

Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies

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EDITORIAL

ASHLEIGH PROSSER

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As 2021 draws to a close, and we have spent yet another year learning how to live and work alongside the ever-present threat posed by the pandemic, I am once again grateful that we have been able to bring you the following issue of *Aeternum*. The global academic network of Gothic and Horror scholars are the still-beating heart that lies underneath the floorboards of this free, open-access, and entirely volunteer-run Journal. Without your ongoing support, we would not have the privilege of publishing such innovative collections of contemporary Gothic scholarship twice a year. This issue offers the reader five articles and four book reviews that bring together international scholarship, diverse perspectives, and cutting-edge critical commentary on contemporary Gothic studies.

The first article of this issue is Miranda Corcoran and Anne Mahler's, "'You either ate the world or the world ate you': Gender Performance and Violence in Stephen King's Campus Shooting Trilogy", which presents a compelling argument on the literary depiction of school campus-based violence in three works by Stephen King that appeared before such horrors were to become tragically commonplace in the United States. Corcoran and Mahler carry out a comparative textual analysis of the short story "Cain Rose Up" (1968), the novel *Carrie* (1974), and the novella *Rage* (1977), and read within them a collective demonstration of King's pre-occupation with such forms of violence and their problematic relationship to gender performance. Sophie Dungan, in her article, "Anthropocene Disease and the Undead in *V Wars*" explores the 2019 television series *V Wars*, based on Jonathan Maberry's

eponymous four-book series (2012-2016), in which vampirism is a virus released from the melting icecaps that spreads to pandemic proportions and causes war between the infected and uninfected. Dungan's reading of the series is timely, and the connections she draws between the portrayal of vampirism as a viral outbreak narrative that is an eco-Gothic consequence of climate change, and the state of our current plagued and warming world, are astute. Nicole Hamilton continues this issue's trend for close reading, examining the 2018 novel *Never Rest* by Marshall Thornton in the third article of this issue. In her article, "The Grotesque and the Erotic: Exploring Connections Between Monstrosity and Sexuality in Marshall Thornton's *Never Rest*", Hamilton draws on discourses of monstrosity, queer theory, and Gothic intertextuality to analyse Thornton's depiction of the AIDs epidemic through his portrayal of main character Jake's experiences, and the ways in which this narrative resonates with that of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Lucinda Holdsworth presents the fourth article of this issue, "Gothic Hungers: Genre as Critique in Aliette de Bodard's *Dominion of the Fallen*". Holdsworth argues that de Bodard's science fiction fantasy novels, the publications of which span from 2015-2020, are complex depictions of imperial Gothic and social realism that can be read as anticolonial (rather than postcolonial). In her reading, Holdsworth performs insightful parallels between de Bodard's world-building narratives and their commentary on issues in contemporary racial politics, particularly the anti-Asian rhetoric that has surrounded discussions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The final article of this issue is by Brontë Schiltz, titled "Imagine or afraid?": Haunting the simulacrum in Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* and Ali Smith's *The Accidental*". Schiltz's comparative analysis focuses on reading the spectral in these two contemporary Gothic works. Using key Gothic theorists and, of course, the Derridean conceptualisation of the spectre, Schiltz thoughtfully engages with complex approaches and presents a compelling argument for the function of spectral intrusions in these novels.

To conclude this issue of *Aeternum*, we present three book reviews of recently released edited collections and monographs in the field of contemporary Gothic studies, and a reflective review essay on *Midnight Sun*, which is the final novel in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. In the first review of this issue, Chloe Charlotte Herbert offers an analysis of Catherine Spooner and Dale Townshend's third volume of *The Cambridge History of Gothic: Gothic in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (2021). Herbert provides a succinct summary of this vast collection of scholarship from established and emerging voices in the field, and she offers thoughtful commentary on how the editors have expertly weaved together such works. David Hollands presents his review of another edited collection, *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema* (2021), which has been collated by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen. Hollands offers a concise overview of the collection, its academic strengths, and its editors' approach to collation of scholarship. Hollands concludes that the contribution its authors collectively make towards filling a gap in the field of cinema studies is a positive and timely offering. The third review, by Jack McCormack-Clark, is of Rosalind Galt's monograph, *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak*

and Cinemas of Decolonization (2021). McCormack-Clark presents an outline of Galt's persuasive argument for the significance of the figure of the Pontianak in South-East Asian cinema, and the importance of Galt's contribution to advancing the study of the figure in post-colonial, film, and cultural studies. Finally, this issue is brought to its conclusion by Antonio Sanna, who offers a reflective review essay on the novel *Midnight Sun* (2020) by Stephenie Meyer, which is currently the final volume in the *Twilight* saga series. Sanna's review is a fitting place to conclude an issue that speaks to the symbolic significance of the representation of the monster and the monstrous in contemporary popular culture across the globe. For, as well-versed scholars and students of the Gothic know, such monsters are wont to be creatively resurrected and returned to us in times of turmoil, and the world certainly looks to remain a tumultuous place for a while to come.

Editor's Details

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“You either ate the world or the world ate you”: Gender Performance and Violence in Stephen King's Campus Shooting Trilogy

ABSTRACT

*This paper argues that three early works by Stephen King can be read collectively as a literary exploration of campus violence. Bringing together the novel *Carrie* (1974), the novella *Rage* (1977), and the short story “*Cain Rose Up*” (1968), we explore how King represents campus-based violence in an era before school shootings became commonplace in the United States. In particular, we argue that King's school shooting narratives evince a deep-seated preoccupation with the relationship between violence and gender performance. The young male protagonists of *Rage* and “*Cain Rose Up*” are depicted as constantly striving for, but never fully embodying, the hegemonic ideals of masculinity prevalent in their culture. Consequently, in both texts, violence is figured as a means of reasserting a manhood that is constantly under threat and never secure. Likewise, in *Carrie*, the eponymous protagonist is portrayed as unable to perform the normative standards of femininity expected of her. She is described as overweight, sweaty, and plagued by dermatological eruptions. Her performance of femininity is considered unacceptable because she is unable to control or rein in her body and its biological functions. The violence she commits against her peers can therefore be understood as a reaction to this perceived failure to embody normative femininity. However, by unleashing psychic, rather than weapon-based, vengeance upon her classmates, *Carrie* rejects culturally prescribed modes of femininity and allows her body, its fluids and excesses, to come to the fore. In this way, *Carrie*'s violence signals a refusal to maintain the appearance of clean and controlled womanhood.*

Keywords: Gender performance, campus violence, Stephen King, hegemonic masculinity

In recent years, celebrated horror author Stephen King has emerged as vocal advocate for gun control, weighing in on debates regarding the second amendment and using his Twitter platform to condemn the pro-gun policies of the US Republican Party. This advocacy is hardly surprising; gun violence – especially in school or campus contexts – has long been a concern in his work. This paper argues that three of King’s early works can be read collectively as a literary exploration of campus violence, an ongoing dialogue about the complex ways in which identity, gender, and institutional power intersect to produce extreme violence. Bringing together the short story “Cain Rose Up” (1968), the novel *Carrie* (1974), and the novella *Rage* (1977), this paper explores how King represents campus-based violence in an era before school shootings became commonplace in the United States. Because of the thematic continuity between these three texts, we define them as King’s campus shooting trilogy. Significantly, all three works – even *Carrie* where literal gun violence is exchanged for a more metaphorical form of supernatural violence – anticipate some of the key features of modern high school shooting narratives. However, because these texts were produced prior to the 1999 mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, they do not necessarily engage with the contemporary gun law debates that emerged following the phenomenon-defining rampages of the 1990s. Instead, these texts explore the social and psychological roots of campus violence, linking such acts of terror to cultural expectations surrounding gender.

According to Anne Mahler, high school shooting narratives address;

one or multiple aspects of a high school shooting, ranging from the events leading up to the attack, the attack itself, or its aftermath and long-lasting impact on the individual, or the affected community. Its protagonist(s) are associated with the event in varying capacities, whether it be as shooter, victim, bystander, family member, or community member. It is set in a suburban, usually North American, environment and often employs non-linear narrative techniques. These techniques most commonly include fragmented timelines, shifting narrative perspectives, and the epistolary form (2020, 18).

Each of the texts under discussion here displays at least some of these features, and all three centre primarily on the experiences of perpetrators. We argue that King’s school shooting narratives are characterised by a deep-seated preoccupation with the relationship between violence and gender performance, which is negotiated in different ways across the three texts. The young male protagonists of *Rage* and “Cain” are depicted as constantly striving for, but never fully embodying, the hegemonic ideals of masculinity prevalent in their culture. In both texts, violence is figured as a means of reasserting a manhood that is constantly under threat and

never secure. Likewise, in *Carrie*, the eponymous protagonist is unable to perform the normative standards of femininity expected of her. However, as we demonstrate below, Carrie's violence differs from that of King's male characters, as her brutality can be understood as a means of resisting culturally prescribed norms of womanhood.

"Abelburgers": Hegemonic Masculinity and the Homosocial Food Chain in "Cain Rose Up"

"Cain Rose Up" is the only entry in King's campus shooting trilogy that is set on a university campus, as opposed to a high school campus, and its perpetrator, Curt Garrish, is a university student rather than a high school student. The attack is marked by its sniper style, explicitly recalling the 1966 University of Texas tower shooting, in which former Marine Charles Whitman killed 16 and injured 31 during a shooting on the campus. It is one of Stephen King's earliest works, having been published in the University of Maine's *Ubris* Magazine. Its short story form captures the abruptness of the event, while its brevity prevents the author from explicating the shooter's motive. Consequently, we only learn about Garrish's struggle with his masculinity through external characterisation, as King describes Garrish's personal space and belongings. These descriptive passages underline the performative aspect of his masculinity, while denying access to his thoughts and feelings.

The title of King's short story, "Cain Rose Up," quotes the Biblical tale of Cain and Abel, arguably the most famous fraternal murder in Western culture. Whereas the outcome of Cain's slaying of his brother is widely known (he was cursed to wander the earth), less attention is paid to what motivates Cain to commit his crime. Cain, "tiller of the ground[,] [...] brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel also brought the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering; but unto Cain and to his offering He had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell" (Gen. 4:2-5). Having offered the fruit of his labour to God and having been rejected despite his efforts, "Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him" (Gen. 4:8), arguably out of jealousy. Through the use of the title "Cain Rose Up," King paratextually references Garrish's motive. He draws a parallel between Cain's and Curt's strive for recognition, and he sets the scene for a short story about homosocial competition, and hierarchy.

"Cain" is littered with symbols of all-American masculinity. Much of the story is set in Garrish's dorm room, which he shares with a roommate who has already moved out, leaving "only his pinups, two dirty mismatched sweatsocks, and a ceramic parody of Rodin's Thinker perched on a toilet seat" (2007, 252). The *Playboy* magazines that litter the dorm room suggest heteronormative male sexuality, yet Garrish does not show any interest in them. Garrish's side of the room is more reminiscent of military barracks, with only a few personal items decorating his otherwise Spartan space. Most notable is a "huge blow-up of Humphrey Bogart"

(2007, 252) on Garrish's wall, displaying the actor with "an automatic pistol in each hand and [...] wearing suspenders" (2007, 252). Garrish, does not appear particularly familiar with Bogart's life or career; rather, the actor is a symbolic figure, emblematic of hypermasculine ideals. Indeed, Garrish views Bogart as the embodiment of a strength and virility that he lacks: "Garrish doubted if Bogie had been impotent, although he had never read anything about him" (2007, 253). This suggests that, for Garrish, masculinity is a performance, a set of codes and conventions to be enacted through and inscribed upon the body. King's sketch of a violent adolescent preoccupied with acting out hegemonic ideals of manhood thus accords with Judith Butler's notion of gender as essentially performative. In her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, Butler maintains that gender performance does not simply conjure the appearance of the gendered body, it in fact constitutes the gendered body. Gender, for Butler does not refer to a real, a priori essence. Instead, it describes an act of performance, of "doing" (1990, 34). The gendered subject does not pre-exist this "doing" of gender; it is created by it. Moreover, as Susan Feldman explains, gender performance is often contingent upon the repudiation of alterity. Thus, "the White, heterosexual, male subject would emerge only through its repudiation of blackness, homosexuality and femininity" (Feldman 2009, 267). Garrish, like the other violent adolescents featured in King's campus shooting trilogy, struggles to perform gender in a normative, socially sanctioned manner. He compensates for his own perceived deficiencies through an accumulation of surface-level signifiers of hypermasculinity, and a rejection of anything connected to femininity or queerness.

Garrish's preoccupation with performing hegemonic modes of masculinity can also be seen in his preoccupation with eating and digestion, an obsession that can be read in the context of male homosocial competition. Before and during his sniper attack, Garrish repeatedly employs variations of the phrase "You either ate the world or the world ate you" (2007, 252). This phrase is first uttered after a conversation with floor counsellor Rollins, a man described as "tall, well-built, crewcut, symmetrical" (2007, 251), an all-American hegemonic male. After a short conversation, Garrish pictures Rollins "lying dead in a ditch with maggots in his eyes" (2007, 252). Clearly threatened by Rollins' overt masculinity, Garrish imaginatively emasculates the other man. Freud observes that a "morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration" (2003, 139). Thus, Garrish's violent fantasies can be traced to anxieties about his own failure to perform his gender as appropriately masculine and his contempt for those who successfully embody the hypermasculinity he desires.

This echoes R.W. Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity as the practice whereby "at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted" (2008, 77). In order for one expression of masculinity to be valorised, others must be devalued, a process Garrish envisions in terms of a food chain. In the closing line of the story, Garrish exclaims "'Good God, let's eat'" (2007,

257), before pulling the trigger again, killing and metaphorically consuming, other representations of masculinity in order to catapult himself to the top of the masculine gender order, or, again metaphorically speaking, to ascend to the top of food chain.

Although some sources claim that Garrish's sniper attack is random (Newhouse 1987), it can also be argued that he specifically targets representatives of hegemonic American masculinity. Throughout the story, Garrish views heteronormative family life as a dead end. Garrish's attack leaves at least five possible victims. The first fatalities are a family of three, and a young man named Quinn, who is seen tossing a softball and is therefore coded as a "jock." Before the story closes, Garrish fires at a student in a madras shirt. The madras shirt is a staple of the preppy Ivy League fashion popular during the 1960s and commonly associated with icons of heteronormative masculinity like John F. Kennedy. In contrast, he spares fellow student Bailey, who leaves a rather pathetic impression on the reader, being portrayed with "lint in his belly button," and "sharp, ratty little features," as well as "thready and saggy-seated" underwear (2007, 254). During his shooting spree, Garrish attacks the nuclear family, masculine athleticism and conformist, middle-class manhood, but spares a non-hegemonic representation of masculinity. This selective approach supports the idea that he is struggling to move up the hierarchy, and not down. Garrish, having failed to perform the kind of hegemonic masculinity signified by his tough-guy icon Bogie, ultimately dispatches those men who more closely exemplify culturally exalted expressions of manhood.

Although King does not provide a physical description of Garrish, it can be argued that he resorts to gun violence as a means of exerting power over those he could not ordinarily dominate through physical prowess alone. Mary Stange and Carol Oyster observe that guns serve "a symbolic function that exceeds any practical utility, [becoming] the symbol par excellence of masculinity: of power, force, aggressiveness, decisiveness, deadly accuracy, cold rationality" (2000, 22). This sentiment is also interwoven into King's story. In "Cain," masculinity is largely construed as performative, intelligible through traits like athleticism or signalled through visual cues like muscular build, preppy shirts, and braces. Moreover, because the performance of hegemonic masculinity depends on the subordination of "lesser" masculinities, it is presented as essentially hierarchical in nature. Garrish's shooting spree can therefore be read as an attempt to perform hypermasculinity through violence and domination. For him, the gun denotes all those attributes – aggression, power, and strength – which he cannot express through his body but which he can affect through the symbolically-potent rifle he wields.

"Mamma's boy": Failures of Manhood in *Rage*

Where the short story "Cain" provides only a momentary glimpse of Garrish's attack, the novella *Rage* is a more thorough exploration of the relationship between violence and gender performance. Published almost a decade after "Cain," under

King's pseudonym Richard Bachman, *Rage* is one of the earliest high school shooting narratives. Blurring the line between school shooter and hostage-taker, protagonist Charlie Decker manages to divert the attention of his captives, and that of the reader, away from the horror of his violent actions and towards an understanding of the gender-based abuse he suffers at the hands of his father and his peers. As one of King's earliest works, *Rage* is not as narratively refined, nor as commercially successful as his later texts; it has, however, allegedly served as a blueprint for school violence committed by adolescents who identified with Charlie's experience of abuse. Andrew L. Cooper notes that the most prominent example of this is arguably the case of Michael Carneal, perpetrator of the 1997 West Paducah High School shooting, who allegedly kept a copy of *Rage* in his locker. Significantly, it was after his rampage that Stephen King let the novella go out of print (2014, 177).

In *Rage*, Charlie describes the verbal and physical abuse perpetrated against him by his father, abuse that is consistently linked to rigid notions of socially sanctioned masculinity. Charlie is the only son of an artistic mother and an army recruitment chief father, a man who personifies the ideal image of manhood at the time of publication. His father, Mr. Decker, is described as a "a big, quiet man with sandy hair" (1988, 44), who displays the physical dominance and emotional detachment that are assumed to be the default markers of a masculinity that Charlie is unable to embody. According to Kimmel, fathers are "the one person who has the power to validate your manhood or dissolve it in an instant" (2008, 130). This is exemplified in *Rage*, when Charlie's father projects unrealistic masculine traits onto him and is dismayed when Charlie is unable to live up to them. Whenever Mr. Decker is quoted in these scenes, he insults Charlie based on a presumed absence of masculine traits. In one instance, he calls Charlie a "mamma's boy" (1988, 45), and in another he tells Charlie to "'shut up. Be a man, for God's sake'" (1988, 47). His father's patriarchal and strict behaviour suggests a transgenerational passing down of gender ideals. As Charlie observes, "the sins of fathers are visited upon the sons" (1988, 44), a clear indicator that he is aware of the psychological impact his father's strict upbringing has on him.

Moreover, this reveals how Charlie struggles with his deep affection for and connection to his mother, something which is frowned upon by his father who favours a hypermasculine suppression of emotions. The tension between Charlie's love for his mother and his father's insistence that he should detach himself from her and "be a man" leaves Charlie conflicted about his manhood, and uncertain about his ability to perform masculinity in a culturally desirable manner. Charlie attempts to resolve this conflict by killing two teachers and forcing his peers to listen to his life story. His speech is ultimately so persuasive that his classmates develop Stockholm syndrome, and, in a lynch-mob-style attack, beat a classmate, who arguably represents the hegemonic male ideal, into a coma. This attack upon a hypermasculine classmate is significant, as it suggests that Charlie, like his predecessor Curt Garrish, is frustrated by his own failure to present as appropriately

masculine. Although Charlie does not initiate the violence against this young man, it is clearly inspired by his speech and his frustrations with rigid 1970s ideas of manhood.

By killing two teachers, Charlie explicitly challenges the existing social hierarchy. As the novel progresses, he moves on to challenge the power of specifically male authority figures, such as his headmaster and police hostage negotiators. Charlie specifically undermines these male adults, provoking them with profane language and personal questions that reveal shortcomings in their own gender performances. This practice can be observed from the outset of the novella; for instance, when Charlie provokes Headmaster Denver, stating “‘I’m tired of being masturbated on. Be a man, for God’s sake, Mr. Denver. And if you can’t be a man, at least pull up your pants and be a principal’” (1988, 17). Denver is clearly humiliated by Charlie’s taunts: “‘Shut up,’ he grunted. His face had gone bright red” (1988, 17). Charlie rebels against the loss of control he experiences as a result of traits that, according to the other protagonists, make him appear more feminine: his emotionality, his physical weakness, and his attachment to his mother. It is because of these characteristics, which mark him as less masculine, that he becomes a target for his father, and for his peers.

Both stories deal with masculinity and its performance; however, “Cain Rose Up” is more explicit in its symbolism, while *Rage* is more implicit and conveys attitudes towards normative American masculinity through the anecdotes Charlie recounts during the hostage-taking, as well as his inability to live up to masculine gender ideals. King’s writing thus suggests a growing crisis in American masculinity during the 1960s and 1970s. “Cain” and *Rage* illuminate the late 1960s and 1970s as a “period of crisis, in which standards of manhood were put to the test, [marking] the beginning of the conversation about those standards, and the realization that ideals of true masculinity were never as concrete as they may have seemed” (Ludas 2011, 17). Garrish’s and Charlie’s crimes are a violent attempt to hold on to, and comply with, masculine gender ideals that appear threatened by a disastrous war in Vietnam, by large numbers of women entering “the workforce, for the first time since the end of WWII” (Ludas 2011, 17), and by the increasingly sedentary, bureaucratic nature of an expanding white-collar labour force. Concomitantly, inroads made by the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism and gay liberation movements combined to threaten the stability of patriarchal power and conventional constructions of masculinity. Garrish and Charlie are sons of a generation unsettled by these transformations, beholden to an ideal of masculinity which they themselves can never fully attain, and whose shootings are a desperate attempt to hold on to masculine ideals through the performance of hypermasculine, hyperviolent crimes.

“Plug It Up”: Embodiment and Violence in *Carrie*

Mass-shooters in general, and school shooters in particular, are overwhelmingly male. Michael Kimmel and Cliff Leek posit that “an essential part of the discussion of all rampage school shootings is gender” (2015, 176). School shootings are intimately linked to “crises in masculinities,” so closely bound up with imperilled manhood that Kimmel and Mahler conclude that “masculinity is the single greatest risk factor in school violence” (2003, 1440). Only a very few exceptions from these observations can be found, and female campus shooters remain rare. This demographic is also reflected in fictional reworkings of campus violence, in which an overwhelming number of the perpetrators are male. It is for this reason that King’s debut novel *Carrie* merits discussion. It can be read as a comparative text, whose thematic concerns adumbrate those of “Cain” and *Rage*, and separately, as a unique exploration of how violence intersects with cultural constructions of femininity in a manner distinct from its convergence with masculinity. *Carrie*, although portraying an act of mass violence committed within the environs of an American high school, deviates significantly from King’s other representations of campus violence, and indeed from other cultural expressions of the phenomenon. Where his other works associate such spectacular eruptions of violence with masculinity, *Carrie*’s protagonist, Carrietta (Carrie) White, is female. Likewise, while “Cain” and *Rage* link violent masculinity to the use of weapons, mostly guns, Carrie uses the power of her mind to dispatch her classmates. Although Carrie’s choice to enact her revenge without the help of a weapon might align appear to align her with normative modes of “passive” femininity, the connections established throughout the novel between Carrie’s abilities and unruly corporeality suggest a more embattled relationship with dominant gender norms.

The concluding section of this paper thus frames Carrie White not simply as a female permutation of the archetypal school shooter, but rather as figure whose acts of violence are intimately linked to her experience of embodied femininity as well as to her inability to correctly perform normative womanhood. As noted above, female perpetrators of campus violence are comparatively rare. According to Camélia Dumitriu, only eight of the approximately 163 school shootings that took place between 1900 and 2013 were carried out by women (2013, 301). Where women are involved in campus violence, they are rarely part of the peer group they attack. Most often, they are older than their victims, as in the case of sixteen-year-old Brenda Spencer who infamously explained away her decision to open fire on the elementary school across from her home with a flippant “I just don’t like Mondays” (Repard 2019). Likewise, Laurie Dann was thirty years old when she killed one child and wounded five others at Hubbard Woods School in Winnetka, Illinois, in May 1988. Both Spencer and Dann pervert notions of maternal love and care, harming children instead of nurturing them.

Casting off entrenched cultural narratives that equate femininity with empathy and compassion, such women are transgressive not only in their violence but in how that violence troubles gender norms. Indeed, King's work regularly places violent women in an ambivalent relationship to normative gender roles. Annie Wilkes, the antagonist of 1987's *Misery*, is at once overtly feminine (being a former nurse and a devotee of romance novels) and somewhat masculine (with an imposing build and violent temper). In *Carrie*, the massacre enacted by the titular character is certainly in keeping with the popular view of feminine violence as anathema to prevailing notions of proper womanhood. Carrie's violence, which is intimately connected to her embodied femininity, is framed as an expansion of her inability to present what Julia Kristeva terms the "clean and proper body" (1982, 75). The brutal revenge that Carrie unleashes on her peers is bound up with a body, a self, that is from the very start of the novel framed as improperly feminine in its leakiness, dirt, and excess.

Carrie opens its narrative proper with a vision of femininity figured as aesthetically pleasing, clean and enticing. King describes, in a passage now notorious for its voyeurism, the steamy, sweat-scented locker room of the Chamberlin high school. The teenage girls who occupy the locker room, are associated with cleanliness. The room is filled with "Showers turning off one by one, girls stepping out, removing pastel bathing caps, towelling, spraying deodorant, checking the clock over the door. Bras were hooked, underpants stepped into" (1974, 4). These girls are adept in the maintenance of the clean, ordered feminine body. Carrie, however, has not mastered the rituals necessary to present her body as a clean, ordered surface and lacks the proficiency to contain her troubling corporeal excess: "She was a chunky girl with pimples on her neck, back and buttocks, her wet hair completely without colour" (1974, 4). Carrie's body is characterised by the eruption of pimples, sweat and fat. She is reviled by her peers because she fails to mask the biological reality of her body, allowing its fluids and odours to seep out into a social arena in which such signifiers of corporeality are framed as a disturbing intrusion.

When Carrie steps from the shower, her peers observe droplets of menstrual blood running down her legs. She is ignorant as to the meaning of this strange, dark blood, having been raised by a devoutly religious mother and isolated from her peers. Like Garrish and Charlie, Carrie is a socially marginal figure with a troubled home life. Carrie's classmates recognise instinctively that by menstruating in public, Carrie is behaving in a manner that is both excessive and transgressive. They instruct her to clean herself up and to "plug up" her blood flow because they understand the importance of such acts of self-maintenance in the regulation of the social order. It is also for this reason that, as Carrie crouches screaming in the corner of a shower, her classmates recall her past failures to present her body as clean and whole. In this moment the girls remember how Carrie had always smelled sweaty, how her stockings always ran and how she always displayed visible sweat stains

under the arms of her blouses (1974, 9). To her peers, Carrie's leaky body attests to a "certain irreducible 'dirt' or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the 'clean' and 'proper'" (Grosz 1994, 194).

Judith Butler observes that "'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (1990, 23). We are disturbed by the appearance of those beings who fail to conform to the gender norms through which we define persons as such (Butler 1990, 23). Carrie's failure to perform normative femininity, and therefore to be read as female, encompasses her inability to correctly reconfigure her body in accordance with acceptable standards of femininity: her skin is blotchy, her hair is limp and colourless, her ignorance of makeup (and the female body) causes her to blot her lipstick with a sanitary napkin (1974, 46). However, it also expands beyond her incapacity to manipulate the cosmetic signifiers of womanhood to incorporate the way in which Carrie's body is associated with an inappropriate fleshly excess:

She was thick through the waist only because sometimes she felt so miserable, empty, bored, that the only way to fill that gaping, whistling hole was to eat and eat and eat – but she was not that thick through the middle (1974, 47).

Carrie's excess weight is explicitly linked to her inability to contain or discipline her body. Carrie realises that she could reduce her intake of food, "stop the chocolates and her pimples would go down" (1974, 47). Yet, she refuses to exert this kind of control over her bodily excess. Echoing the boundary disturbance that occurs when Carrie menstruates publicly in the opening chapter, Carrie's weight and dermatological eruptions suggest an unruly, threatening corporeality.

Despite these failures of performance and control, Carrie nevertheless desires the freedom she associates with her culture's prescribed ideals of femininity. Her desire to perform normative womanhood thus aligns her with Garrish and Charlie, both of whom strive to embody appropriate modes of masculinity. When Carrie is asked to attend her high school prom by the popular and charismatic Tommy Ross, she embraces the opportunity to adorn herself in the signifiers of acceptable femininity. She sews a luxuriant red gown, whose "crumpled velvet richness" initially fills her with fear (1974, 107), fixes her hair and wears a special brasserie to give her "breasts the proper uplift" (1974, 141). Darren Elliott-Smith observes that as Carrie dresses for the prom, she "moves towards a culturally-imposed idea of femininity via a masquerade of it: in dressing up, making clothes, fixing her hair and wearing make-up" (2016).

Her brief adornment in the costume of acceptable womanhood is, however, cut short. In what may be the most infamous moment in King's novel, two bullies humiliate Carrie by dumping a bucket of pigs' blood over her just as she is crowned prom queen. The pigs' blood that covers her body recalls the menstrual blood that had flowed so publicly down her legs in the first chapter. Realising what has happened, Carrie opens her eyes to see that she is "red and dripping with it, they had drenched her in the very secretness of blood" (1974, 216). The tears that flow following her humiliation are likewise described as running "as hot and as heavy as that first flow of menstrual blood had been" (1974, 219). Indeed, the grotesque fluidity of this sequence is such that it even infects the novel's formal structure. As John Sears explains, *Carrie's* unconventional, relentless form – its frequent lack of punctuation and its preponderance of sentences that flow together – is "in keeping with the flows of blood and the circulation of the novel's internal symbolic structure" (2011, 41). Upon being confronted with her ultimate failure to perform normative femininity, Carrie finally embraces the leaky, uncontainable threat that is her body. She exacts revenge upon her peers, not by trying to reconstruct the gender role she has so often failed to perform, but by embracing its failure. Where the protagonists of "Cain" and *Rage* engage in an extreme performance of hypermasculinity through violence, Carrie accepts her inability to embody socially prescribed womanhood. She accepts the leaky, porous nature of her body, using her unruly biology to exact violent revenge upon her peers. Rather than using weapons to punish her classmates for their cruelty, Carrie uses her mind; she employs her powers of telekinesis, the ability to move objects with one's mind, to dispatch almost everyone in attendance at the prom. However, where telekinesis is commonly associated with mental faculties, Carrie's powers are bound up with her body. When she uses them, we are told, her telekinetic abilities exert a massive strain upon her physical body. In one sequence where she practices controlling her powers by floating a hairbrush in mid-air, Carrie's respiration falls to sixteen breaths per minute, her blood pressure rises to 190/100 and her heartbeat to 140 (1974, 92).

Carrie's telekinesis ultimately transcends her corporeal boundaries, emanating from her interiority to affect the outside world. Carrie's powers are emblematic of her ongoing inability to control and discipline her body. Just as she is characterised early in the novel by a failure to conceal or keep inside those fluids – blood and sweat – that speak to an uncomfortable biological reality, so too are her powers characterised by the exteriorisation of internal processes. Following her humiliation at the prom, Carrie gives up all pretence to a contained, appropriately clean body. She delights in her capacity for corporeal excess and transgression. She extends her mind out beyond the borders of her body and uses her powers to fling classmates and teachers violently across the gymnasium where the prom is taking place. She, likewise, uses her powers to rip out power cords and explode transformers, setting fire to both her packed school and the town surrounding it.

In the midst of her revenge Carrie revels in the once monstrous porosity of her body. The pleasure Carrie finds in her unruly biology could therefore be said to constitute what Mary Russo terms the female grotesque, that which is “abjected from the classical canons of bodily aesthetics” (1994, 8). Russo argues that the “grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world” (1994, 8); rather, it is a corporeality that extends beyond its own parameters to merge with the world, with animals and objects. Where the classical body is viewed as “transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek”, the grotesque body is “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing” (Russo 1994, 8). Moreover, as Chloé Germaine Buckley notes, the female grotesque “imagines a line of flight from binaristic gender and classed identifications through its representation of an undecidable body” (2018, 75). Carrie, having previously striven towards a mode of culturally circumscribed femininity that is “closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek,” now delights in her occupation of a body that is “open, protruding, irregular, secreting”. Her grotesque fluidity thus demolishes binary, normative gender identifications. In her seeping multiplicity, Carrie not only finds pleasure in her unruly body, but in its ambiguous, undecidable openness.

Like other female murderers or perpetrators of campus violence, Carrie upends notions of appropriate femininity. However, where women like Brenda Spencer or Laurie Dann may subvert notions of womanhood by becoming a kind of anti-mother, harming rather than nurturing children, Carrie troubles normative conceptions of femininity by taking pleasure in the leaky, porous nature of her unruly body. Instead of desiring to mask her fluids and secretions behind a veneer cleanliness and bodily integrity, Carrie embraces her body as grotesque, open and unstable. She derives power from her inability to perform femininity as a closed, static, and clean entity.

Concluding Remarks

In his campus shooting trilogy, Stephen King addresses the issues surrounding identity and gender performance as an integral characteristic of campus violence. The relationship between violence and gender performance in “Cain” and *Rage* is negotiated through a reinforcement of the existing gender order from within, as both Garrish and Charlie attempt to replace the hegemonic males at the top of this hierarchy, and thus seek to overcome perceived shortcomings in their performances of adolescent masculinity. With their hyperviolent rampages and use of guns as signifiers of masculinity, they momentarily catapult themselves to the top of the intra-gender order, using hyperviolence to uphold and reassert existing conventions of intra-masculine domination. In contrast, Carrie’s violence is possessed of perverse, liberatory potential. Where Garrish and Charlie embark on brutal shootings in an attempt to perform masculinity through aggression and domination, Carrie’s prom night rampage serves as the culmination of her ongoing failure to perform normative femininity through bodily containment. Carrie’s violent revenge, which hinges on the dissolution of corporeal boundaries, allows her to break free

from rigid constructions of proper femininity. King's representation of campus "shootings" in the decades before it crystallised as an identifiable cultural phenomenon thus reveals the centrality of gender to such events, illuminating some of the ways in which rigidly normative constructions of both masculinity and femininity can propagate violence.

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Anthropocene Disease and the Undead in *V Wars*

ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the recent television series *V Wars* (2019) that has had little academic attention to date. In *V Wars*, vampirism is a virus released into earth systems because of glacial deterioration due to global warming. This outbreak turns (some) humans into vampires, culminating in a species war that pits surviving humans against vampires. Focussing on the series' unique representation of the spread of vampirism around ice melt, this article argues that *V Wars*' vampires are distinctly ecological in nature. Drawing on Priscilla Wald's theorisation of the outbreak narrative, this article argues *V Wars*' representation of the vampire as a spreader of disease demonstrates the close link between human disruption of the Anthropocene and public health, since exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, while also illustrating intricate and inextricable entanglements between humans and myriad earth others from which crisis can stem. As a vector of contagion, the vampire in *V Wars* promotes an understanding of Nature and potential virus-related disasters that lie in wait if humankind does not adopt better environmental practices, pertinent for our current era of pandemics, extinctions, ecological collapse and beyond. *V Wars* thus illustrates the need to cultivate better, more conscious relations with earth systems and nonhuman others – measures necessary to mitigate and manage the emergence of future Anthropocene disease.*

Keywords: *V Wars*, vampire, virus, Anthropocene, pandemic.

In recent years, interest in the relationship between human and planetary health has increased, due in part to a growing understanding of the impact of human activities on earth on public health. This awareness has of course been intensified in recent months due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been described by observers as an 'Anthropocene disease', drawing attention to the links between human and animal life, disease, and death. As Chin *et al.*'s recent study found, pandemics have become increasingly frequent since the 'great acceleration', a term popular in Anthropocene studies to denote a "sharply rising intensity of human activity since about 1950" (2020, 1). Their study, which maps select markers of human impact on the environment against the onset year of infectious pandemic disease from 1800 onward, discovered that as tropical forest loss, population growth and carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions increased, so too did the frequency and voracity of emerging infectious diseases (EIDS). According to Chin *et al.*, "the concurrent trend of accelerating pandemics" and global human impact on Earth is "not surprising given what is known about the origin of such diseases and their subsequent spread. Nearly all novel EIDS originate in animal populations" (2021, 2). Of the 335 EIDS recorded between 1960 and 2004, at least 60% came from nonhuman animals (O'Callaghan-Gordo and Antó 2020, 1). These numbers owe to increasing human-animal relations which act as facilitators of new zoonosis (disease transmitted from animals to humans) and increase risks of disease spread such as "the destruction of natural habitats", species extinction, "poorly regulated capture, marketing and consumption of non-human animals", "deforestation" and urbanization (O'Callaghan-Gordo and Antó 2020, 2). These relations lead to the simplification of ecosystems and a loss in predator species enabling disease-carrying reservoirs (organisms which harbor infectious pathogens and transmits them to other populations) and vector species to thrive (Chin *et al.* 2020, 2).

The recent television series *V Wars* (2019) based on Jonathan Maberry's four-book anthology of the same name (2012-2016) illustrates the causal relation between EIDS and anthropogenic impact on earth systems. Its story follows research physician Dr. Luther Swann (Ian Somerhalder) and his best friend, Michael Fayne (Adrian Holmes), as they face the evolving crisis of a deadly outbreak that turns (some) humans including Fayne into vampires. In *V Wars'* fictional world, only humans with the NH47 gene – a gene related to hereditary cardiomyopathy – can become vampires (series 1, episode 5). The outbreak of vampires is the result of rampant Arctic ice melt that releases previously frozen prion cells – "proteins that cause really bad shit like Mad Cow [Disease]" (series 1, episode 1) – into earth systems, culminating (or so it is suggested in the series finale) in a species war that pits surviving humans against the growing vampire population, who call themselves "Blood Nation" or "Bloods" for short. While the novels track developments in the war via a series of eyewitness accounts, the television series did not receive popular or critical success and was cancelled by Netflix after just one

season. As a result, the television series only shows the first stirrings of war. Nevertheless, this article argues *V Wars* is interesting as a text that explores now relevant anxieties about viral pandemic and climate change.

Focusing on the link between climate change and the outbreak of the vampire virus, this article argues *V Wars* illustrates in fictional form increasingly complex connections between the significant impact of human activity on planetary ecology and public health. As Priscilla Wald argues, outbreak narratives educate “as they disseminate information” about “contagion routes” and:

Promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviours, and lifestyles, and they change economies. They also influence how both scientists and the lay public understand the nature and consequences of infection, [as well as] how they imagine threat (2008, 3).

This article finds such outcomes in *V Wars*. In the series’ representation of the vampire as spreader of disease, it shows the catastrophic consequences of human driven climate change on viral contagion and biothreats. It also aids audience understanding of how disease spreads are pertinent for our current era of ecological destruction and Covid-19. The information *V Wars* disseminates about contagion routes is especially important in light of the spread of (racist, xenophobic) misinformation regarding Covid-19’s origins, not only problematic but counter-productive to the prevention and management of future Anthropocene disease. In its depiction of the spreading of disease, *V Wars* promotes a change in current anthropocentric behaviours and illustrates the need to cultivate better, more conscious relations with the earth and nonhuman others – measures necessary to mitigate human impact on planetary ecology for public health. Before continuing further, a few points about historical depictions of vampires as spreaders of disease are necessary.

Disease and the Undead

Associations between vampires and the spread of disease are not new. As James Twitchell writes, “two centuries ago many diseases” such as porphyria, tuberculosis, cholera, cancer and even plague “were misdiagnosed as being the result of vampire activity” (1981, 19). This misdiagnosis came from “a lack of understanding about infectious diseases and the way in which [they spread]” (Butler 2018, 14). Despite advances in epidemiology, representations of the vampire as a spreader of disease have continued in film, television, and literature. F. W Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), for example, re-imagines Stoker’s Count Dracula – now named Count Orlock – as a spreader of plague. Reminiscent of The Black Death, “vessels containing disease-carrying rats” (Mulvey-Roberts 2016, 140) transport this vampire plague to Germany. “Orlock’s own rodent-like appearance” serves to strengthen the film’s association of “vampirism with the spread of plague” (Abbott 2014, 50). In the late-

twentieth century, vampires were vectors of sexually transmitted diseases. While “vampirism, with its connotative yoking of sexuality and contagion, has a long history of being linked to the horrors of venereal diseases – syphilis in particular” (1997, 118) as Nicola Nixon observes, the vampire provided added resonance for a “plague-stricken, newly censorious culture” (Auerbach 1995, 111, 175) grappling with the emergence and spread of HIV/AIDS. This correlation is clear in the lesbian thriller *The Hunger* (1983) directed by Tony Scott, Kathryn Bigelow’s *Near Dark* (1987), Brian Aldiss’ *Dracula Unbound* (1991) and Stephen Norrington’s *Blade* (1998) among others. As Xavier Aldana Reyes, Nina Auerbach, Ken Gelder and Marina Levina have all noted the vampire is well placed for fear around the spreading of sexually transmitted disease given vampirism’s “conflation of infection and sex” (Levina 2019, 65) achieved through the swapping of blood and bodily fluids.

In recent years, representations of the vampire as a spreader of disease refract contemporaneous concerns about the threat of globalisation and advances in science and biotechnology on the emergence and spread of disease. In Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s novel *The Strain*, since adapted for television (2013-2017), vampirism spreads through “bloodworms, parasites carrying the vampire virus that seek out a human host to infect” (Abbott 2014, 50). The virus arrives in Manhattan where the novel is set when a plane carrying the Master, a vampire who intends to take over the world, lands at John F. Kennedy International Airport. His deadly arrival evokes the threat of globalisation fuelled by outbreaks like SARS (2002) spread by air travel, among other means. Similar concerns occur in the film *Daybreakers* (2009) directed by Peter and Michael Spierig, where plague-infected bats infect humans sparking a global vampire plague that decimates humankind. Both films “tap into anxieties around the spread of the disease and the potential for global pandemic” (Abbott 2014, 51) provoked by real-world scares such as Avian Flu (2003; 2013), Swine Flu (2009) and Ebola (2014-15) which have all been linked to the transmission of viruses from animals to humans.

In films like Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002), Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* (2007), adapted from Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel of the same name, and Park Chan-Wook’s *Thirst* (2009), vampirism is the result of mishaps in genetic engineering. In *28 Days Later*, experiments to genetically modify chimpanzees unleashes a highly contagious, rage-inducing virus that infects the test subjects, who when rescued from the testing facility by animal activists, lay waste to society. In *I Am Legend*, efforts to genetically re-engineer the measles virus to cure cancer becomes lethal, infecting 99% of the world’s population, turning those it does not kill into vampires. In *Thirst*, clinical trials to test potential vaccines for the deadly smallpox like Emmanuel Virus (EV) affects recipients’ blood, turning them into vampires. In each film the vampire virus produces different results. In *28 Days Later* and *I am Legend*, vampires more closely resemble zombies in appearance and behaviour with a horde-like mentality and living arrangements, whereas Sang-hyun, the vampire at the centre of *Thirst*, maintains his humanity and continues to

discharge his duties as a Catholic priest while drinking human blood to keep the symptoms of EV (blisters, coughing blood) at bay. Nevertheless, as Lorna Piatti-Farnell notes in *The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature*, the biotechnological origin of each virus functions as a “latent warning” and “manifest critique of the nature of engineered organisms, their place in the world, and their relationship to human beings” (2014, 40). This narrative has appeared still more recently in the television series *The Passage* (2019) created by Liz Heldin, adapted from Justin Cronin’s trilogy of the same name (2010), wherein a scientific mutation of the human body triggers the vampire apocalypse.

Already we can start to see how *V Wars* differs from earlier representations of the vampire as a spreader of disease. While many of the films and television series previously mentioned rely on climate and/or nuclear disasters (which affect global climate) to facilitate vampire apocalypse and engage metaphorically with concerns about pandemic, climate change, and our relationship with planetary ecology (see Bacon 2020, 83-117), *V Wars* is unique in explicitly linking vampire pandemic to rampant ice melt. A hyperobject in the first instance (a topic to which we shall return), ice melt foregrounds the human history of the Anthropocene (see also Lanone 2013). As Susi K. Frank and Kjetil Jakobsen write in their introduction to *Arctic Archive: Ice, Memory and Entropy*:

Preserved in the ice are traces of the geological and climatic history of the earth, as well as of the past, ... including the history of modernity with its typical attitude towards nature as an object of conquest, of control and of transformation (2019, 15).

Stored in the ice is information on the significant changes brought by nineteenth-century technology. As Frank and Jakobsen report, “ice from 2011 contains 40% more CO₂ than the one frozen in 1740, before the Industrial Revolution” (2019, 10) when “carbon from coal-fired industries began to be deposited worldwide, ... thanks to the invention of the steam engine by James Watt” (Morton 2013, 4) – a decisive geological moment marking the inception of humanity as a planetary shaping force (ibid, 7). This is not to suggest other films which rely on climate and or man-made disasters to facilitate vampire apocalypse are unable to foreground human impacts on planetary ecology. “The world also ended in 1945”, Timothy Morton points out, when the first atom bomb was tested, and “later that year when two nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (2013, 7), the fall out of which Matheson’s *I am Legend* explores. The difference lies in *V Wars*’ ability to illustrate the very real problem of how pandemics appear because of humankind’s relationship with other species and ecological frameworks.

Pandemics and planetary health

In *V Wars*' first episode, Swann explains the connection between pandemics and planetary health during a presentation at the 5th Global Summit on Infectious Diseases on the potentially apocalyptic epidemiological dangers of polar ice melt. Addressing fellow scientists and scientific researchers, he remarks:

We know that climate change is causing glacial deterioration. We also know that there are viruses and bacteria trapped in that now-melting ice. Now let's just say, a prehistoric equivalent of the Zika virus, Ebola or the bubonic plague were to appear as a result of the melt. Our bodies would have no immunity. And we would have no vaccines to help us.

He then offers a stark forecast, which is part hypothesis, part predication:

If you ask me, I don't think it's going to be asteroids or nuclear war that wipes [humankind] out. It's going to be this. ... [T]he data tells us that this is inevitable.

Swann's comments point to what scientists and epidemiologists already know: global warming is affecting the emergence and spread of disease. In Arctic territories of the Russian Federation, for example, rising temperatures and melting permafrost (ground that stays completely frozen for at least two years straight) has seen an increase in anthrax outbreaks (Revich and Podolnaya 2011, 5). One such outbreak in 2016 infected "more than 2,000 reindeer ..., dozens of people became sick, and one child died" (Keetley 2021, 375). On February 1, 2018, the World Health Organisation (WHO) similarly reported that global warming will "increase exposure" to the *Aedes* mosquito, which is native to Africa but now found in tropical, subtropical, and temperate regions throughout the world. "Highly sensitive to climate conditions", the *Aedes* mosquito is a vector for dengue fever, Zika virus, Chikungunya, and yellow fever. While cooler climates and economic development "have kept mosquito-borne diseases out of wealthier Northern Hemisphere countries" (Jordan 2019), global warming may change that. As the WHO reports, rising global temperatures are "likely to lengthen the transmission seasons" further increasing the spread of such vector-borne diseases. *V Wars* translates this information into narrative, as its plot is driven by the potentially apocalyptic epidemiological dangers of global warming. In so doing, the series draws attention to how humankind is inextricably bound to, not separated from, earth systems. The vampire virus thus offers a prominent example of how nature can no longer be thought of as something outside and removed from humans (and vice versa). *V Wars* thereby illustrates the need to care for the environment and curb factors of global warming for the sake of human and planetary health.

In *V Wars*, the vampire virus spreads from prehistoric human bones *and* animal biomass that surface due to ice melt. While the bones and biomass carry the same amount of infectious viral particles, exposure to the latter causes Fayne to transform. The role of zoonosis here in the transmission of the vampire virus further highlights how interwoven humankind is with nature and nonhuman animals. It does so in two ways. Instead of alienating humans from other life forms, our vulnerability to zoonosis points to the collapse of binaries such as human and nonhuman animal, cultural and nature occurring in the Anthropocene. Furthermore, the transmission of disease from animals to humans in the real world owes to increasing human encroachment on animal habitats. Activities like deforestation, urbanization, and extensive livestock farming (O’Callaghan-Gordo and Antó 2020, 2) encourage human-animal contact, while also leading to another common cause of EIDS, namely, biodiversity loss. Other extractivist activities such as harvesting oil and timber and “expanding the agricultural frontier to respond to current food systems” also “encourage contact between humans and wildlife” and thereby “increase the frequency of ecotones, key areas in the onset of infectious diseases” (ibid). In *V Wars*, the catalyst for vampirism is not human encroachment on animal habitats, but rather global warming. Nevertheless, the series’ use of zoonosis as part of vampirisms spread brings human and animal others intimate relationship into sharper relief. In doing so, *V Wars* challenges the viewer to acknowledge the intrinsic relationality of the human and nonhuman. If zoonosis is the result of an anthropocentric worldview in which human interests are privileged over the interests of other animal, people must rethink how we live with both plant *and* animal others. Not only for the benefit of animal others, but our own benefit, too.

V Wars’ interest in portraying the epidemiological threat of ice melt is clearer still as the narrative tracks the global and local infection routes through which the vampire virus spreads. While Fayne is “patient zero” (the first documented patient in a disease epidemic within a population), he is not the first human to be infected. It is Dr Vercernis, a colleague of Swann’s at the Arctic Science Exchange Centre who first becomes a vampire after discovering the contagion-bearing remains. Vercernis commits suicide due to his becoming a vampire, preventing the virus’ spread past the Arctic where he works (series 1, episode 1). However, his efforts are thwarted when Swann and Fayne travel to the centre and are exposed to the virus. Subsequently, when Swann and Fayne travel back to America the virus travels with them. Once in America, the virus spreads by now familiar routes: via exposure to saliva, from contact with infected surfaces that “prions may be able to survive [on] ... for a few days” (series 1, episode 3) and through the air. Swann’s wife, Jess (Jessica Harmon), and Fayne’s dentist, for example, contract the virus through exposure to Swann’s and Fayne’s saliva respectively (series 1, episode 1). (Although Swann recovers from exposure to the virus, he nevertheless is a carrier.) In the second episode, a mechanic who works on Fayne’s motorcycle also contracts the virus. Notably, the virus also spreads through the vampire’s bite, however, this method of transmission is less virulent. Only Danika (Kimberly-Sue Murray),

Fayne's first victim, and Mila (Laura Vandervoort), Danika's sister, turn because of the vampire bite. Privileging real-world transmission routes and not the vampire's bite grants *V Wars* a degree of verisimilitude in its depiction of the outbreak event. This verisimilitude strengthens the series' ability to tap into anxieties around the spread of the disease and the potential for global pandemic due to global warming. By the fourth episode, the potential is clear: human bodies drained of their blood appear in caravan parks, commercial waste bins and other mundane locations across Seneca, New York, where the show is set, pointing to a rise in vampires. This influx owes to the virulence of aerosol and surface infection. As forensic reports show, "nothing connects those bodies to Fayne" (series 1, episode 4). The appearance of Ron O'Malley (Peter Van Horne) and his daughter, Ava (Sydney Meyer), vampires with no known links to Fayne, in the fourth episode confirms this virus has spread past Fayne's close contacts and by episode 6, military calculations estimate the vampire population has grown to six thousand.

As Dawn Keetley writes in "Climate change, 'Anthropocene unburials' and agency on a thawing planet" (2021), the appearance of thawing microbial life like the vampire virus that infect and effect humankind speak to negotiations of agency, human and nonhuman, occurring in the Anthropocene. Quoting Robert Macfarlane, Keetley asserts such "Anthropocene unburials" – Macfarlane's phrase for microbial life released by melting ice – qualify claims of human power over nature, reflecting a human agency in wane (2021, 376). Thawing microbial life stands for "human agency ... ceding to a 'nature' that is paradoxically gaining more power now we have so profoundly altered it" (Keetley 2021, 377). Swann speaks to this power when he asserts microbial outbreaks released by thawing ice "[aren't] nature crying out for help" but "warning shots" (series 1, episode 1). Such comments ascribe nature with a certain sense of agential power. Here nature is active and purposeful, the virus a caution against "the considerable pressure that human activities are exerting on ecosystems" (Pierre-Marie *et al.* 2021, 1141) and nature's potentially apocalyptic power. This power is suggested in scenes of glaciers showing signs of melt. Shot using a low camera angle and seen from below, the sheer size of the glacier and its equally devastating (potential) virological threat is emphasised; a danger reproduced in high-angle shots of forest surrounding Seneca. Thick and expansive, the forest is impenetrable, another natural arena in which similarly lethal microbial lifeforms might lie in wait.

Nature's apocalyptic power is clearer still in the series' representation of vampires as nature's agents through which nature exerts its power and revenge on humankind. Fayne confirms the link between nature and vampires when he appears on live television to address the public in episode five. Tying vampires' emergence and attack on humankind as a retaliation of sorts against humanity's extractivist and destructive practices, Fayne berates humankind for having "always taken whatever they need at the expense of every other creature on Earth". This includes the "Neanderthals and Denisovans" who, as he points out, "were doomed" to extinction

by humankind's appearance. Fayne's message is clear: human history is a history of the destruction of others. To a certain extent, Fayne's speech recalls other narratives like *I am Legend* and *28 Days Letter* wherein a "vampiric plague" is unleashed by the planet to rid itself of mankind thereby "reset the ecosystem" (Bacon 2020, 83). This is particularly true of *I am Legend* which "shows an extremely impatient nature that is eager to reclaim the land taken by human civilization" (ibid, 89) in the fast re-wilding of New York City. However, Fayne's desire to wage what he describes as "necessary and natural" (series 1, episode 5) war against humankind is not motivated by a desire to avenge a ravaged ecosystem but self-interest: he wants to defend himself and his people from the government agencies and vigilante groups who want to eradicate vampires. As Fayne declares, "we are living breathing beings" with "as much right to live as anyone else ... [and] the right to defend ourselves" (ibid). His actions are also prejudicial, grounded in a belief that vampires "are a new species ... an improved species. Faster, stronger, smarter" (ibid) than humans therefore more deserving to inherit the planet.

This is not to suggest that vampires in *V Wars* do not function as a metaphor for "an ecosystem fighting back against the human threat to its future" (Bacon 2020, 83). Like their brethren in *I am Legend* and *The Passage*, vampires in *V Wars* are "a means to an ecological end" (ibid, 85). The difference is *V Wars* points to the very real and urgent need to recognise the significance of pandemics "as part of understanding human-landscape interactions in the Anthropocene, as well as the multi-scale interconnectedness between environment and health" (Chin *et al.* 2020, 1). Such insight highlights the necessity to create new paradigms for human-animal and human-earth relations to secure the future of each. There may not be a "vaccine to help us" (series 1, episode 1) against the vampire virus or similarly lethal real-life diseases spread because of global warming. However, there are changes concerning how humans live with and act on this earth to combat the potentially species-ending emergence of future Anthropocene disease.

Managing biothreats: BludSub and beyond

As critics like Donna Haraway note, the Anthropocene:

Means many things, including that immense irreversible destruction is really in train, not only for the 11 billion or so people who will be on earth near the end of the 21st century, but for myriads of other critters too (2015, 162).

To combat this, Haraway calls for humankind to "make kin" with "all earthlings" – bacteria, fungi, critters, species of every kind – and "practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time)" (ibid). *V Wars* translates this insight through the effort of (some) humans and (some) vampires to co-exist. Human-vampire co-existence is possible because of the decision of 30% of the vampire population to subsist on donated human blood sourced from morgues and hospital clinics as well

as from family members who donate their own blood (series 1, episode 6). Vampires who choose to subsist on donated human blood also feature in the long-running television series *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), *Being Human* (U.K. 2008-13; U.S. 2011), *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), *Vampire Academy* (2007-2010) and the *Blade* (1998-2004) films to name a few. As I have noted elsewhere, the choice made by some vampires in these texts to consume donated human blood owes to “deep respect for human life and desire to spare human suffering” (Dungan 2020a, 72). It also owes to a desire to live peacefully alongside humankind. Vampires who consume donated human blood also feature in Suzy Charnas’ novel *The Vampire Tapestry* (1992) and Laura K. Hamilton’s *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* (1993-present) series. However, in these novels, the decision made by some vampires to consume donated human blood does not owe to an ethical or moral consideration of humankind’s right to not be fed on and they do not feed exclusively on donated human blood. Like the decision of (some) vampires in *The Vampire Diaries*, *Being Human*, *Vampire Academy* and the *Blade* films, the choice made by (some) vampires in *V Wars* to consume donated human blood owes to a respect for, and a desire to live amongst, humans. Mila, for example, decides to subsist on a diet of intravenous blood bags sourced from the local hospital when she becomes a vampire. She also hunts and kills vampires who prey on humans and even begins a romantic relationship with a human (female) police officer. Such actions illustrate a desire to not just live alongside but love and protect humankind – actions that align with her decision to not kill humans but instead feed on donated human blood.

In the final episode, the government decides to manufacture and freely distribute the synthetic blood drink, BludSub, to America’s vampire population. Developed by the National Institutes of Health (although “not for this purpose”) BludSub has the potential to “stop a vampire’s need to consume [human] blood” as it is composed of a synthetic enzyme that “behaves like” and thus is a suitable replacement for human blood (series 1, episode 10). Like the availability of the synthetic blood drink, TruBlood, in the television series *True Blood* (2008-14), BludSub allows vampires who choose to consume synthetic or donated and not human blood, to become part of human society. However, like TruBlood in *True Blood*, not everyone accepts BludSub and its promise of cross-species coexistence. There are some humans, like General May (Jonathan Higgins), anti-Blood Senator Smythe (Ted Atherton) and Calix Niklos (Peter Outerbridge), a high-ranking Department of National Security official and later vampire, who advocate for the killing of “basically everyone who’s been exposed” (series 1, episode 6) to the vampire virus and establish (illegal) vampire concentration camps to this end (series 1, episode 7). The series also tracks growing vigilante hate-crimes against vampires and vampire sympathisers. Lynch mobs form, seeking out and staking vampires and potentially infected humans. A similar storyline occurs in *True Blood* wherein “vampire lynch mobs, modelled after the Klu Klux Klan, operate in Bon Temps [where the series is set], replete with their own Dragon and masks” and “vampires are rounded up by a state-run task force, interred in state-run prisons, starved and

subjected to scientific studies and baiting” (Dungan 2020a, 94). In each series, these actions are motivated by prejudice and speciesism and therefore curb human-vampire relations.

Furthermore, while some vampires in *V Wars* choose to subsist on synthetic blood, most refuse to live sociably with humans and consume synthetic blood in favour of “being true to their nature” which is “feeding” on human blood (series 1, episode 10). For these vampires, humans are nothing but “food” (ibid). Vampires’ efforts to stymie the success of *BludSub* and the inter-species possibilities opened by its consumption are best demonstrated when Niklos “poison[s] at least half the *BludSub*” (ibid) distributed to willing vampires. A similar plot occurs in *True Blood* when the anti-assimilationist Governor of Louisiana, who owns America’s largest *TruBlood* manufacturing plant, contaminates his supply of synthetic blood with hepatitis V, a form of hepatitis lethal to vampires. Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) and Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård), the vampires at the centre of *True Blood*, successfully stop the world-wide distribution of contaminated *TruBlood* and its potentially world-ending implications. In *V Wars*, by contrast, Niklos succeeds resulting in the death of “dozens” of vampires during a televised distribution event (series 1, episode 10). It is a scene that convinces assimilationist and anti-assimilationist vampires alike to not to trust humans and retaliate and widespread societal breakdown ensues. There are reports of *Bloods* launching attacks against humans across America (six in Pittsburgh alone) and armed human vigilantes roam the streets hunting vampires. This outcome denies the narrative closure seen in *True Blood* wherein the series solves the apocalyptic tension between humans and vampires. Instead, *V Wars* depicts the end of society and humankind as we know it. As is revealed in the final episodes’ closing minutes, Niklos has not only contaminated half of America’s *BludSub* supply, but also reengineered the vampire virus to optimise its virility and ordered it to be added into the water supply of 10 major cities, exposing 30 million Americans to the virus (series 1, episode 10).

Niklos’ actions can be read as continuing the theme of planetary revenge as he tries to wipe out humans with vampires by creating mass-exposure events and denying vampires’ access to dietary alternatives. His plan is not without its problems: it does not appear to consider the availability of donated human blood. Nevertheless, like *Stakeland* (Mickle 2010) which features “feral, violent” vampires “driven by their need for human blood” (Bacon 2020, 101), Niklos’ scheme ensures that most vampires only have access to and thirst for human blood. This outcome promises that humanity, too preoccupied with surviving, “will not be exploiting its environment in any large-scale way for some considerable time, thus allowing the earth to restore itself” (ibid, 103). However, Niklos’ actions owe to his desire for political, not environmental, gain. He expresses these views in a televised address to the American public where he explains his reasons for becoming a vampire and contaminating America’s water supply. He states:

Until a few days ago, I was the Bloods' worst enemy. But it became increasingly clear to me that I was wrong. There can be only one winner in this battle for survival, this evolutionary struggle, and humans, weak, divided, and terrified, simply don't deserve to win.

"Bloods are here to stay" Niklos continues, and vows humankind will "stop being our masters and simply become our food" (series 1, episode 10).

V Wars' conclusion is interesting for it inverts what Wald terms "the evolutionary inflection" (2012, 116-117) of outbreak narratives wherein humankind (almost always) triumphs. As Wald argues, our triumph owes to representations of vampires as "unusually unstable life forms" "despite their superior strength and, in many cases, ... apparent immortality" (2012, 116-117). In *I am Legend*, vampires devolve into voiceless hordes; "in *Daybreakers*, a worldwide shortage of human blood causes the vampires to metamorphose into impulsive, violent (literally, bloodthirsty), powerful, but grotesque winged creatures called Subsiders" (ibid); and in *Thirst*, Sang-hyun must drink human blood to keep the deadly symptoms of EV at bay. Such "instability," according to Wald, "suggests that the vampires represent an insufficiently evolved life form and implies that contemporary human beings indeed represent an evolutionary telos: everything else is devolution" (ibid). This suggestion is absent in *V Wars*. As proven by BlutSub's failure and Niklos' success, it is vampires, not humans, who triumph. Moreover, the series' vampire population are not insufficiently evolved life forms. They are neither dehumanised (*Daybreakers*) nor mentally deficient (*I am Legend*). On the contrary, they keep their human appearance (except when feeding) and mental faculties. In episode nine Fayne *does* begin to feel sick. He loses his enhanced strength, sight, and hearing and even doubts his ability to feed. However, as the audience discovers, Fayne's illness does not owe to some inherent biological instability, but poison. Ava gives Fayne carfentanyl which impairs a vampire's nervous system convincing them they are sick. Vampires' triumph poses a significant, and timely, challenge to the narrative of human exceptionalism found in outbreak narratives and anthropocentrism more broadly. It highlights humankind "are not essential to the continuation of the earth. Neither by divine right nor by evolutionary right, the earth is not ours to do with as we please" (Bacon 2020, 192).

This last point comes into prominence if we recall ice melt – the catalyst for the vampire apocalypse because of global warming – has the properties of a hyperobject, "things that are massively distributed in time and space" (Morton 2013, 1) as to transcend localization, such as global warming, Styrofoam, and plutonium. Polar ice melt disrupts weather patterns and contributes to global warming, rising sea levels, and warming oceans. What makes hyperobjects "special" or useful for thinking about human-earth and human-animal relations in the Anthropocene is their impact on how humankind thinks about the earth, our place on it and in the cosmos (ibid, 17). Hyperobjects highlight humankind's existence "on the inside of

some big objects (bigger than us, that is)" including "the ecosystem, biosphere, climate, planet, Solar System" (ibid, 118, 128). *V Wars* translates this ecological awareness through vampires' triumph over humankind. By displacing humankind from the centre of our conceptual world, *V Wars* illustrates the many ways we are part of, not separated from, nature. In so doing, *V Wars* draws attention to the very real need for humanity to reflect on our connection with the nonhuman world and rebuild it from an inclusive perspective that considers other life-forms.

As Nina Auerbach declares in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995), "every age embraces the vampire it needs" (1995, 145). It follows then that in our pandemic-stricken times wherein infectious diseases experts assert "the next pandemic is not 100 years away; it is just around the corner" (*National Press Club Address* 2021), vampires, with their long history of contagion, now illustrate the very real problem of how pandemics appear because of humankind's relationship with other species and the environment. The vampire virus "is a warning" (series 1, episode 1), one that makes "urgent the question of how we might live responsibly and equitably in a shrinking – and ever more interdependent – world" (Wald 2021, vxii). Like the decision of (some) vampires to consume synthetic or donated and not human blood, some changes to the way humanity lives are to do with how we eat. But they also involve how we think about animals, the earth, and our place on it. We need to "make kin" (2015, 162) as Donna Haraway claims, with and across all manner of planetary life to mitigate or prevent the potentially apocalyptic epidemiological dangers of global warming.

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The Grotesque and the Erotic: Exploring Connections Between Monstrosity and Sexuality in Marshall Thornton's *Never Rest*

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to examine the connections between monstrosity, sexuality, and illness in Marshall Thornton's Frankenstein (1818) reinterpretation, Never Rest (2018). Here, I focus on the character of Jake, a gay teenager with leukaemia who becomes part of an experiment to cure death. Throughout, I reference the text's relationship to Shelley's original novel, exploring the queer Gothicism of Frankenstein and how this is presented in Never Rest. Through Thornton's depiction of a character slowly succumbing to monstrosity while simultaneously exploring and accepting his identity as a gay man, we begin to understand the connection between the two, with particular focus on the relationship between the undead and homosexuality. The novel highlights the lingering effects of the AIDs epidemic, in doing so tying together themes of illness and sexuality as Jake explores sex with fellow terminal patient Goth. I suggest that through Jake's monstrous nature, the notion of the desexualised terminally ill patient is subverted. Moreover, I argue that Thornton's novel presents monstrosity as both horrific and desirable, and that only in embracing the monster within can we truly accept ourselves. I conclude that Never Rest serves as a rejection of the palatable by confronting societal taboos of sexuality and illness through the lens of the monstrous.

Keywords: Monstrosity, illness, sexuality, the undead, adaptation.

In a rather broad sense, monsters function as “‘meaning machines’ exuviating all manner of cultural productions depending on their context and historical moment” (Poole 2011, xiv), meaning that monstrous figures can be interpreted in whatever way the subject sees fit. For many scholars, however, monsters can be interpreted as a physical manifestation of anxieties, particularly that relating to the Other. In fact, Halberstam establishes that nineteenth-century Gothic literature used the monstrous body to explore “race, class, gender, and sexuality” (1995, 6). This theory is shared by Wisker, who argues that “figures of horror [...] are ideally placed to be reimagined and rescripted as positive celebrations of otherness” (2009, 124). With this in mind, this article seeks to examine the connections between monstrosity, sexuality, and illness in Marshall Thornton’s *Frankenstein* (1818) reinterpretation, *Never Rest* (2018). It focuses on the character of Jake, a gay teenager with leukaemia who becomes part of an experiment to cure death. In what follows, I reference the text’s relationship to Shelley’s original novel, exploring the queer Gothicity of *Frankenstein* and how this is reimagined in *Never Rest*. I shall argue that through Thornton’s depiction of a character slowly succumbing to monstrosity while simultaneously exploring and accepting his identity as a gay man, we begin to understand the connection between the two, with particular focus on the relationship between the undead and homosexuality.

Thornton’s novel centres on Jake, a nineteen-year-old boy with terminal leukaemia, who begins the novel having accepted his fate and appears ready to die. However, his mother discovers an alternative treatment being trialled by Dr Harry called Property Five. As he begins the treatment, Jake’s health improves and he embarks on a romance with fellow terminal patient Goth, but he soon notices changes in himself. He is unable to eat without throwing up, maggots begin to grow in his ears, he begins to smell strangely, and he is always cold. Eventually, Jake realises that he died during the fit that prompted his first dose of Property Five, and that the treatment brought him back to ‘life’. Dr Harry reveals that the treatment replaces dying blood cells in an attempt to encourage the body to create new ones and restart bodily functions. However, the experiment is failing, and he intends to terminate all the patients involved. The novel ends with Jake killing Dr Harry to save himself and, in an act of desperation, injecting a dying Goth with Property Five so that they can escape the facility together. With themes of monstrosity, the Other, and sexuality, *Never Rest* serves as an adaptation of Shelley’s text that highlights the transgressive nature of the monstrous in a modern context, while forging its own identity through discussions surrounding illness and AIDs.

Before proceeding to analyse *Never Rest*, however, we must first acknowledge the connections between the Gothic and queerness. As Hogle notes, “Gothic fiction generally [plays] with and oscillate[s] between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural” (2002, 2). This can be seen in key

Gothic texts such as Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which each explore questions of identity and duality through supernatural means. As such, we can assert that the Gothic operates within a liminal space, one that pushes beyond the boundaries of the 'natural' to query the existence of a 'natural' way of being. This sentiment is one shared by many queer theorists, with Katz in particular arguing against "our usual assumption of an eternal heterosexuality" (2014, 13) in favour of the idea that modern understandings of sexuality are a social construct. Much like the Gothic, queer theory eschews categorisation and is, by definition, in a constant state of shifting and evolving. In fact, Jagose highlights that its "definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics" (1996, 1). Rather than being confined to a singular definition, queer theory seeks to challenge and critique, with Edelman pointing out that "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (2004, 17). It becomes clear, then, that both the Gothic and queer theory are concerned with transgression and uncertainty, and that each play with what it means to be human or monster, male or female, gay or straight. In blurring these lines, the two challenge the notion of strict binaries and present a rejection of normative society.

If we consider this rejection a key aspect of both the Gothic and queer theory, each presents a radical alternative to the norm as "both transgress boundaries and occupy liminal spaces, and in doing so, they each consistently interrogate ideas of what is 'respectable' and what is 'normal'" (Haefele-Thomas, 2012, 2). It is through this interrogation that the boundaries of normative society begin to come undone. Furthering this idea, Bienstock Anolik posits that "in the case of the homosexual Other, this sexual danger is so frighteningly inexpressible that it can be articulated only through a relocation into a figure of supernatural horror" (2007, 5). The danger of queer sexuality can then be reconfigured through the danger posited by the uncontrollable reanimated being such as Frankenstein's Creature or Jake in *Never Rest*. This article posits that Thornton's novel provides a queer monster that celebrates the transgressive nature of queer existence through its depiction of Jake, our monstrous queer protagonist. In what follows I will highlight the importance of queer sexuality in monstrosity, particularly focusing on the manifestation of Jake's monstrosity through his physical transformation, others' reactions to him, and his subsequent actions.

The Queer Context of *Frankenstein*

The undead have long been strongly linked with queerness. From Sheridan LeFanu's lesbian vampire story *Carmilla* (1872) to bisexual zombie Kieran in the BBC's *In the Flesh* (2013-14), examples of the queer undead are plentiful, with many using fear of the monster as a metaphor for homophobia. The connection between the two has been discussed by various scholars, most aptly in this author's opinion by Sue-Ellen Case in her article, "Tracking the Vampire" (1991). Here, she details the intersection of vampirism and lesbianism, positing that prejudice against homosexuality stems

from the association of heterosexual sex practices with procreation. Through this, Case says, the living are conflated with the natural, therefore meaning that sexual practice that do not create life, such as masturbation or same-gender sexual encounters, are unnatural. Case asserts:

Life/Death becomes the binary of the “natural” limits of Being: the organic is the natural. In contrast, the queer has been historically constituted as unnatural. Queer desire, as unnatural, breaks with this life/death binary of Being through same-sex desires (1991, 3).

This links with Bienstock Anolik’s theory of the sexual other, as the inherent fear of the queer becomes not only of the sexual act itself, but its subsequent threat to patriarchal, heteronormative society. Case continues to emphasize this, writing that “queer desire punctures the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being” (ibid, 4). Here, queer sexuality becomes inherently linked with the destruction of society through its inability to procreate and, as a result, is associated with death.

With Case’s theory in mind, the use of the undead as queer metaphor becomes increasingly obvious. Much like the queer, the undead punctures the seemingly natural life/death dichotomy simply by existing. By occupying the liminal space between life and death, the undead function as neither and yet both, challenging the very notion of what it means to be ‘natural’. Harkening back to my discussion of queer theory, queerness is characterised by its undefinable nature, effectively existing within that same liminal space occupied by the undead. Like the undead, the existence of queerness suggests an alternative to what we perceive to be the ‘norm’ and thereby challenges the very existence of the norm itself. This can be seen in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* through the titular character’s creation of the Creature. Botting suggests that, in giving ‘birth’ to the Creature, Frankenstein erases the “natural basis [with which we] establish gender differences” (1991, 101), removing the need for a female. Through this act, queer sexuality *does* in fact create life.

In many ways, *Frankenstein* is perhaps the best of the classic Gothic monsters to subject to reinterpretation through an explicitly modern queer lens. Where Dracula’s monstrosity is predicated on his depiction as an evil parasitic being, Shelley’s novel depicts the Creature as an unintentional monster, one who does not mean to cause harm but is feared based on “physiological immediacy and visual appearance” (Britton 2019, 177). In *Skin Shows*, Halberstam concludes that “by focusing upon the body as the locus of fear, Shelley’s novel suggests that it is people (or at least bodies) who terrify people, not ghosts or gods, devils, or monks, windswept castles or labyrinthine monasteries” (1995, 28). To take this a step further, it is specifically people who appear different, or Other, who terrify people.

It is here that the subject of the grotesque body comes into play. Characterised by Bakhtin as “a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel between death and conception” (1984, 318), the grotesque body is one that, much like the Gothic and queer theory, defies classification and is reminiscent of Case’s connectivity between queerness and the undead. In defying explanation, it crosses borders of normality and conventionality to create confusion and shock in those around it. Shelley displays this in *Frankenstein* through the Creature himself, whose body is almost unfathomable to those who encounter him. He is an anomaly that cannot be explained by contemporary science, and thus is rejected for it, as well as his garish appearance. However, Halberstam goes on to suggest that the Creature’s physicality is also instrumental in his depiction as a sympathetic being. He is, quite literally, an amalgamation of human parts and, “by his very composition, [he] can never be one thing, never represent only a single anxiety” (1995, 36). In other words, we can project the plight of virtually any marginalised identity onto him and he can be representative of any human. Indeed, the story of *Frankenstein* has since been imprinted into the cultural zeitgeist as a queer story through these associations between the public’s perception of the Creature and queer people, with loose adaptations such as Jim Sharman’s *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) explicitly highlighting this reading (Schultz, 2020).

However, perhaps the most overtly queer aspect of the novel is the Creature’s creator, Victor Frankenstein. Halberstam asserts that “the monster is pre-sexual, his sexuality, in other words, does not constitute his identity” (Halberstam 1995, 42), a contrast to Victor, who “creates an impression of deviant and dangerous sexual possibility” (Rigby 2009, 36) through his pursuit of reanimation. In a way, Victor aims to imitate heterosexual procreation through the birth of his Creature, but in doing so perverts it, rejecting the natural understanding of both life and death through his attempt at creation. Therefore, it is through Victor’s alternative creation of life that spawns The Creature, who can also be interpreted as an extension of Victor’s own self, or an outward projection of his unconscious wants and desires. Victor notes that “his limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful,” (Shelley 2007, 58) telling the reader that he had intentionally chosen to make the Creature physically attractive. Although he is subsequently horrified by the Creature’s grotesque appearance once it has been brought to life, I suggest that this is due to his desires making their way from the safety of the private sphere of his mind to the public sphere. This, in turn, solidified those desires and made them tangible, rather than the hypothetical notion they had previously been. Through the Creature, Victor is forced to “confront [...] the horror that is oneself, the horror that one’s relation to the world is painfully inappropriate and distorting the privacy of self” (Haggerty 2006, 53), and it is this horror that prompts his decision to destroy the Creature, a decision which is directly interrogated in *Never Rest*. Shelley allows us to confront the notion that grotesquery lies not only within the physical body, but within the mind, demonstrated through Victor’s inability to confront his own grotesque self.

Never Rest: a story of leukaemia and gay sex

While serving as an adaptation of Shelley's original novel, *Never Rest* shifts from *Frankenstein* slightly in that it presents both the Creature and the mad scientist in an explicitly queer context as both characters are depicted as gay men. After Jake realises that he is undead, he confronts Dr Harry about what happened to him. Dr Harry reveals that he "began by researching AIDS. I lost someone close to me while I was in medical school. Many. I lost many people close to me. Friends, lovers. It was horrible" (Thornton 2018, 90). Here, Thornton reinterprets the mad scientist by rewriting his quest as a reaction to the AIDS epidemic. Rather than simply being a man desperate to cure death, we see Harry as a man grieving the loss of a community, who not only survived the epidemic but seeks to ensure that future generations will not have to share his experience. This context adds a political narrative to Thornton's tale. The AIDS epidemic was not just a tragedy, but one that was intentionally ignored in the United States by the Reagan administration due to its association with queer men. In a documentary short called *When AIDS Was Funny*, Scott Calonico revealed audio from Ronald Reagan's press secretary Larry Speakes and journalist Larry King in 1982 in which the two discussed the epidemic, with King joking "it's known as 'gay plague.' [Press pool laughter.]" (2015). Through instances like these, the dominant narrative of the 1980s subsequently became that HIV/AIDS was in fact a 'gay plague' with discussions around transmission focusing on the swapping of bodily fluids during sexual activity. As a result of this association, the Reagan administration was able to avoid publicly discussing the infection, with Reagan himself attending his first meeting about AIDS in 1985, four years after it began to spread. This lack of engagement with the epidemic is cited by many as the reason for the high death toll, as little was being done regarding research and prevention, with Brier particularly citing the administration's refusal to fund AIDS programs (2009, 79).

Given the suffering that came about as a direct result of AIDS and America's response to it, it becomes particularly striking that Thornton utilises it in *Never Rest*. In taking the story of *Frankenstein*, Thornton shifts the self-loathing aspects of Victor's sexuality into righteous anger on Dr Harry's part. When speaking on his ambitions, Harry says "can you imagine a world without loss? A world without grief? It would be a wonderful place, don't you think" (Thornton 2018, 115). It becomes evident that his desires are not selfish, but rather that he hopes to create a world rife with queer futurity. In creating the undead, Dr Harry seeks to ensure that a 'gay plague' will not wipe out generations of queerness ever again. Through this act, it becomes clear that despite ultimately becoming the villain of the novel, his intentions are deeply sympathetic.

Illness, Sexuality, and the Grotesque

Never Rest's thematic content revolves heavily around the relationship between sexuality and illness or disability, with the two being presented as so integral to one

another that it becomes near impossible to discuss Jake's queer identity without also referring to his illness, as they are deeply intertwined for him as well as the reader. With the backdrop of the AIDs epidemic, it becomes clear that this linking of queer sexuality and illness is not coincidental, but rather serves as a commentary on the way in which queerness has historically been associated with disease. In his article 'Homo/Hetero: The Struggle for Sexual Identity', Joseph Epstein places homosexuality as an "unexplained injury", one that he wishes could be removed from society entirely (1970, 37-51). Epstein's attitude here highlights the assumption that homosexuality was a flaw to be fixed, rather than simply an alternative sexuality.

Thornton's novel plays with the notion of a 'cure' for homosexuality using a gay protagonist with cancer. Here, the focus becomes Jake's actual illness and the idea of a cure for his sexuality is subverted, particularly when we take the character of Goth into consideration. The doctor reveals that he knew both Jake and Goth were gay when he chose them for the experiment, with Jake realising "you didn't want me to be dead alone" (Thornton 2018, 123), effectively recreating the *Bride of Frankenstein* narrative motif. In doing so, the novel reiterates that homosexuality is not something to be cured and is in fact encouraged through Dr Harry's choice to introduce the two. This then further ties into Dr Harry's trauma surrounding AIDs as his desire for younger generations to cultivate a community is reflected here. In this way, Harry's experiment succeeds, as it is through Jake's relationship with Goth that he truly begins his journey towards self-acceptance. When their relationship begins to develop romantically, Jake says:

Most of the time, I felt like an experiment on the verge of going wrong. A thing. A monster. But then, Goth would be there, and I was an almost normal teenager falling in love (Thornton 2018, 148).

Hence, it soon becomes obvious that Jake's feelings of monstrosity are offset by his relationship with Goth, and as his monstrous transformation continues, Jake's internal perception of himself becomes more positive.

Jake's acceptance of himself and his sexual relationship with Goth is increasingly important when we consider Dr Harry's experiences with AIDs. Due to the 1980s explicit focus on the connection between AIDs and homosexuality, a puritanical mindset towards casual sex and promiscuity began to emerge in the period, particularly within Conservative Christian groups in the United States. Anthony Michael Petro argues that the AIDs crisis resulted in a shift in American Christianity's response to sex in general. His book, *After the Wrath of God*, opens with a quote from Reverend Billy Graham, who is asked 'is AIDs a judgement of God?' to which he responds, "I could not say for sure, but I think so" (Petro 2015, 1). While Graham came under fire for his statement, his words are emblematic of attitudes towards the AIDs crisis at the time. Petro goes on to write that "AIDs was also a

moral epidemic, complete with a hierarchy of victimhood that placed innocent children above implicitly guilty homosexuals" (ibid, 2). For many, the distinct connection between AIDs and the gay community resulted in the idea that queer people were degenerate and unclean, and this mindset problematised not only queer people themselves but the very act of queer sex for decades to come.

This connection between queerness and uncleanliness recalls the notion of the grotesque body, which was touched on earlier in this article. On the grotesque body, Cohen Shabot writes:

[They] are not clean, closed, well-defined, clear-cut, beautiful bodies striving for symmetry and order. Rather, the grotesque body is a body that defies clear definitions and borders and that occupies the middle ground between life and death, between subject and object, between one and many (2007, 59).

Utilising this as a definition of the grotesque body, we begin to see a clear connection between queerness and the grotesque. To recall Case's theory regarding queerness and the undead, queer desire punctures the life/death dichotomy through sex that doesn't typically result in procreation. Therefore, much like the grotesque body, queer sex exists within this same middle ground, undoing the borders between the natural and unnatural. In rooting degeneracy and uncleanliness in queer sex, the queer body then becomes the locus of grotesquery for daring to engage in such acts, and effectively becomes the grotesque body.

Crucially, *Never Rest* not only broaches the subject of sex, but allows Jake and Goth to explicitly discuss their sexual relationship and contains an explicit, although not particularly graphic, queer sex scene. As their relationship becomes physical, the two discuss the idea of sex:

There were red, peeling spots on my chest from being shocked and cuts on my feet from walking barefoot outside. I smelled. And in the right light, I looked green.

Yeah, I was sex on a stick.

'How can you want to have sex with me?' I asked. 'I'm coming apart.'

'How can you want to have sex with me? I'm dying.'

'But you're beautiful.'

'And so are you.' (Thornton 2018, 137).

Goth's sexual attraction to Jake never wavers, even after he witnesses Jake pull maggots out of his ears. The significance of Goth's name cannot be overlooked here, since goths are typically assumed to have a preoccupation with death and the undead as proponents of the goth subculture (Shumway and Arnet 2007, 139). While Goth himself does not share this preoccupation, Goth's attraction to Jake despite his decaying form suggests Thornton's awareness of this as he has intentionally written

a character that does not care if he is, quite literally, falling apart. Therefore, it can be said that through his monstrous transformation, Jake is given the opportunity that had been previously denied to him due to his illness. In their text *Grotesque*, Edwards and Graulund note that “[Frankenstein] creates a grotesque, a mishmash of disparate elements made terrible by ‘horrific contrast’ between the beautiful and the vile” (2013, 53), imagery which Thornton uses in this scene not to disgust, but to inspire eroticism. Goth is not discouraged by Jake’s grotesque appearance and is instead enchanted by the mixture of the beautiful and the vile, displaying a direct contrast to Frankenstein’s, and the public’s, reaction to his Creature in the original novel by Mary Shelley. Rather than the shame surrounding sexuality that is promoted through America’s subsequent puritanical outlook towards sexuality post-AIDs, Jake and Goth present the reader with an open and loving depiction of sex and sexuality.

Alongside Jake’s exploration of his identity, the novel focuses heavily on how his experiences as a terminally ill person have affected his sexuality. Jake’s confidence in himself as someone worthy of personhood and autonomy is reinforced throughout the novel, most prominently in his relationship with Goth. At the beginning of the novel, Jake says “I’ve been sick so long I didn’t think I’d get to be anything” (Thornton 2018, 45) specifying that he avoided pinpointing his sexuality and coming out because he did not believe he would ever get a chance to explore his attractions. Here we can see the impact that his illness had on his identity and his relationship to it, highlighting how intertwined the two are for Jake. Many depictions of cancer that centre on or deal with the idea of sexuality focus on the renegotiation of sexuality, particularly regarding breast cancer patients. Fernández-Morales’ article “Illness, Genre, and Gender in Contemporary Television Fiction: Representations of Female Cancer in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*” (2009) research several of the most well-known depictions of female characters who suffer from cancer in their 40s, both of whom actively engaged in sex prior to their diagnoses. Ussher, Perz, and Gilbert have noted that “research examining changes to sexuality after cancer has primarily focused on cancers that directly affect the sexual or reproductive body,” (2015) specifically those with prostate or breast cancer. Where Jake’s relationship to cancer and sexuality differs, however, is that Jake’s cancer is not related to his sexual organs, nor is he in recovery during the novel. Rather than being in remission and recalibrating his relationship with sex and sexuality, Jake’s diagnosis at a young age left him unable, or perhaps unwilling, to fully understand his sexuality. Unlike Samantha in *Sex and the City*, Jake was not forced to reconfigure his relationship to sex because he did not have the opportunity to develop a relationship with it to begin with.

In the article “Attitudes and perceptions towards disability and sexuality”, Esmail, Darry, Walter, and Knupp write that healthy sexual development requires “the basic needs of being liked and accepted, displaying and receiving affection, feeling valued and attractive and sharing thoughts and feelings” (2010, 1149), and

they suggest that these components can be affected, both positively and negatively, by social constructs within society. Most notably, those with physical attributes that indicate illness or disability “are often patronised, pitied and treated as invisible or stared at” (ibid, 1150), all of which can result in shame, anxiety, and self-consciousness. However, while Jake experiences these anxieties, it is embracing his physicality that enables him to become comfortable and enthusiastic about sex. Moreover, Goth is drawn to Jake perhaps even more so due to his sickly appearance, telling him: “I’m not sure I’d want to be with a regular boy. He wouldn’t understand, and he might feel sorry for me. You don’t. You get it” (Thornton 2018, 113). This admission stresses that it is both Jake’s illness and his now monstrous nature that draws Goth to him, at least in part, with Jake’s non-normative status as an undead being enabling him to pursue their relationship. Rather than renegotiating his relationship to sex, Jake is instead able to come into his own through acceptance of his identity.

The Acceptance of Self through Monstrosity

The intense and explicit nature of Jake and Goth’s romance becomes an increasingly important factor when we consider the overwhelming number of queer stories that focus primarily on homophobia and queer tragedy. Marcotte (2018) writes that the central theme of queer stories was often the coming-out process and the aftermath of that revelation, with *Simon VS The Homosapiens Agenda* being a prime example. Although it explores Simon’s online relationship with Blue, the central theme of the novel is Simon’s journey towards coming out to his family and being ‘out’ publicly. Where *Never Rest* departs from this narrative is that it is not posited as a coming out story. In the opening pages of the novel, Jake reveals that he had known he was gay for years but avoided discussing it with his mother for fear of “teasing her with something that couldn’t be”: a healthy Jake with a future (Thornton 2018, 7). Here, we see Jake prioritise his illness over his sexuality, adding a new layer to the coming out story. Moreover, as Jake begins to entertain the idea of happiness as a queer boy, the notion of coming out becomes irrelevant. On their second meeting Goth simply asks Jake if he is gay, replying with “well don’t worry, I’m gay too” (ibid, 45). Here, Goth displays a nonchalance that is rarely seen in a genre which predominantly depicts characters wrestling with their sexuality.

When the two eventually have sex towards the end of the novel, Jake says that he felt as though he was “making love to fire. That we were fire and ice. Except neither would give an inch. I couldn’t smother him anymore than he could melt me” (ibid, 138). Here, queer sexuality is not only brought to the forefront but is treated with the weight that is typically afforded to heterosexual relationships through their intense connection. Moreover, through this sex scene the novel challenges the dominant understanding of normative sex. It is queer in multiple senses of the word, both because it is two boys engaging in sexual activity, and because it displays a grotesquery that is often absent in mainstream heterosexual sex. While Jake has not reached his monstrous final form yet, his body has begun to

decay, making it clear that Goth is effectively having sex with a corpse, something which should theoretically invoke disgust and horror in the reader. Kristeva describes the corpse as the “utmost of abjection [... it] disturbs identity, system, order” (1982, 4), and yet Jake’s undead nature does not deter Goth from finding him “beautiful” (Thornton 2018, 137). Jake asserts that Goth’s feverish warmth feels like “slipping into a bath” while Goth is soothed by Jake’s cool temperature (Thornton 2018, 137), emphasising that their ‘defects’ (Jake being undead and Goth dying) actually contribute to their compatibility. This mixture of the erotic and the grotesque is typically depicted in horror films such as *Possession* (1981) or *Nekromantik* (1987) through sex scenes involving corpses or inhuman creatures, but *Never Rest* brings this grotesquery to the forefront by depicting it as romantic rather than invoking horror. Moreover, this directly contrasts with one of the most popular mainstream human/undead romances, *Warm Bodies*, which depicts the protagonist, R, as being cured of his zombie characteristics after kissing his love interest, Julie. Here, the grotesque is ‘fixed’ by the consummation of heterosexual love, whereas Jake and Goth’s grotesque characteristics only contribute to the romance of the moment, evidenced by their physical compatibility.

Edwards and Graulund highlight the importance of transgression in monstrosity, writing that “to transgress is to infringe, or go beyond, the bounds of an aesthetic, ethical and established form of behaviour” (2013, 66). Through transgression, the monster can defy social norms and expectations as they already exist outside the normative boundaries of society, with Jake and Goth doing so not only in terms of their sexuality, but with their illnesses as well. Susan Sontag wrote of the isolating experience of having cancer, that it is “felt to be obscene – in the original meaning of that word: ill-omened, abominable, repugnant to the senses” (2002, 9). Despite Sontag writing this in 1978, attitudes towards sick bodies remain laced with discomfort and rarely do we see representations of sick people engaging in sex, particularly queer people. As referenced previously, many of the depictions of terminally ill people and their relationship to sexuality focus on those with prostate or breast cancer, and often deal with one partner adjusting to their sexuality post-diagnosis. What Thornton provides, however, is the mutual understanding of two terminally ill partners not only engaging in sex but delighting in their perceived ‘grotesque’ bodies.

Where Sontag argues that illness, particularly cancer, is used as a metaphor for other things due to the innate unknowability of the disease, Jake’s transformation becomes symbolic of both his sexuality and his leukaemia, externalising the illness and making its effects on his body even more visible than they once were (ibid, 6). Halberstam writes that the postmodern horror film “find[s] its place in... the obscenity of ‘immediate visibility’” (1995, 1), a state that both Jake and Goth find themselves in by the end of the novel. Jake has begun to decay and, after having been sedated by Dr Harry and taken to a funeral home with the intention of being cremated, is seen by a civilian driving along the side of the road. She stops to ask if

he needs help, with Jake describing that “concern flashed across her face, then, as she got a good look at me, fear” (Thornton 2018, 158). The woman drives away quickly, not daring to get too close to the presumably frightening sight, and it quickly becomes clear that Jake is visibly grotesque to the point of inciting genuine terror. He describes himself as “horrible, a monster, staggering as though not completely alive” (ibid, 158), and it is this grotesque identity that Jake later accepts. In a discussion about the film theorist Robin Wood, Jon Towlson wrote that Wood “regarded the horror film as a potentially progressive genre inasmuch as the dread of social, sexual, and ideological difference is challenged when the other is rendered sympathetic and understandable to the viewer and thereby cannot be recuperated into dominant ideology” (2018, 59). If we consider this in the context of *Never Rest*, Jake’s acceptance of himself (of his monstrosity and, by extension, his identity as a gay man and a sick man) becomes a rejection of the normative world around him. Rather than dejectedly accepting his fate as the Other, he embraces the aspects of himself that make him monstrous in the eyes of society and becomes even more so.

In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the Creature can be seen as an externalisation of Frankenstein’s subconscious desires, and the “representation of his eroticism is grotesque because it greatly undermines his status according to patriarchy’s heterosexual norm” (Marcotte 2018). The Creature’s grotesque nature, and Frankenstein’s subsequent rejection of that nature, indicates to the reader that this is a being deserving of punishment and furthers the idea that Frankenstein’s desires towards him are wrong. Ultimately, this physical manifestation of queer desire must be removed. However, *Never Rest* directly challenges this notion in multiple ways. While the novel does end in Harry’s death, rather than being punished for his transgressions, Harry is punished for attempting to take Jake’s choice away from him. When Jake tells him “I’m not a thing. I am a person. I get to decide [whether he lives or dies],” Harry responds by saying “No. You don’t” (Thornton 2018, 163). Harry clearly demonstrates that he has lost sight of his reasons for creating Property Five and attempts to forcibly remove Jake’s autonomy, undermining his ability to make informed choices about his own life, therefore treating him as less than, in part due to his illness.

If we recall the idea of the queer body as the grotesque body, it becomes integral, then, that Harry attempts to cure Jake’s illness through his experiments. In doing so, Harry seeks to remove the seemingly ‘grotesque’ aspects of his patients, demonstrating that he has not undergone the self-acceptance that Jake has, perhaps in favour of remaining palatable in the eyes of society. According to Cohen Shabot, “that which exceeds us, that which threatens our sameness, our ‘normality,’ our well-defined and protected presence in the world, constitutes the different” (2007, 65). Jake’s grotesque state of being has exceeded Dr Harry’s intentions, thus presenting a danger to his existence and respectability. When Jake confronts him on why he lied to another doctor about the experiments, he says “I might [get better]. If you told Dr Callabray the truth” (Thornton 2018, 146) and Harry’s refusal to take

this on board suggests that his professional reputation has become more important to him than the patients he claims to help. Rather than embrace the new, grotesque nature of his patients, Harry seeks to destroy it, ultimately rejecting his own creation. Here, we observe a queer person whose notions of sexuality are rooted in his own experiences, and as a result is unable to see past them. In doing so, Thornton suggests that Harry has become disconnected from his own community and, rather than accepting that his own views are perhaps outdated or incorrect, refuses to acknowledge the importance of listening to younger generations.

Never Rest climaxes with the Jake's heroic rescue of Goth, which then leads to his reanimation. The retelling thus instead ends on a positive note, with both Jake and Goth wondering what's next for them. Jake's acceptance of himself in all ways contrasts with *Frankenstein*, in which the Creature says "I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself. It is true we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another" (Shelley 2016, 148). Frankenstein's monster knowingly refers to himself as a monster, seemingly at peace with this fact as long as he has a companion to share his monstrosity with. However, it is important to note that, despite his Otherness, the monster does not stray so far from normative society to engage in homosexuality. In fact, he specifically requests a "creature of another sex," simultaneously acknowledging his own apparent gender and that there exists "another." This acknowledgment suggests that requesting a companion of the same gender, or even not specifying, would demonstrate that he is too far gone into his monstrosity and unworthy of sympathy. In contrast, Thornton's novel ends with Jake's total acceptance of his self in his entirety. His existence as a sick man, as a gay man, and as a monster is something that no longer frightens him, but that he has fully embraced regardless of how he is treated by others.

Conclusion

It can be said that Shelley's original novel serves as a reminder that repression of one's desires can lead to destruction, and that this is a warning that continues to be applicable to a contemporary audience. While this is a sentiment that Thornton's novel shares, it manifests itself in a different way, enabling the reader to understand how attitudes towards homosexuality have changed since *Frankenstein's* publication. Where once homosexuality would have been relegated to subtext, as is suggestively shown in Shelley's novel, reinterpreting the narrative in a modern context allows for such a subject matter to be brought into the light and dealt with explicitly, perhaps reflecting society's willingness to engage with it directly.

Crucially, what *Never Rest* conveys is an acute awareness of the importance of self-acceptance to contemporary readers, while also providing a radical alternative to conformism. Here, we see an explicit embracing of the monstrous queer in Thornton's reinterpretation. Rather than being depicted as a monster *because* he is gay, Jake's transformation into a monster allows him the life he never thought he

would have. In being monstrous, he is given freedom. He rejects the heteronormative and ableist ideals of society in favour of an alternative existence, one that will undoubtedly leave him on the margins of society, but it is one in which he can exist as his true self. Jake's very existence harkens back to Case's ideas surrounding disgust towards queer sexuality as non-reproductive, doubly so due to his position as a gay man and as an undead one. Jake says "I can't die. But I'm not exactly alive either. I'm caught. In between" (Thornton 2018, 149). He now exists in the liminal space between life and death, transgressing normative states of being. However, unlike Frankenstein's Creature, Jake wholly embraces this transgression by the end of the novel, and rather than seeking to hide in the corners of society, looks outwardly, thinking "we'd figure it out. We were ready" (ibid, 166).

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Gothic Hungers:

Genre as Critique in Alette de Bodard's *Dominion of the Fallen*

ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of genre in Alette de Bodard's series Dominion of the Fallen (2015-2020), arguing that the narrative is divided between the imperial Gothic and social realism. De Bodard's series follows Philippe, an ex-immortal abducted from Vietnam and conscripted by the Houses, European empires controlled by Fallen angels. While the narrative inside the Houses draws heavily on imperial Gothic fear of the colonial Other, the narrative outside the Houses is far closer to social realism. To demonstrate this, I examine the conflicting generic treatment of consumption across the series, arguing that de Bodard uses the social realist language of hunger and deprivation to undercut the imperial Gothic fear of the Other, inflated by the colonial rhetoric of cannibalism. The French Vietnamese author is often described as a writer of postcolonial science fiction fantasy, however I suggest that her ironic use of the imperial Gothic here can be instead read as anticolonial, for it enounces her active resistance to the genre's sustained inflammatory rhetorical power. I conclude by suggesting that de Bodard's writing is a prescient intervention in contemporary racial politics, particularly with regards to the anti-Asian rhetoric surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. Dominion demonstrates the consequences of allowing imperial Gothic language to flourish and suggests genre resistance as a route to counter the distorted social constructions it encourages.

Keywords: Imperial Gothic, Genre, Consumption, Alette de Bodard, Colonialism

Genre has long been understood as a form of social action which can shape the way we interpret and interact with the world. Catherine Schryer argues that “genres provide us with the flexible guidelines, or access to strategies that we need to function together in the constant social construction of reality” (2002, 95), while Carolyn Miller defines genre not only by form “but also in terms of the typified actions produced” (Miller 1994, 69). While the Gothic genre more generally speaking has allowed numerous disenfranchised groups to voice a counter discourse, such definitions of genre necessarily prompt uncomfortable questions when applied to certain Gothic subgenres, notably the imperial Gothic. If genres contribute to a social construction of reality, which does indeed produce typified responses, what responses might the imperial Gothic inspire? This is the question that Aliette de Bodard explores in *Dominion of the Fallen* (2015-2020), a series primarily comprised of the novels *The House of Shattered Wings* (2015), *The House of Binding Thorns* (2018) and *The House of Sundering Flames* (2019), as well as numerous online short stories and novellas.

Despite being set in the 1970s, the series is imbued with the aesthetics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an interview for *Lightspeed* magazine, de Bodard explains this decision:

It was a time of great contrasts: of elegant men and women attending glamorous balls while workers struggled to make both ends meet mere streets away and soldiers conquered colonies like Vietnam to satisfy an endless need for money (Coleman 2017).

The contrasts de Bodard highlights above are immediately evident in *Dominion*; the Houses live lavishly while the majority, or “Houseless”, struggle to eat. Nowhere are these contrasts displayed more effectively than in de Bodard’s use of genre, where stark contrasts between lavish Gothic and quotidian social fact lay bare the divisions of her imagined world and of the societies she echoes. In highlighting the French colonisation of Vietnam, de Bodard briefly gestures here towards a key aspect of *Dominion*’s use of nineteenth century aesthetics: its critique of nineteenth century colonial ideology, as expressed in Gothic tropes of the time.

Throughout *Dominion of the Fallen*, there is a clear tonal difference between the narrative inside the Houses and the sections following the Houseless. While the sections of the series that take place within the Houses draw heavily on Gothic tropes, the sections outside the Houses’ walls are far closer to social realism. The tonal disparity between these two genres blindsides the reader, as the fear of the Other, inflated by the Gothic language of the Houses, is punctured by the harsh reality of the other’s lives. Whilst this discordant juxtaposition of Gothic fear and realist practicality surfaces in almost every aspect of *Dominion*’s world, it is in the act

of consumption – of food, flesh, land, and narrative space – where it is most fully developed. This article argues that, by contrasting the imperial Gothic rhetoric of cannibalism with realist depictions of hunger, de Bodard exposes this rhetoric as a projection of the cultural cannibalism at the heart of empire. De Bodard's interrogation of imperial Gothic rhetoric provides a timely literary model of resistance to a mode of rhetoric that increasingly influences contemporary political discourse and social constructions of reality, particularly with regards to the Covid-19 pandemic. Her use of genre resistance demonstrates the need for continued realist interruption to counter imperialist worldviews – interruption which centres the experiences of those othered by such discourse. In the following sections, I will outline some key tropes and thematic concerns of the Gothic, specifically the imperial Gothic, and social realism. I will then demonstrate the applicability of these genres to the narrative within the Houses, before addressing the divergent generic treatment of consumption of *Dominion of the Fallen*.

The Imperial Gothic

The narrative within the Houses is Gothic by any definition of the term. Indeed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's checklist of Gothic tropes in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986) almost perfectly describes the series:

an oppressive ruin [...] a Catholic or feudal society [...] priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscured family ties; the poisonous effects of guilt and shame; nocturnal landscapes and dreams; apparitions from the past (10).

Similarly, Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy argue that both Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall's requirement of an "emphasis on the returning past" and Patrick McGrath's "interest in transgression and decay" (Spooner and McEvoy 2007, 1) can be found in the curse that haunts House Silverspires in *House of Shattered Wings*. Angela Wright suggests a key aspect of the Gothic resides in the architecture itself: "the Gothic building as a symbol of fear and unyielding power is ubiquitous" (2007, 36). This is certainly true of the Houses in *Dominion*, so saturated with power and magic that their architecture manifests a characterizable, ghostly presence. This is nowhere more apparent than in House Hawthorn, where the House communicates through "skeletal branches of hawthorn shaped into the vague shape of children" (de Bodard 2019, 10), yet each House possesses its own unique, haunting avatar. Frederic Jameson's analysis of postmodern Gothic film is particularly relevant here:

Gothics are ultimately a class fantasy (or nightmare) in which the dialectic of privilege and shelter is exercised: your privileges seal you off from other people, but by the same token they constitute a protective wall through which you cannot see, and behind which therefore all kinds of envious forces may

be imagined in the process of assembling, plotting, preparing to give assault (1996, 289).

Jameson's analysis is an apt description of *Dominion's* House narrative. Sealed off from the rest of the world through social, physical, and magical barriers, the Houses are the centre of privilege in the world of *Dominion*. Trapped within this Gothic fantasy/nightmare, the House-bound have othered all outside their House so dramatically that even neighbouring Houses, almost identical in many ways, transform in their minds into monstrous enemies plotting their downfall. As such, they become so.

Yet Gothic is not a political monolith and has been used to empower and oppress in equal measure. Therefore, specificity is key: within the wider Gothic umbrella, de Bodard predominantly appropriates the language of the imperial Gothic. First coined by Patrick Brantlinger in *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*, imperial Gothic describes a subgenre of nineteenth century Gothic texts which express anxieties over the decline of empire and fear of the Othered colonial subject. Brantlinger suggests that the three prevalent themes within the genre are "individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilisation by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world" (1988, 230), drawing particular attention to the presence of these themes in the writing of Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad amongst others.

Dominion's House narrative most obviously conforms to imperial Gothic conventions through its depiction of consumption. In *Consuming Gothic*, Lorna Piatti-Farnell argues that food and consumption are inextricably bound to ideas of "disgust, revulsion, alienation" (2017, 262) in their Gothic form. This is due to consumption's role, in Piatti-Farnell's words, as "the ultimate act of fragmentation":

for it fully separates that which is about to be consumed from its own network of boundaries, and places it within the structures of domination that belong solely to the eater (ibid, 113-4).

Consumption anxiety is a key theme in a variety of Gothic subgenres, often hyperbolically expressed through depictions of cannibalism; indeed, Howard Malchow argues that cannibalism is a staple of Gothic fiction (1996, 45). In the imperial Gothic, however, this anxiety takes on a particularly unpleasant xenophobic and/or racist dimension. Such connotations are difficult to sidestep in any discussion of cannibalism, imperial or otherwise, given the word's troubled roots. Although groups of differing nationalities have always accused each other of anthropophagy, Tabish Khair reminds us that the rhetoric of the cannibal is intrinsically linked to colonialism. The word itself arises from Christopher Columbus's journal, in which he detailed the Arawak people's descriptions of the

fearsome flesh-eating nature of their enemies, the Caribs – mistranslated as Canibs, and later cannibals. Therefore, the concept of cannibalism began and continues to function as an identity rather than an action. As European empires spread across the globe, Khair states that “the cannibal had to exist, for he was essential to a simplified ‘negative’ notion of Otherness that finally justified colonial and evangelical missions” (2009, 54). Unlike anthropophagy, which also describes the act of eating human flesh, the word cannibalism carries connotations of savagery and gruesome violence. This becomes deeply disturbing when we consider Debbie Barnard’s assertion that, “in the French colonial system, the assignation of the epithet “*cannibal*” was based on race, rather than on direct observation or gastronomic preferences” (2005, 327). While many contemporary Gothic texts have attempted to excise these colonial connotations from their depictions of cannibalism, no such attempt is made in the imperial Gothic. Instead, this genre actively and enthusiastically engages with the cultural and racial stereotypes that the cannibal creates.

Crucially, Brantlinger notes that the imperial Gothic’s interest in cannibalism goes both ways: “imperial Gothic involves a reverse cannibalism: the nightmare of being swallowed by the world’s dark places has as its obverse side the solipsistic fantasy of swallowing the world” (1988, 247). As *Dominion of the Fallen* takes place in an alternate Paris, Tabish Khair’s discussion of this dichotomy in imperial Gothic texts set in Europe is particularly pertinent:

In general, the Other is seen as a Self waiting to be assimilated [...] or the Other is cast as the purely negative image of the European Self [...] In colonial terms, these relations to Otherness defined the difference between the approaches of the civilising or evangelising gentleman, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the ‘school’ that posited non-Europeans as basically unmitigated/lurking cannibals (2009, 4).

This fantasy of assimilation/destruction follows the same process of fragmentation noted above by Piatti-Farnell in Gothic consumption more generally. However, the colonial aspects of that fragmentation described here by Brantlinger and Khair are key to understanding the specifics of consumption in the imperial Gothic.

Social Realism

Supernatural elements periodically impose themselves on the lives of the Houseless in Paris, so one might be tempted to define the sections of *Dominion* focused on their lives as urban fantasy. However, they have much more in common with social realism. Not to be confused with socialist realism, David Shapiro defines social realism as an artistic style,

opposed to the ruling class and its mores, [which] predominantly selects as its subject matter the negative aspects of life under capitalism: labour conflicts,

poverty, the greediness of capitalists, the nobility of long-suffering workers (Shapiro 1973, 20).

Transposing this sentiment to literature, John Z. Ming Chen and Yuhaua Ji define it as a mode of writing focussing on the suffering of “the lower-middle class, the working class and the poor—the underprivileged, the subaltern, the underrepresented or even unrepresented in earlier literature” (2015, 113), drawing particular attention to “immigrant groups and their ghettoization” (ibid., 114). Among the *Houseless*, the narrative is concerned primarily with the harsh realities of life for the working class and precariat members of the Annamite community. Described by Philippe as living in “a slum among slums, poor and destitute, surviving on scraps outside the House system”, (de Bodard 2018, 32). The practical concerns of finding money, medicine and staying warm dominate the *Houseless* narrative more than the novel’s supernatural elements which, for the most part, function as intrusions from the magical elite.

Social realist texts also deal with consumption, however their engagement with this theme often centres on the metabolic elements of staying alive, giving great weight to food and its acquisition. This can certainly be seen in the *Houseless* narrative; food is treated as “a precious rarity” even when “diluted and adulterated, cut to be cheaper” (de Bodard 2018, 104). The *Houseless Aurore*, for instance, gives greater significance to her community’s precarious place in Paris than to the magical torture device implanted in her chest by House leader Asmodeus. Upon receiving a meal from her sister, she notes the social implications of every grain of rice:

The meal was rice dark with grit, a drop of fish sauce to hide the blandness of grains that had grown in poisoned fields, and a scattering of dried fish, from the large jar that they’d been sparingly taking from for months (de Bodard 2019, 119).

Similarly, the *Houseless Françoise*, caught in a deadly power struggle between Houses, focuses her narration on details such as the “poor insulation” of her neighbours’ apartments, the twice broken windows, and the inadequacy of their dumplings given “the small amount of filling available, and even that had been bulked up with potatoes and fat” (de Bodard 2018, 138). Conversely, when her musings are interrupted by the appearance of House emissaries, Françoise recognises them by how “well-fed” (ibid, 139) they are. Hunger is a fact of life for the *Houseless*; it is treated with a practical detachment, characteristic of social realism, that suggests this is familiar territory.

With our two genres established, we will now interrogate de Bodard’s use of these genres’ tropes. Gothic consumption in *Dominion* can be divided into three broad categories: the “reverse cannibalism” described by Brantlinger above; consumption of Fallen flesh; and consumption of Fallen bones, or “angel essence”.

The remainder of this article will examine each category in turn, demonstrating the way in which imperial Gothic rhetoric is used to incite fear of the colonial Other. In each case, the fear generated by the Gothic is undercut by social realist interjections.

“Reverse Cannibalism” and Forced Assimilation

Brantlinger’s imperial Gothic fantasy of “swallowing the world” (1988, 247) presents itself in the very first chapter of *House of Shattered Wings* wherein Selene, the head of House Silverspires, encounters Philippe for the first time. After realising she is unable to destroy Philippe due to his powerful magic, Selene instead settles for forcibly assimilating him into House Silverspires. Her decision to abduct and bind him to the House occurs within the few seconds in which she considers “the foreign features of his face” and deems him a “second-rate” citizen, “like all colonial subjects” (de Bodard, 2015, 12). His status as racially and culturally Other is all the justification Selene needs to override his bodily autonomy by placing an “invisible collar” of magic on him (ibid, 34).

The ingestion of Philippe into the European body of the House reveals that the House-bound, protected from the everyday concerns of affording the next meal, have very different appetites to the Houseless. In this, they have learned from their founder, Lucifer Morningstar – a Fallen with a desperate “hunger for power” and control “masking his desire for survival” (de Bodard 2019, 469). This desire for survival causes him to amass great power, leading to the creation of the first of many Houses across Europe. Like their creator, the Houses – both the sentient structures themselves and those bound to them – are motivated by “a bright, intense hunger – a desperate need to go on at any cost. Blood and magic and the eating of [their] own” (ibid, 487). Content only for brief periods after gorging himself on power, Morningstar’s state of mind has become “entwined in its very foundations” (ibid). As the oldest of the Houses, Silverspires acts as the blueprint for all subsequent Houses. House Hawthorn, the second House founded, takes this inherited hunger to grotesque literal extremes: the inhabitants of the House are sucked into the walls and consumed to reinforce the magical structure in times of need. While the Houseless present are the first to be eaten, the Housebound are eventually targeted as well in an act of auto-cannibalism which both weakens and strengthens the larger body.

The Houses’ hunger for power and resources is not limited to Paris, nor even to Europe, but reaches outwards across the world in the form of Fallen empires, stripped of people and resources to fuel local power struggles. House-bound attitudes towards the colonial abuse that sustains them varies from those, like Emmanuelle, whose sentiments echo the rhetoric of manifest destiny – “it was because Fallen magic was innately stronger [...] it had been our destiny to conquer” (de Bodard 2015, 37) – to those like Madeleine who are apathetically uncomfortable with the source of their wealth:

She didn't like the idea of invading countries, but she was no fool: the empire had made them rich and powerful, and even its bare, pathetic remnants after the war brought them riches and standards of living far above those of the street gangs or other Houseless. Sometimes, you did what you had to, in order to survive (de Bodard 2015, 68).

In viewing the empire as a necessary evil "in order to survive", Madeleine exposes the truth of Morningstar and the Houses' hunger. Their idea of survival is not based on a threat to their lives, as the survival-based hunger of the Houseless is but is intrinsically linked to the idea of "riches and standards of living far above those of the [...] Houseless". Even to Madeleine, who appears to be more sympathetic to colonial plights than most of the House-bound, maintaining a level of comfort and wealth greater than the majority is more valuable than the lives of the House's colonial subjects.

The Houses' imperial Gothic fantasy of outward expansion is mirrored in *Dominion's* narrative structure; most of the series takes place within the Houses, and scenes dedicated to the Houseless are frequently encroached upon by House politics. De Bodard seems all too aware of this imperial Gothic desire to dominate, yet she resists the Houses' demand for narrative time throughout, continually refocusing the reader's attention on those they attempt to consume. These few instances of social realism have a profound effect, puncturing the inflated bubble of hysteria created in the main narrative. In this, the appearance of social realism echoes the Annamite community's rightful pride in the space they have "made with [their] own hands, against the indifference of the Houses"; their hard-won narrative space is occupied in defiance of imperial literature's insistence on pre-eminence (de Bodard 2019, 239).

Consumption of Fallen Flesh

Throughout the series, the Fallen live in fear of the world outside their respective Houses due to the possibility of being "taken apart on the streets" (de Bodard 2015, 148) and consumed by the Houseless. This consumption of angelic power is done in the most visceral way: through ingesting limbs "hacked away in a rush of pain" (ibid, 10) or drinking blood. The descriptions of these acts, at least when narrated by the House-bound, evoke revulsion and emphasises the victims' vulnerability in comparison to the pleasure the perpetrators feel enacting such graphic violence. For example, after removing a few fingers from Isabelle, a "young and desperate" (ibid, 7) newly Fallen angel, Ninon and Philippe are described by House leader Selene as laughing through "lips stained with blood", even being "drunk" (ibid, 10) on blood. That the only characters whose consumption of the Fallen is described in terms of violence or savagery are Ninon and Philippe, seems significant. They are not only othered by their position as Houseless, but also by their Vietnamese heritage. It is their Otherness that designates them as cannibalistic, more than their actions themselves.

The same scene, when described from Philippe's point of view, is quite different. As mentioned above, Philippe is forcibly assimilated into the House system early in *House of Shattered Wings*. As a result, his relationship with genre is complex; before his assimilation and after his eventual escape from the Houses, Philippe's narration is social realist. During his time in House Silverspires, however, his narration slowly takes on a more Gothic tone as he is drawn deeper into House politics. The scene in which Isabelle's fingers are removed takes place just before his assimilation into House Silverspires – as such, the imperial Gothic outlook of the Houses has not yet affected his narration. In his version of events, the thought of removing Isabelle's fingers "made him sick" (ibid, 6); when he eventually does so, he is motivated by a need to find something "that would be worth something, enough to sustain them all" (ibid), not the bloodlust Selene imagines belongs in "the mind of a savage" (ibid, 22). His actions are motivated here by financial need rather than bloodlust or hunger; such focus on making ends meet is characteristic of social realism. Crucially, Philippe's version of events is presented to the reader *before* Selene's imperial Gothic account. This structure encourages readers to distrust all subsequent expressions of imperial Gothic fear, as they have been discredited from the start.

Despite the horror associated with the cannibalistic Houseless, the Houses of Paris are sustained by their own consumption of the bodies of the Fallen. The contrast between the House-bound's attitudes towards these two practises is best shown through Madeline's narration of her role as House Alchemist:

Time to perform her role then [...] she trimmed, one by one, the long, clawlike nails on fine hands, and similarly collected the trimmings in a box which she sealed. Any stray hairs she also took, and dealt with in the same fashion [...] House Silverspires, like all Houses, knew the value of preserving some of their earliest leavings. Not everything; that would have been tantamount to what the gangs did, taking Fallen bodies apart before they grew strong enough to retaliate – though there were also rumours of spells strong enough to negate Fallen magic, and places where they were kept in cages or in chains like sheep or dairy cows. Silverspires was not one of those places, thank God (de Bodard 2015, 18).

It is important to note that Silverspires *is* one of those places, as those deemed enemies of the House are often chained up in cells and slowly taken apart. Yet, when enacted by the Houseless, it is seen as infinitely more sinister. Like the Houseless, the House-bound consume the Fallen's magic, however their consumption is never described in the same visceral terms; indeed, it is never described at all. Instead, the narration skips from the moment of contact with the container of a Fallen body part to the acquisition of their power: "Her hand closed on cold metal, which flared into warmth at her touch" (ibid., 153). As this quotation demonstrates, the narrator omits the moment and method of consumption. Such elision is characteristic of the

Houses' cognitive dissonance towards Fallen flesh but stands as a silent allegory for European imperialist attitudes towards anthropophagy. While anthropophagic religious rituals by non-Europeans have historically been represented as examples of savage cannibalism, Bernard stresses that the same is not true of the ritualised anthropophagy of Christian communion (2005, 325).

This is not to say that the House's treatment of Fallen bodies goes completely undescribed; indeed, a great deal of attention is given to the narration of Madeline's alchemy. Yet while these descriptions can be graphic at times, the use of medical equipment such as "scalpels" (de Bodard 2015, 18) and the body's careful treatment announces that this process is a medical dissection, not mere kitchen butchery. Through the work of the Alchemist, the Fallen undergo a transformation from bodies to "artifacts" (ibid., 49). Through the actions of the Houseless, on the other hand, the Fallen undergo a transformation from bodies to meat. The process of objectification and consumption is the same yet depending on perspective they are regarded quite differently. The Fallen body, then, like the human body, is subject to a complicated set of rules dictating the circumstances that produce edible or inedible products. To consume Fallen flesh is to separate it from the House it belongs to and assimilate it. For a House-bound, this is either a reabsorption back into the original power structure, or an act of outwards expansion; it is a very literal example of Khair's description of the Gothic Other as "a Self waiting to be assimilated" into the European Self (2009, 4). For one of the Houseless to consume Fallen flesh is an assimilation of the European Self into the Other, and thus unacceptable to the imperialist Houses. The empires of the Houses may expand their control outwards, but the Other must not be allowed to creep in.

Angel Essence

The already intricate set of rules surrounding Fallen bodies becomes even more complex when de Bodard introduces the problem of "angel essence", a highly addictive substance derived from Fallen bones. Unlike Fallen flesh, angel essence carries a high cost to balance the promise of power. The substance slowly eats away at the body of its user; for humans this is limited to the lungs, whilst those in the neighbouring Dragon Kingdom can look forward to having "half the flesh of their face sloughed off, the bones glistening below the slack jellied red of corrupted muscles" (de Bodard 2018, 114). In the Further Reading section of *House of Binding Thorns*, de Bodard states that her depiction of relations between the Dragon Kingdom and the Fallen were based not only on French colonial interference in Vietnam, but also on the British opium trade in China that preceded the first Opium War (ibid., 355). In his discussion of the Chinese Opium Crisis of the nineteenth century, Hao Gao states that, "the more this drug was consumed, the greater became the need for it" (2020, 156). Like the opium trafficked into China, the angel essence sold to the Houseless and the Dragon Kingdom "requires its users to take more, always more often" (de Bodard 2015, 238). Although its consumption is also anthropophagic, these parallels suggest that it is more appropriate to consider angel

essence through the lens of addiction, rather than cannibalism. Once again, the treatment of this issue is divided along generic lines. Carol Margaret Davison notes that addiction and alcoholism were frequently linked to “criminality and madness” (2018, 3) in Victorian Gothic texts, and this attitude can certainly be seen inside the Houses. House alchemist Madeleine is exiled from Silverspires after her addiction is discovered; in this scene, her use of angel essence is presented as an act of theft: “she’s never had much magical talent. How much easier to steal it away” (de Bodard 2015, 234). Later she is taken in by House Hawthorn, who react to her addiction by sending “orderlies” (de Bodard 2018, 5) to strap her to a bed – an image reminiscent of an asylum.

The opium parallels here are also significant, as Davison goes on to reveal the implications of this substance in the Victorian Gothic:

One of the most significant components in the Victorian semiotics of addiction involved the provenance of the addictive substance. Drugs – particularly opium – were extremely ‘racialized and racializing’ throughout this era. Their representation frequently raised the spectre of the ‘Other’, which entailed the dreaded suggestion of a national Faustian pact that was popularly but erroneously thought to involve Britain’s economic dependence on China (2018, 3).

Such fear haunts the Houses; however, it is in the social realism outside the Houses that the reader learns the truth of the matter. When House Hawthorn delegates are taken to see the effects of the angel essence trade in the Dragon Kingdom, they see not a den of criminals or madmen, but an overflowing hospital. The addictive quality of essence, combined with the fleeting nature of the power it provides, makes it an ideal tool of control for the Houses. In his investigation of the angel essence traffic into the Dragon Kingdom, Thuan realises that “essence weakened them, and being weak made them vulnerable to Hawthorn’s predation” (de Bodard 2018, 64). Although it is later revealed that House Astragale is the source of the traffic rather than House Hawthorn, the principle still applies – the traffic of essence allows the Houses to manipulate and control those they see as culturally Other. Rebel leader Yen Oanh is quick hold the Houses accountable, noting that “as always, it’s the poor, the hunters, the peasants, the workers, who bear the brunt of it.” (ibid., 113). In the midst of her accusation, Yen Oanh likens the Houses’ essence trade to food: “You offer rice to a man dying of hunger. Do you think he will not take it?” (ibid., 115). That she expresses their vulnerability through the scarcity of food suggests, once again, that hunger is a familiar experience. The use of social realism here to draw attention to the suffering of immigrant groups challenges the Houses Gothic fear of the addict and its accompanying dread of economic dependence on east Asia. As the passage makes abundantly clear, the Houses are in complete control here, not the Dragon Kingdom.

By adopting the language of the imperial Gothic within the Houses and undercutting it with the reality of life outside the Houses, de Bodard exposes colonial rhetoric's insubstantiality. In doing so, de Bodard places the blame for these cannibalistic fantasies squarely where they belong: within the cultures imagining them. De Bodard's decision to depict Morningstar as the original architect of this imperial Gothic world also functions in a similar way. Otherness, particularly with regards to nationality and race, has always been associated with the devil amongst European audiences. In his biography of Satan, Henry Ansgar Kelly notes that in medieval illustrations, "when Demons appear in their own form, they are often [...] characterized as Ethiopians, that is, Black Africans" (2006, 285). Nowhere is this disturbing trend more prevalent than in Gothic fiction, a genre in which the conflation of racial difference and the satanic continued well into the early nineteenth century in texts such as Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*. As Khair argues:

It was easy to slide from the Devil to the racial Other [...] much of the language used for both overlapped, and there was still, well into the nineteenth and even the early twentieth century at times, a tendency to contrast the truth (sometimes supplemented by rationality within a tradition established centuries ago by Aquinas) of Christianity with the "superstitions" of other religions, to consider and depict the gods and goddesses of other faiths, particularly non-Semitic ones, as demons and devils (2009, 48).

Dominion of the Fallen actively works against this conflation. The non-European is distinctly separated from the devil within the text, and the Vietnamese community actively pushes back against any attempt to assimilate them into the Houses' imperial Gothic Eurocentric worldview. The divide in genre between the House-bound and the Houseless marks a refusal to allow any transference of satanic qualities onto the Other. Instead, Morningstar's presence forces the satanic back onto the European kyriarchy that attempts, like Dr Jekyll, to give its worst attributes to someone else.

Although de Bodard's work has been described as postcolonial science-fiction fantasy, her use of genre in *Dominion of the Fallen* resists this label, and indeed, the very notion of postcolonial fiction. The Houses are certainly haunted by the spectre of the past and sins committed long ago, but for the struggling Vietnamese community on the fringes of society, for the dragon kingdom rotting away from essence addiction, there is no 'post' to the effects of colonialism. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated through the magic of Diamaras, one of the Fallen who collects stolen Vietnamese cultural artifacts. Upon visiting her museum, Philippe realises she draws her power "in a typical Fallen way [...] through others' submission and humiliation: from the brash display of once-worshipped statues as curiosity pieces in a museum" (de Bodard 2019, 93). This is cultural abuse at its most obvious: the sacred objects of another culture are belittled as trinkets to be gawked at. The Houses have the luxury to insist upon the "Eurocentric emphasis on a chronological

break that implies that colonialism is over" (Proctor and Smith 2007, 96) that often characterises discussion of the postcolonial, yet de Bodard reveals these power dynamics are ongoing through a scene all too familiar to visitors of the British Museum or the Louvre. This is not a *postcolonial* text then, but an *anticolonial* one. The imperial Gothic outlook of the Houses demonstrates the continued othering of non-Europeans, yet by contrasting this outlook with the Social Realism of those who are othered, de Bodard reveals how absurd the Houses' fears are. Those who are feared as horrifying cannibalistic monsters from within Jameson's "protective wall through which you cannot see" (1996, 289) are, for the most part, powerless individuals at the mercy of the House system.

Imperial Gothic as/for Social Action

Finally, by way of conclusion I return to the question posed in the introduction of this article: what responses might the imperial Gothic inspire? In *Dominion*, de Bodard answers this plainly: the repeated othering of racial difference; the desire to assimilate or destroy that other; and the fear of east Asian economic dependence leads to a demonstrably false construction of reality. The consequences of this warped social construction are devastating for the most vulnerable members of society, but particularly for the Asian immigrant communities in the text.

De Bodard's warning here is a timely one. On March 16th, 2021, the world was horrified by a string of racially motivated shootings at three Atlanta spas owned by Asian American women, yet as *Time Magazine* reported, the incident was merely "one facet of a global increase in anti-Asian attacks" (Haynes 2021). This increase in violence towards the Asian diaspora has been fuelled in no small part by the racist rhetoric typified by Donald Trump's use, picked up by his supporters, of the terms "Chinese virus", "Wuhan Virus" and worse, "Kung Flu" (*Guardian Staff* 2020) throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Such rhetoric, intended to demarcate disease as non-western and racially other, is all too familiar to readers of imperial Gothic texts. Indeed, Darryl Jones, in an exploration of the link between this rhetoric and the "yellow peril" of the nineteenth century, notes that "for those of us with a background in Gothic Studies [...] perhaps the most dislocating thing about the Covid-19 crisis is the inescapable sense that *we have been here before.*" (Jones 2020, 42). Crucially, Jones notes the significance of the racist discourse surrounding "wet markets" and historical accusations of so called "unclean eating", reminding us again that "the classical unclean-eating slur is cannibalism" (2020, 44). As a literary genre, the imperial Gothic's popularity may have waned, but as a rhetorical genre its hold is strong as ever. The renewed brazenness of such rhetoric betrays an eagerness to return to an imperial Gothic construction of reality. Within such a warped worldview, tragically, the response it inspired was only too predictable.

Dominion of the Fallen's core novels were completed a few years before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, yet our current crisis makes de Bodard's

intervention more vital than ever. Amy Devitt notes genre can work not only *as* social action but *for* social action when deployed critically:

Resisting genres can also mean offering alternative genres – countering fake news with fact checking, meeting inflammatory political speeches with protest signs, or writing critical reviews of books. As Paré (2002) has noted, such resistance to a genre’s worldview can create chinks through which the need for genre change becomes more visible (Devitt 2021, 26).

Devitt is, of course, speaking here of rhetorical genres, yet literature, or literary essence, is rhetorical. As such, the same can be said of critical use of the Gothic. An imperial Gothic fear of the Other, de Bodard suggests, can be undermined only through the sustained intrusion of realism.

The series’ ending leaves the reader cautiously optimistic for the future of the Vietnamese community in Paris, yet this optimism depends on the fact that both Morningstar and the majority of the Houses he inspired have been utterly destroyed. Crucially, her use of genre resistance does not suggest a rejection of the Gothic altogether, as some elements of the Gothic remain and are even celebrated – the intense romance between Dragon Prince Thuan and the almost Byronic antihero Asmodeus for instance, which ultimately goes some way towards redeeming the previously brutally violent Fallen. It is only those aspects of the genre which are inseparable from imperial rhetoric which are resisted and eventually excised. De Bodard’s critique is effective in part because she recognises and even revels in the power of the Gothic, while keeping the imperial aspects of that power framed as obfuscatory and vampiric. As with any Gothic text, the reader cannot help but delight in the sense of creeping dread that pervades *Dominion*, yet de Bodard’s resistance to imperial rhetoric ensures that this fear is directed away from the Othered colonial subject. Instead, the process of othering itself becomes the object of fear as the Houses’ remorseless cruelty to those it has dehumanized becomes more and more apparent. In *Dominion of the Fallen*, de Bodard offers a literary model of resistance to a rhetorical genre that threatens to overwhelm us now, countering the inflammatory imperial Gothic worldview with an alternative genre and making visible the need for continued genre resistance and, hopefully, genre change.

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“Imagine or afraid?”:

Haunting the simulacrum in Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* and Ali Smith’s *The Accidental*

ABSTRACT

*For Jean Baudrillard, the age of late capitalism is characterised by an endemic loss of meaning, as “serial repetition” produces a cultural state in which signifiers refer not to actual objects but to previous signifiers and thus become increasingly emptied of their original denotation. For Jerrold Hogle, Baudrillard’s simulacrum essentially characterises the majority of Gothic narratives. This paper explores this relationship through an examination of two novels, Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* (2009) and Ali Smith’s *The Accidental* (2006), both of which involve spectral intrusions into bourgeois homes during periods of social and economic upheaval. It begins by meditating on representations of conservatism as intrinsically spectral in its attempt to perpetually relive the dead or dying ways of the past in the present. It then considers Fred Botting’s characterisation of the Gothic as an evocation of nightmare, contrasting the aptness of this reading to Waters’ morbid novel with *The Accidental*, which focuses more optimistically on awakenings. Finally, it contemplates the Derridean concept of the spectre as that which must be acknowledged to effect change within these novels, examining their characters’ comparative levels of willingness to do so in relation to the extent to which their lives are either corroded or transformed. Ultimately, this paper argues that a recurrent question posed in Smith’s novel – “Imagine or afraid?” – encapsulates the essential choice with which humanity is repeatedly faced: as our old ways collapse around us, we can either cling to them at our peril, or dare to imagine an alternative future.*

Keywords: Gothic, spectrality, capitalism, capitalist realism, post-capitalism

For Jean Baudrillard, the age of late capitalism is characterised by an endemic loss of meaning. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he discusses the process by which “serial repetition” (Baudrillard 1993, 55) produces a cultural state in which signifiers refer not to actual objects but to previous signifiers and thus become increasingly emptied of their original denotation. Think, for instance, of the numbers in our bank accounts: once representing physical notes and coins, most currency is now digital, and thus the sign refers to nothing but itself, signifying, as Shakespeare would have it, nothing. Jerrold Hogle draws parallels between Baudrillard’s conception of the simulacrum (which he contrasts with the Real) and Gothic narratives and phantoms. He argues that “the modern ‘Gothic’ as we know it has been grounded in fakery” (Hogle 2012, 496), referring to its recurrent “turning of every perceived object [...] into a ghost-like figure that is distanced from what it signifies” (ibid, 497) as “the ghost of the counterfeit” (ibid, 498). This process, he argues, has an intrinsic relationship with class:

the Gothic re-faking of fakery becomes a major repository of the newest contradictions in and anxieties about the unknowable Real in Western life that most need to be abjected by those who face them, so that middle-class Westerners can keep constructing a distinct sense of identity (ibid, 500).

This develops Julia Kristeva’s corporeal model of the abject (1982) to propose a parallel social model, in which identity is constructed through the rejection of the Other. For Ruth Bienstock Anolik, however, “the essential fear of the Gothic is that there are actually no categories of Otherness” (2004, 10). Horror thus emerges from “the anxiety not of difference but of sameness” (ibid, 11). Correspondingly, Hogle explains, citing Baudrillard, that during the Renaissance, “Europeans felt that they were leaving behind the age of the ‘obligatory sign,’ the notion of signifiers always referring to an ordained status in people and things where ‘assignation is absolute and there is no class mobility’” (Hogle 2012, 501; Baudrillard 1993:50). In *The Little Stranger* (2009) and *The Accidental* (2005), Sarah Waters and Ali Smith interrogate this anxiety through narratives that explore the intrusion of a spectral presence into a bourgeois English family home.

This article begins by meditating on representations of conservatism as spectral. It then considers the extent to which the novels adhere to Fred Botting’s characterisation of the Gothic as an evocation of nightmare and the implications of their adherence or diversion. Finally, it contemplates the Derridean concept of the spectre as that which must be acknowledged to effect change. Through a marriage of Gothic and Marxist frameworks, it builds on existing scholarship on the novels under consideration and on class in the Gothic novel to offer fresh insight into the economic spectrality of these texts, demonstrating, in the process, the aptness of the Gothic mode for vital imaginings of a post-capitalist future.

In *The Little Stranger*, the narrator, Dr Faraday, is called out to Hundreds Hall, ancestral home to Mrs Ayres and her children, Caroline and Roderick, where his mother once worked and with which he became “besotted” as a child (Parker 2013, 101), to attend to their servant, Betty. Faraday subsequently becomes a frequent visitor at Hundreds, with which he grows increasingly obsessed, and which is concurrently progressively plagued by preternatural activity, leading many scholars to interpret the haunting of Hundreds as a manifestation of Faraday’s longing to inhabit the house (see Braid 2013; Germanà 2013b; Heilmann 2012; Parker 2013). This activity eventually results in the disintegration of Roderick’s sanity, Mrs Ayres’ suicide and, following her breaking off her engagement to Faraday, Caroline’s suspicious death. Emma Parker thus argues that “the spectre that haunts Hundreds Hall functions as a metaphor for class unrest” (2013, 105). Crucially, however, it is not only Faraday who is characterised as spectral – Mrs Ayres and her children, in their stringent loyalty to their pre-war quasi-aristocratic roles, also embody a highly performative re-enactment of the past in the present that suggests they, as much as Faraday, epitomise Hogle’s concept of the ghost of the counterfeit.

In a similar vein, *The Accidental* follows the intrusion of a nebulously otherworldly woman, Amber, into the holiday residence of the Smart family, consisting of Eve, her husband Michael, and her two children, Astrid and Magnus, each of whom exist at a remove from reality. Eve is the author of the “Genuine Article series ... a series of ‘autobiotruefictinterviews’” in which she “takes the ordinary life of a living person who died before his or her time in the Second World War and gives him or her a voice – but a voice that tells his or her story as if he or she had lived on” (Smith 2006, 81). Michael is an English lecturer who enacts a “parody of bourgeois existence” (O’Donnell 2013, 97) while ceaselessly pursuing unfulfilling affairs with his female students that never quite feel “authentic” (Smith 2006, 71). Astrid, tormented by school bullies and troubled by the absence of her biological father, obsessively filters the world through the lens of her expensive camera, hoping to collect “vital evidence” of wrongdoings so that “because of her, things will finally be put right” (ibid, 10-11). Finally, Magnus, plagued by the knowledge that his participation in a sixth-form prank, in which he helped two boys to paste a photo of a female peer’s face onto a photo of a naked porn star and send it around the school, resulted in the girl’s suicide, imagines himself as “Hologram Boy”, “a three-dimensional reproduction of something not really there”, distanced from the morally tainted “real Magnus” (ibid, 38). Like the Ayreses, the Smarts embody a mode of existence built on fakery that renders them as spectral as Amber, if not even more so, prior to her arrival.

Amber begins to crack the Smarts’ carefully constructed image of themselves when she orders Astrid to film the CCTV cameras at a railway station, but they are interrupted by a station attendant who demands that they stop filming. When Astrid tells him, untruthfully, that “[i]t’s for a school project on security systems in train stations”, he replies: “I’m afraid, I imagine, you’ll need to get written permission

from the proprietors of each station for something like that”, to which Amber asks: “Imagine or afraid?” (ibid, 131). Astrid becomes obsessed with this question, and later, after Amber’s departure, starts “an alternative school newspaper”, in conjunction with which she makes “badges for herself and her friends”, and offers Michael “a choice [between a] badge with the word imagine written on it or a badge with the word afraid” (Smith 2006, 291). This dichotomy between imagination and fear essentially characterises the approaches to class hierarchy respectively offered by *The Little Stranger* and *The Accidental*. As we will see, while the former explores the destructive power of adhering to archaic power structures, the latter considers the joyful liberation of harnessing the courage to imagine an alternative future.

Interestingly, one of the examples of Gothic fakery cited by Hogle is Manfred’s “fraudulent class-climbing” (2012, 496) in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. Although Faraday’s social ascension is not actually fraudulent, he seems to feel otherwise, referring to the “peasant blood” (Waters 2009, 27) that differentiates him from his peers. Parker explores an incident in which the Ayreses’ dog, Gyp, brutally attacks a child during a party at which Faraday “is not only mistaken for a servant but treated like one by [a guest] when she asks him to fetch her a drink” (2013, 108). She argues that reading “Gyp’s function as a conduit for Faraday’s feelings is endorsed by the dog’s name, which is slang for ‘a cheat or swindle’, and echoes Faraday’s own sense that his presence at Hundreds Hall makes him a fraud” (Parker 2013, 108). This reading is also substantiated by Faraday’s accent and dialect. When he entered private education, he recalls that “all [he] learned was that [his] accent was wrong” (Waters 2009, 250). In adulthood, he notes his cousin’s “ripe Warwickshire accent [he] could never quite believe had once also been [his]” (Waters 2009, 248). The day before Mrs Ayres’ suicide, however, he tells Betty she “needn’t be frit”, remarking that he “used the Warwickshire word, almost unconsciously” (Waters 2009, 401). Crucially, Betty is the only other character to use the word “frit” (Waters 2009, 413). There is an implication, then, that Faraday’s middle-class identity is a performative construction, upheld by an affected accent and dialect that do not naturally belong to him.

By contrast, Amber’s accent initiates the beginning of Eve’s entry into the Real. Astrid misinterprets it as “Irish-sounding, or maybe a kind of American”, while Michael notes that it “sounded foreign” and guesses it is “Scandinavian” (Smith 2006, 31; 65). One of the first things Eve says to her, however, is: “You’re Scottish, aren’t you? I can hear it in your voice” (Smith 2006, 91), which Amber confirms. Eve is delighted by this, disclosing to Amber that her “mother was Scottish” (Smith 2006, 91). For Emily Horton, *The Accidental* is “a complex exploration of post-9/11 trauma” (2012, 639). Eve in particular, she argues, is defined by “psychological and social inauthenticity” and “engages a victimized sensibility, full of outrage and self-pity, to actively defer confrontation with her personal depression” (Horton 2012, 643). Upon hearing Amber’s accent, however, Eve addresses the genuine trauma that she has tactically displaced into her writing – the

death of her mother when she was fifteen. The foreign accent, a signifier that places Amber outside of the English class system, thereby prompts Eve to begin her journey towards an authenticity that her bourgeois literary identity had previously foreclosed.

The dichotomy between imagination and fear is also explored through the theme of (un)consciousness. For Northrop Frye, Romance is the “nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream” (1957, 186). For Fred Botting, however, “Gothic romances manifest a descent into anxiety and nightmare” (2008, 9). The latter is certainly the case in *The Little Stranger* – Faraday describes Mrs Ayres’ suicide as “nightmarish” (2009, 415), for instance. In *The Accidental*, however, the manifestation of dream states is more complex. Amber is characterised as nightmarish, but this thrills those who encounter her. Astrid fantasises about Amber confronting her school bullies, saying “I am your worst nightmare welcome to hell” (Smith 2006, 133) before attacking them. This fantasy, however, inspires her to later confront the bullies herself when she returns to school after Amber’s departure:

the first time Lorna Rose dared to give her the you’re a weirdo look ... Astrid, instead of ignoring it or freaking out about it, stood up out of her seat and ... walked along the desks right to where Lorna was sitting ... and said ... I’m watching you (Smith 2006, 231).

Afterwards, Astrid’s bullies “all made a kind of almost embarrassing effort at being friendly” (Smith 2006, 231). The narrative thus tends more towards wish-fulfilment, and the novel concludes with Amber declaring: “I’m everything you ever dreamed” (Smith 2006, 306). More crucially, though, Amber also embodies awakening. A motif of light pervades the text, and Monica Germanà argues that “to all four [Smarts], Amber is *enlightening* in different ways” (2013a, 88). When Astrid takes her holiday tapes to a camera shop to play them back, Amber having destroyed her camera, the first ends with “blinding sunlight reflecting into the lens”, after which there is “nothing else on the tape”, which is “majorly annoying because Astrid had been hoping for some footage of Amber from that day” (Smith 2006, 222). She refers to the other tape, “the one with the dawns [that she compulsively filmed prior to Amber’s arrival] on it,” as “the beginnings tape” (ibid, 223). When she watches it back, however,

there was nothing on the tape, just a series of fast-forward dark skies going light, one after the other. With each edit into another day the dark crashed down again on the screen. Then it paled into white-ish, though Astrid remembers the days as a deep far blue (ibid, 225).

Earlier in the novel, Astrid realises that she had “never really noticed how green things are before” and thinks that “[i]f she had her camera she would have just filmed the colour for a whole minute and then later she would be able to see what it

really looks like, that colour” (ibid, 127). Looking back over her footage later, her realisation that the camera did not capture colour truthfully illustrates the extent of Amber’s influence over her understanding of the world – like the “seductive” apple she threw to her during their first meeting (Horton 2012, 642), Amber ultimately came “between [Astrid] and her camera” (Smith 2006, 31). Therefore, although “[t]here was no dawn footage of Amber. There was nothing. It was as if Amber had deleted herself, or was never there in the first place and Astrid had just imagined it” (ibid, 225), Amber’s impact on Astrid is made explicitly manifest. No longer trapped within spectral unreality, Astrid, like the rest of her family, can finally experience the Real. Magnus, for instance, is released from his holographic identity by his sexual relations with Amber, who saves his life by appearing like “an angel” as he attempts to hang himself, replicating the death of the victim of his prank (ibid, 55). Hogle reads Dracula’s sexually and ethnically threatening nature through the ghost of the counterfeit, as he “turn[s] the English people he penetrates into ‘un-dead’ evacuated images of their former selves” (2012, 503). In *The Accidental*, however, Amber’s sexual infiltration of Magnus’s life produces the opposite effect – to him, “Amber = true. Amber = everything he didn’t even know he imagined possible for himself” (Smith 2006, 153). Following their encounter, he ceases his displacement of his traumatic guilt through his imagined holographic double and “tells it all to Astrid” (ibid, 258), so beginning his own healing process.

In *The Little Stranger*, however, reality never becomes accessible to the spectral characters that haunt Hundreds Hall. Scarlett Thomas argues that, at the novel’s end, “one is left with the uncomfortable sense that the Ayreses have been needlessly murdered by progress and social change” (2009), but this falsely implies them to lack autonomy. When Faraday remarks to fellow doctor Seeley that it’s “as if something’s slowly sucking the life out of the whole family”, Seeley replies: “It’s called a Labour government. The Ayreses’ problem ... is that they can’t, or won’t, adapt” (Waters 2009, 378). Alongside the more literal spectre haunting Hundreds, then, is the spectre of progress. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues that:

[c]apitalist societies can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished ... and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back (2006, 123).

Moreover, Stephen Levin differentiates Marx and Derrida’s philosophies of spectrality through their approaches to futurity:

Marx frequently regards the spectre as something to be exorcised in order to usher in a radically new future, while Derrida wishes to correct this eschatological dimension of Marx’s thinking, insisting that the spectre is a perdurable force to be actively heard and addressed (2013, 37).

The Ayreses attempt, fruitlessly, to exorcise the spectres of change, yet they seek not “a radically new future” but the continuation of an archaic past. Like Derrida, Avery Gordon argues that “[t]he whole essence ... of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention” (2008, xvi). The demand made by the spectre of advancement that pervades *The Little Stranger* is that the Ayreses adapt to the structural alterations of modernity. In refusing to comply, living in fear of change rather than daring to imagine a different kind of future, they seal their own fate. As Ann Heilmann argues:

Waters’ novel ... encourages us to consider the collapse of an ancestral house as an opportunity for redefinition, even survival: the loss of their home sets the Sharpes free [in *The Franchise Affair*, one of Waters’ sources of inspiration], whereas its continued existence costs Caroline her life (2012, 52).

Prior to the climax of the destruction of Hundreds and its inhabitants, Caroline admits to a lifelong habit of snobbish cruelty, telling Faraday that as “a girl ... I was horrid to the maids. You’re supposed to grow out of horridness, aren’t you? I don’t think I ever grew out of mine. Sometimes I think it’s still inside me, like something nasty I swallowed, that got stuck” (Waters 2009, 318). This admission foreshadows Faraday’s description of the haunting of Hundreds as “in some way *familiar*: as if its bashful advance towards us was more properly a *return*” (ibid, 393). While this of course describes his own return to Hundreds, it is equally applicable to Caroline’s resurgent malice towards those she deems inferior. When Faraday and Seeley theorise, then, that there is “something loose in that house, some sort of ravenous frustrated energy, with Caroline at its heart” (ibid, 382), their conjectures perhaps contain an element of truth. While the narrative suggests the energy to in fact be Faraday’s, it is facilitated by the hierarchical class structure upheld by the continual existence of Hundreds and all that it connotes. In this sense, the Ayreses’ unfortunate ends may indeed have been needless, but only insofar as they were offered alternative futures that they elected to ignore.

In *The Accidental*, Levin argues, “the spectre intrudes upon the tradition-steeped living, creating significant struggles that nonetheless hold the potential to restore life to the living” (2013, 38). This potential is also registered in *The Little Stranger* – berating Caroline for her intention to sell Hundreds, Faraday asks:

A year ago, what did you have? A house you claimed drained all your time. An ageing mother, a sick brother. What was your future? And yet, look at you now. You’re free, Caroline. You’ll have money, I suppose, once Hundreds is sold. It seems to me, you know, that you’ve done really rather nicely (Waters 2009, 465).

Although uttered in spite, this accusation rings true. Caroline is not, at this point, obligated “to perform a role that no longer belongs to her, that of the English lady”

(Germanà 2013b, 119), and finally has the opportunity to embrace the Real. She tells Faraday: “I wish I’d left a year ago, and taken my mother and my brother with me” (Waters 2009, 465). The fact that they did not leave earlier, however, was due, as Faraday recognises, to “class pride” (ibid, 399). Hilary Mantel describes the novel as centrally concerned with “the corrosive power of class resentment” (2009). It seems reductive, however, to read Faraday as merely bitter – rather, he is envious. In this sense, it is class *reverence*, among both those within and those without the upper echelons, that is the inciting force of destruction.

The Accidental, however, is centred not on corrosion, but on transformation. Ali Smith submits that,

[a]s our countries and our world become smaller, and yet we’re bordered, everything is about the stranger. So if we don’t [pay] attention to what the story of the stranger means, and if we forget the goodness of the stranger, the way in which inordinate hospitality was signalled as crucial to survival ... [i]f we don’t pay attention to the things that happen when something enters our world from outside, and if every dominant narrative tells us to dislike it, then I don’t know how we’ll manage to stay human (2013, 142).

Her characterisation of Amber as essentially good is fundamental to the novel’s overarching concerns. Ulrike Tancke reads Amber as demonic, his principal point of contention being her effect on Eve. He argues that,

[i]n one sense, Amber appears to be a catalyst for Eve’s suppressed desires for non-conformity and escape ... [y]et Eve’s subsequent behaviour is anything but a liberating or self-affirmative move, but exposes a hidden layer of violence and destructiveness in her character (Tancke 2013, 83).

In particular, he suggests, this

sense of destructiveness is heightened [when] while in the United States, she randomly intrudes into an American family’s home, a seemingly pointless move which reflects and repeats Amber’s equally unmotivated and sudden presence in the Smarts’ family home (ibid, 84).

It is in the American home, however, that Eve finally achieves the humanity she was lacking. Mistaken for domestic help, she is treated brutally by the woman of the house – a mirror image of herself prior to her encounter with Amber. When the actual cleaner arrives, the woman apologises profusely and says, “I hope you’ll forgive me”, to which Eve says, “No ... [i]t’s unforgivable, the way you behaved. And not just to me” (Smith 2006, 300), finally recognising the barbarism of treating hired staff as subhuman. It is also in America that Eve finally experiences genuine affection for “Astrid, her girl, and Magnus, her boy” (ibid, 296), both of whom she

had previously privately admitted to harbouring feelings of dislike towards. Looking at a photo Amber took of the “family, all of them, smiling” earlier in the novel, she wonders:

Did it show that Magnus was a boy so like his father that Eve almost couldn't bear to sit in the same room with him? Did it show that Astrid was infuriating to Eve, that she deserved to have no father, just as Eve had done most of her life, and was lucky to still have a mother at all? (ibid, 183-4).

Her feelings of affection occur when she sees “a huge cat, a wildcat of some sort, lop[ing] across the moonlit road”, an awe-inspiring experience that she realises would be enhanced by the presence of her children as she “imagine[s] them [t]here in the car” with her (ibid, 296). Significantly, her only verbal response to this encounter is “Fuck” (ibid, 296). Here, Smith draws a contrast with an earlier incident, in which Eve's response to an injury is “ow f***” (ibid, 87). When she then asks herself, in the third person, “Can't Eve say the word fuck?”, she responds with: “Not out loud” (ibid, 87). Her sighting of the wild cat, then, during which she reimagines her role as a mother where she might have experienced fear, also inspires a total abandonment of filtered speech and thought. As well as emotionally, then, she also finally enters the realm of the Real psychologically and linguistically.

It is also in America that Eve is finally able to see the world as it really is and fully escape her world of fakery. She tells the American woman's daughter that her “mother is an absolute nightmare bitch from hell” and, when the girl stares at her in alarm, says: “it's true. You know it is” (ibid, 300-1). She is finally able to see through the veneer of bourgeois existence to the inhumane exploitation on which it is built. Kristeva argues that “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode ... By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in ourself” (Kristeva 1994, 1). By the end of the novel, Eve has reformulated her sense of self on these terms, modelling her behaviour on Amber and, in doing so, becoming a fundamentally better person. Eve's absence also leads Michael to become “a sensitive father to Astrid and Magnus” (Germanà 2013a, 92). He finally considers their presence to make his house “home” (Smith 2006, 267), and Magnus decides that “Michael's all right” (ibid, 240). Astrid, who previously resented her enforced adoption of his surname, thinking of herself, instead, as “Astrid Berenski” (ibid, 7), also reformulates her sense of self as “Asterid Smart the Smart Asteroid” (ibid, 234). It is this renewed sense of identity that allows her to progress – Amber's departure, she realises, “isn't the end. ... It is the beginning of everything, the beginning of the century and it is definitely Astrid's century ... and here she is, here she comes, hurtling through the air into it” (ibid, 234). With Michael filling the absence left by her biological father's abandonment, she is also finally able to heal – she realises that “she doesn't need her father's letters anymore. They weren't proof of anything really. ... In fact it is a relief not to always have to be thinking about them or wondering what the story is or was” (ibid, 232). It is at this

point that she shifts from fear to imagination – she recalls that “[h]er father could be anything, and anywhere, is what Amber said. Imagine or afraid” (ibid, 232). Thus, while Astrid is hurt by her mother’s absence, which she regards as “substandard parenting” (ibid, 227), Eve’s behaviour in America, far from revealing a capacity for destruction, rather broadly demonstrates a new capacity for genuine emotion that she developed through her association with Amber, and that inspires reparative behaviours and revelations among the rest of her family.

For Waters, by contrast:

The Little Stranger ultimately [is] about the failure of the Ayreses and Faraday to evolve. The only person who evolves is Betty: she’s the image of the working-class future, she’s on her way up, she’s on her way out, she’s unharmed by what’s happened; but both the Ayreses and Faraday in their different ways are trapped in an older structure (2013, 133-4).

As Parker notes, “[a]s Faraday spends more time at Hundreds and becomes ‘one of the family’, he grows increasingly wedded to class hierarchy” (2013, 104), unable to envision a version of either England or himself that does not revolve around existing class structures. When, three years after the main events of the narrative, he encounters Betty among the new council houses built on Hundreds land, she is unrecognisable to him. She tells him that “she’d at last got the sort of job she wanted, in a bicycle factory” and is accompanied by a “young man” (Waters 2009, 496) – she has escaped the feudalistic model of domestic servitude and appears more vibrant and content. When Faraday remarks, then, that “out of the wreckage of that terrible year, she and I were the only survivors” (ibid, 496), there is a sense of irony – while Betty has thrived, he remains unfulfilled and obsessed with Hundreds and the life he might have had there. He is unable to appreciate the benefit that the destabilisation of class hierarchy has had for him – though he remarks that “[w]hen the new Health Service arrived I didn’t, as I’d feared I would, lose patients; in fact I gained them”, he credits this to his “connection with the Ayreses” (ibid, 494). Even with the Ayres line obliterated and Hundreds in a state of dilapidation, he is incapable of imagining his identity outside of them. He is, in this sense, what Hogle describes as a “re-faking of what is already a mere emblem of the nearly empty and dead” (2012, 502), entrapped by a “nostalgia for the natural referent of the sign” (Baudrillard 1993, 51) when in fact that referent no longer exists, the status that Hundreds represents belonging to a rapidly fading past. While Amber regards the Smarts as “disgusting” (Smith 2006, 229), Faraday dismisses the disparaging comments the Ayreses make about their socioeconomic inferiors, including his own mother, choosing, rather than questioning the insidious nature of the class system, to attempt to ascend to their level:

I said nothing ... I sat enjoying the tea and cake, too. For if the house, like an oyster, was at work on Betty, fining and disguising her with layer after

miniscule layer of its own particular charm, then I suppose it had already begun a similar process with me (Waters 2009, 3).

In refusing to abandon the traditional class system as a reference point for his own signification, then, he is unable to ever achieve the liberation that the Smarts attain in their transcendence of conservative structures and is doomed to a life of perpetual spectrality, in which, with every return he makes to Hundreds, he experiences “a jolt of fear” (ibid, 499).

Waters notes that, writing about “the forties, the kind of characters I was writing about felt more ... my size ... like they were living in a world that was very close to mine, rather than a sort of stage set” (2009, 131). This is perhaps because, as Parker suggests,

the rising popularity of the country house in the noughties, coupled with the increasing demonization of the working-class ... reflects resistance to New Labour’s attempts to establish greater social equality during its period in government ... and belies the myth that Britain had become a classless society. ... *The Little Stranger* explores a period of social and political transformation similar to that promised by New Labour (2013, 100).

While its setting is at a six decade remove from *The Accidental’s*, then, both novels are centrally concerned with periods of social upheaval in which established class structures were called into question. Ultimately, Germanà argues,

Smith’s novel reveals the glimpse of a possible move away from the simulacral cage of postmodernity; the source of real light may still be unobtainable, but the characters may rejoice, at least, in the spectral particles of a new whole they are invited to share (2013a, 93).

That is, it invites both the Smarts and the reader to imagine an alternative to the artificial terms of existence engendered by adherence to outmoded bourgeois identity. In *The Little Stranger*, however, this glimpse is offered only through Betty, while for characters allied to traditional notions of class, the only possible futures are death, insanity, or perpetual dissatisfaction.

Arguing for the need for contemporary works of Gothic fiction, Steven Bruhm states that “[t]he Gothic’s basic investment in ravaging history and fragmenting the past meshes with our own investments now as we attempt to reinvent history as a way of healing the perpetual loss in modern existence” (2015, 274). This is precisely the attempt made in *The Accidental*, which rejoices in the liberating potentialities of imagining an approach to living other than that prescribed by a history entrenched in class-based abjection and the denial of reality. *The Little Stranger*, meanwhile, illustrates the tragedy that, she suggests, necessarily follows adherence to archaic

models of hegemony. Ultimately, both Smith and Waters invite the reader – and the middle-class reader in particular – to look into their narratives and come to a critical decision: “Imagine or afraid?” (Smith 2006, 131).

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BOOK REVIEW

Catherine Spooner and Dale Townshend (Eds.). *The Cambridge History of Gothic Volume 3: Gothic in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. 556 pp. eBook. ISBN: 978-1-108-47272-2

Reviewed by Chloe Charlotte Herbert (Independent Scholar)

The Cambridge History of Gothic Volume 3: Gothic in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, edited by two notable Gothic scholars Catherine Spooner and Dale Townshend, is an impressively diverse collection of twenty-three essays which explore how the Gothic genre persevered in the twentieth century and continues to flourish in twenty-first century thought. The volume asks us to look beyond the significance of the Gothic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and instead consider how the Gothic is more vital now more than ever because it “tells the history of the present” (Spooner 2021).

Commendable for its articulation of the literary history of the Gothic and its scholarly debate in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Catherine Spooner provides an introduction that “seeks to map the history of Gothic scholarship” in the period in which the “academic discipline [...] came into being” (2). The introduction’s in-depth contextual analysis ensures that the text is suitable to those both familiar and unfamiliar with Gothic literature and film/television during these latter centuries. Admirably, from the offset Spooner does not intend to claim that this collection is a complete “comprehensive” (1) guide to twentieth and twenty-first centuries Gothic. Areas which are only briefly addressed are clearly recognised, as Spooner suggests areas which could be explored further in future scholarly debate, such as a work which solely focuses on both “regional and national Gothics” (21). Instead, this book’s objective is to show how important the Gothic concepts that are

explored in the volume are to modern thought.

Essays are positioned chronologically to provide readers with an overarching contextual understanding of the historical timeline of the Gothic in this specific timeframe, which is split into four overlapping stages to observe the different waves of Gothic criticism from the 1920s through to the present day. Amongst the many topics featured, such include (but are not limited to) War Gothic, American Gothic, Postcolonial Gothic, Gothic Enchantment, Gothic Film, Gender Gothic, Postdigital Gothic, Global Gothic, EcoGothic, and Zombie Gothic, from some of the most well-known Gothic scholars, such as David Punter, as well as newly established critics.

Amongst this fascinating collection of essays, all of which I unfortunately cannot individually acknowledge, there are two which particularly stand out. The first is Ardel Haefele-Thomas's "Gothic, AIDS and Sexuality, 1981-present". Although the exploration of disease is a popular theme of the Gothic, especially in nineteenth-century texts, the method in which Haefele-Thomas conveys the depiction of AIDS in the 1980s onwards in relation to the Gothic is intriguing. Haefele-Thomas asserts that not only does AIDS question the significance of the symbolism of vampire blood in Gothic literature (269), and the idea of a "homophobic gaze" (274) that blames queer people as "serial killers" of the victims of AIDS (274), he suggests that this upsetting subject demonstrates how the Gothic can be a powerful "tool" (266) to explore such matters which have in the past been regarded as taboo, and so acts as a voice for those who have remained silenced.

Another chapter that complements the volume's collection is Tuğçe Bıçakçı Syed's "Islamic Gothic". Syed's interrogation of the emergence of the Gothic in Turkey in the twentieth century as a method of political propaganda for Turkey's conservative ideology, through Islamic folklore and demonology metaphors, specifically the supernatural creature "djinn" (384), is thought-provoking. For Western Gothic, the genre arguably emerged as a way of showing the potential for female autonomy; however, Syed shows us that in Islamic Gothic it originated as a way of reminding Muslim women of their social obligations and position:

the female protagonist who is either completely westernised and detached from traditional Islamic values or confused and in search for her identity, is possessed by a djinn and ... is rescued by a recitation from the Qur'an with the help of a strong male figure (389).

This essay is certainly enlightening, and one which won't be forgotten easily as it makes us realise the extent to which the literary field needs to question how the Gothic is perceived and utilised in other parts of the world.

While the volume indeed offers a thorough analysis of the twentieth century, some essays could have perhaps referred to a few more examples from twenty-first

century literature and film/television (specifically 2010 onwards). I suspect that this is perhaps due to the fear of what Spooner refers to in her introduction as assigning too much to the Gothic genre which could consequently question its academic value (20). However, referring to more recent examples in literature and film/television could encourage younger students to not only take an interest in Contemporary Gothic, further proving the area's importance in academia but also allow them to gain a better understanding of the important topics that are explored in this volume, such as race, religion, gender, sexuality, AIDs, ecology and so forth, from a different perspective.

This volume is not the first to explore the Gothic in the twenty and twenty-first centuries, and it certainly won't be the last, but it is a work which should be praised for its ability to make us question our own moral standing, as well as current issues that need addressing further, answering Spooner's initial question of whether the Gothic studies in this period addresses "a shared purpose and a unified set of debates" (20). Importantly, this collection encourages the reader to embrace what it means to be considered different. This work will be of great interest to students and academics who are interested in literature and film studies of postmodern and contemporary Gothic, and especially to those who wish to learn more about the significance of the Gothic in twenty and twenty-first century studies.

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BOOK REVIEW

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen. *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema*. Fordham University Press, 2021. 225 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-8232-9790-0

Reviewed by David Hollands (Trent University)

Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema begins with an evocative account of a symbolic conjuring of the Devil in 1646 via a magic lantern. As the tale goes in the introduction by editors Regina M. Hansen and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, German Jesuit Father Athanasius Kircher "projected images" onto the walls of his monastery "to entertain his fellow monks" (1). Some of these images were of devils and demons, and while Hansen and Weinstock state that Kircher did not want to be considered a "practitioner of the dark arts," his magic lantern projections inspired those "in his wake" to form and maintain an association between occult imagery and projected images (1). Hansen and Weinstock use this account to point out that technologies like the magic lantern and film projection often become associated with the supernatural. The Devil, a trickster figure, broadly becomes analogous to the illusionary nature of the cinema, and has been present in moving-image works since the development of moving-image technologies. Furthermore, the Devil in cinema "embodies culturally specific anxieties and desires" (2). It is crucial, then, to fill a gap that Hansen and Weinstock see in film studies: closer analyses of the cinematic Devil and what he represents in various contexts.

Hansen and Weinstock's introduction is helpful in establishing a brief but thorough history of the cinematic Devil. They begin with accounts of Satan in The Bible and more broadly in Christian theology. In the context of cinema, representations of the Devil can be traced from the early trick films of Georges Méliès to now. Hansen and Weinstock also note that the cinematic Devil can represent both conservative and progressive values. Works like Méliès *Le manoir du*

diable (1896), where the Devil is warded off by a large cross, promote a "return to conventional religious faith" against "devilish desire" (6). On the other hand, something like *The Witch* (2015) shows Satan as a force "opposing a patriarchal order that uses religion as a bludgeon against women to keep them docile and subservient" (10).

The variety and organization of the essays in this volume effectively demonstrate this representational duality across different time periods and cultural contexts. The volume is divided into four sections, the first three by historical period: (1) the 1890s to the 1940s, which covers Méliès, *Faust* (1926) in the context of the Weimar Republic, and the Devil in Disney animations; (2) the 1960s and 70s, where focus shifts to comedic representations of the Devil in works such as *Bedazzled* (1967), as well as horror films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976) that suggest a cultural shift to the idea that Satan's ultimate triumph is inevitable; (3) the 1980s and 90s, where films like *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *Angel Heart* (1987), and *The Ninth Gate* (1999) all foreground concerns of the nature of reality itself.

The fourth section, which "compare[s] films across eras and genres" (12), is harder to categorize. In terms of the volume's organization, this fourth section feels like the home of the essays that Hansen and Weinstock found the hardest to place. It would have been better, perhaps, had the essays been organized by topic or theme rather than era. For example, Katherine A. Fowkes' "What's the Deal with the Devil? The Comedic Devil in Four Films" focuses on works that feature the Devil as trickster for comedic effect, which would have paired nicely with Simon Bacon's "Agency or Allowance: The Satanic Complications of Female Autonomy in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Witch*", since the Devil of the former film, played by Jack Nicholson, is a comedic trickster of the Reagan era. Similarly, Russ Hunter's "The Sign of the Cross: Georges Méliès and Early Satanic Cinema" begs to be put in direct conversation with Murray Leeder's "Narration and Damnation in *Angel Heart*". As Leeder notes, *Angel Heart*'s Devil is similar in terms of iconography and performance to Méliès' devils, but in the context of narrativized cinema rather than the early exhibitionist cinema of attractions. Although the organization of the volume could have been reconsidered, there is still a nice flow from one essay to the next, even if that flow becomes particularly turbulent in the fourth section.

While the essays in *Giving the Devil His Due* follow logically from the broad purpose of the volume, there is a gnawing missed opportunity that stems from a brief, but potent statement in the volume's introduction: "For many, [the Devil] is [...] a force active in their lives" (2), which, for Hansen and Weinstock, sets him apart from other supernatural entities of the cinema; a significant number of people actually believe in the Devil. While the volume does situate the cinematic Devil in various cultural and historical contexts effectively, that fascinating aspect of belief in the Devil as a real supernatural being is underexplored. The essay that comes closest to this exploration is David Hauka's "Advocating for Satan: The Parousia-Inspired

Horror Genre", but even then, only with an initial thought about Satan being "fused into the historical foundations of [the United States]" (191). The rest of Hauka's essay is primarily a narrative examination of two films, *The Devil's Advocate* (1997) and *Constantine* (2005), that are based on the stories of the Second Coming of Christ and the End of Days.

Despite the minor criticisms raised above, *Giving the Devil His Due* is a fairly rich volume of scholarship overall. It is a necessary first step in addressing the Satanic gap in cinema and media scholarship up to this point. Furthermore, the volume could be especially useful for instructors designing introductory film history courses, since several essays in this volume cover some basics of early film history from a fresh perspective. Hunter's aforementioned exploration of Méliès' devils, for example, would be an especially fun and compelling way to introduce students to Tom Gunning's concept of the cinema of attractions. Ultimately, this volume may not give the Devil his due entirely, but it is a worthwhile and engrossing first attempt.

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BOOK REVIEW

Rosalind Galt. *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization*. Columbia University Press, Year. 2021 pp. 1-313. Book. ISBN: 9780231201339

Reviewed by: Jack McCormack-Clark (Auckland University of Technology)

Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization by Rosalind Galt, investigates the figure of the Pontianak, a Malay *hantu*, or ghost, as an archetype that exemplifies and contests postcolonial identities through cinema. The figure is said to be the vampiric ghost of women who died in childbirth, or at the hands of men. Galt stipulates that it is the very corporeal form of the ghost as a lost or barely visible element that allows us to see what is otherwise missing from official histories. In the case of the Pontianak, it is “a space of living in contestation in post-colonial culture in which injustices both past and present are illuminated in horrifying form” (1).

The image of this creature has changed throughout history from folklore to literary reimaginings, to representation through cinematic images, becoming a regional popular culture phenomenon. It is this archetypal evolution of the character that signifies dramatic post-colonial shifts. The Pontianak is an intriguing undead figure that has survived the various stages of colonization experienced by Malay people throughout history. Throughout these various periods of colonization, the creature has appeared in many forms, and so has become a cultural signpost for various social, political, cultural, and historical changes. Galt indicates that due to this, the Pontianak is a complex figure that emphasizes various intersecting identities and continues to be an object of popular cultural disturbance throughout cinematic symbols and narratives. This has stemmed from anti-colonial tensions to the reimagining's of Malay identities, to citizenship, and notions of societal and cultural belonging.

For those looking to explore the rich depth of the monstrous and its complex intersections with cultural identities within South-East Asian cinema, *Alluring*

Monsters presents a thorough and thought-provoking analysis. The book focuses on how the monstrous reacts through the figure of the Pontianak in postcolonial cinema in Malaysia and Singapore, as a discursive and mythic personification and animism of anticolonialism that disrupts the varying colonializing elements of Islam and Christianity. The figure of the Pontianak, like many monstrous archetypes, is an agent of disruption, discord, and signifier of social and cultural upheaval which is impossible to contain within a single cultural form. It is a figure that continues to adapt to the new issues and challenges that appear on the precipice of the cultural sphere making it a remarkably resilient archetype. Based on the analysis of Galt, it continues to reach beyond its role as a space for contention in the face of the colonial cultures and into contemporary challenges through feminist and queer readings of the Pontianak which have emerged clearly through the colonial and post-colonial histories of Malaysia and Singapore.

One of the inherent strengths of this text is its engagement with monster theory and its cultural significance beyond the abundance of Western examples. It shows the transmissible nature of the monstrous into other histories and cultures around the world as a commonality shared on a universal scale. This is seen within the context of the chapters which cover the historical scope surrounding the cinematic images of the Pontianak and its various productions during intensive periods of cultural agitation, the reimagining of Malay identities in the postcolonial era, and the national, racial, and religious identities that developed within the postcolonial structures of citizenship and belonging. Galt provides an excellent understanding of South-East Asian culture and has thoroughly examined, not only the Pontianak's place in popular culture, but also how it functions within folklore and history.

It is important to point out to the reader that this is not an introductory text to the monstrous, cultural, or cinema studies. Prior knowledge of the discourse and nuance of the monstrous as a cultural phenomenon and horror cinema is certainly required to fully engage with the text as there are no introductory explanations for either element provided. It is in this case better utilized as an advanced text to explore the specific depth of the phenomenon of the monstrous within South-East Asian narratives as the text does provide an excellent introduction to the role of the ghost and supernatural monster within South-East Asian culture, the folklore and mythic origins of the Pontianak and why it has become such a fascinating and visceral, regional popular culture phenomenon. The text also provides an interesting analysis of the potential influence of monstrous figures such as the Pontianak on Western horror and Gothic narratives such as Bram Stokers *Dracula* (1897) and the universal myth of vampiric undead creatures.

In summary, the overall standard of *Alluring Monsters* is very high. It is an in-depth look at how the monster, specifically the Pontianak, acts as a complex intersection of identities in Malaysia and Singapore, and continuously evolves

through cinematic texts as a living contestation of colonial culture and the injustices of both the past and present. It also presents an interesting analysis of interconnectivity between various creatures of folklore on a global scale that share common traits, such as the vampire. It would be an excellent resource for researchers and postgraduate students conducting a more advanced study into the monstrous in South-East Asian cinema, and those looking to broaden their understanding of the role of the monstrous in complex contestations of identity within a postcolonial context.

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BOOK REVIEW

Stephenie Meyer. *Midnight Sun*. Atom, 2020. 756 pp. Book. ISBN: 978-0-349-00362-7

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With the publication of the novel *Twilight* (2005) – which was followed by three sequels (2006-2008), a spin-off novella (*The Short Second Life of Bree Tunner*, 2010), a graphic novel adaptation in two volumes (by Young Kim, 2010-11), an official illustrated guide (2011), and a re-writing of the first book (*Life and Death*, 2015) – Stephenie Meyer has created one of the most celebrated and best-selling series of the new millennium. The saga, which has also generated a prolific production of critical essays and volumes (including Rebecca Housel and J. Jeremy Wisnewski's 2009 *Twilight and Philosophy*, Amy M. Clarke and Marijane Osborne's 2010 *Twilight Mystique*, and Maggie Parke and Natalie Wilson's 2011 *Theorizing Twilight*) may now have reached a conclusion (or perhaps a stall?) with the volume *Midnight Sun*. The novel has gone through a tormented history due to an early draft that was illegally leaked on the internet in 2008, which forced the writer to postpone the volume's completion and publication until 2020.

Midnight Sun recounts the story of *Twilight* from the point of view of its male protagonist, the vampire Edward Cullen. Now readers are given access to the missing pieces of *Twilight*, those parts of the narrative that Edward summarizes or actually never told Bella. Readers who are familiar with the first novel of the series or its 2008 cinematic adaptation are indeed able to learn in detail how vegetarian, civilized vampires hunt for animals, what are the family relationships among the Cullens, their ethical concerns and how intent they are in covering their tracks to humans, along with more intimate details such as the composition of Edward's lullaby love song.

The change in perspective also allows readers to see the point of view of the monster, of vampires as predators, which was not possible with the previous volumes in the saga, because the human protagonist's first-person narration was too innocent (and sometimes close-minded) to understand the otherness of vampires. Unexpectedly, considering the general romantic character of the saga, Edward's recollections of his encounter with the beautiful but clumsy Bella are informed by his thirst for her blood and murderous thoughts, which do not fully transpire in *Twilight*. As it occurs in the *Vampire Chronicles* saga by Anne Rice (1976-2018), Meyer continually emphasizes the need for a benign vampire to contain his murderous instincts and his fight against the perennial thirst for blood. Edward's 'love at first sight' for Bella is rather an instantaneous desire to kill the girl and feed upon her, which is accompanied by the plan to get rid of all witnesses and, simultaneously, by his sense of guilt. The latter, through a series of conflicting emotions, slowly evolves into curiosity, protectiveness, admiration, jealousy and, finally, intense genuine love, characterized by a craving for the beloved's presence and proximity. As it occurs in Gothic narratives that focus on a conflicted villain, Edward is torn between his own latent monstrosity (growling inside like the Freudian id) and his respect for human life. Particularly effective is the metaphor, recurrent throughout the novel, between Bella's fascination with vampiric immortality and Persephone's eating of the pomegranate, which doomed the Greek goddess to an eternal afterlife of darkness.

The first-person narration also allows readers to focus on what the perspective of a telepath is (as happens in Charlaine Harris' best-selling Sookie Stackhouse novels [2001-14]) and the advantages and difficulties it implicates, including the acquisition on the part of readers of background knowledge on the real thoughts of all the characters, and the past of the Cullens. Edward's ability to read the minds of both vampires and humans around him, with what he calls his "extra hearing" (p. 36), consists in a decoding of both thoughts and mental images, and is the equivalent of a series of changes in frames in a cinematographic sequence, leading the reader to see several things from different angles. Most curiously, while Edward cannot read Bella's mind (a secret that is revealed in *Breaking Dawn*), those readers who are familiar with *Twilight* (either the film or the novel) already know what she is thinking and are therefore a step ahead of the novel's narrator and protagonist.

As was the case with the original quadrilogy, Meyer is extremely versed in capturing the behaviour, habits, turmoil, and insecurity of teenagers, and depicts their flirting rituals with accuracy. Edward's perspective is never that of an adult (though he is actually eighty years older than Bella) looking at and flirting with a teenager. Meyer avoids any possible accusations of a pedophilic interest on the protagonist's part by portraying Edward's feelings as his first experience of love (what he calls "this first, and last, tragic love of mine" [p. 238]) and, therefore, as an adolescent turmoil involving utter confusion of mind, sudden jumps from joy to

pain, insecurity about the beloved's mutual affection, and the sensuality of the first reciprocal touches.

The novel is enjoyable even by those readers who have never heard of the saga. The light-hearted dialogues among adolescents and the protagonist's continuous fear of corrupting or hurting his fragile soulmate as much as the suspense building up after the encounter with the rival, carnivorous vampires hunting Bella make *Midnight Sun* a quick, pleasant reading experience. A reading experience which could be vitiated only by the fact that, for those readers who have watched the films, the appearance of the characters will probably be indissolubly linked to those of the actors and actresses that interpreted them. Hardcore fans of the saga may hope for the publication, in future years, of the three sequels from Edward's perspective, though it might be preferable if, rather than repeating itself again and again (as the publication of *Life and Death* also demonstrates), the series would finally proceed with the new adventures of these fascinating vampires.

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