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EDITORIAL

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Death and Contemporary Gothic Studies

The idea of 'death' offers a rich vein of material for Gothic scholars to mine. Of all the eerie and foreboding experiences in this world, it is perhaps the thought of Death that most simultaneously attracts and repels. For death is the great inevitability for us all and yet none of us knows, or can know, it fully.

This issue of *Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies* is the result of discussions between its editors and the journal's founding editor, Dr. Lorna Piatti-Farnell, at the inaugural Australasian Death Studies Network conference in Noosa, Australia, in 2015. This multi-disciplinary conference brought together Australasian scholars and practitioners from a range of disciplines that consider death and dying, including the creative arts, popular culture, health, and community planning. The keynote address of the conference, 'The Price of Undying: Vampire Genetics and the Cultural Politics of Immortality', was delivered by Dr. Piatti-Farnell, who brought her expertise in both Gothic Studies and Popular Culture to this subject, which built on discussions in her recent major book, *The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature* (2014). Piatti-Farnell's address set the tone for many of the discussions during the conference which viewed representations of, social practices around, and a myriad of contemporary anxieties aroused by the idea of death and dying through a twin lens of the Gothic and Popular Culture. Death thus seemed a particularly apt topic to explore in *Aeternum*.

Delegates to the conference comprised a range of scholars, from those completely new to the Gothic, as well as experienced researchers in that field. The conference papers explored death in all its diversity but with a strong prevalence of papers dealing with representations of death, dying, and the undead in popular culture, and Gothic representations of the death, dying, and the undead. Diverse disciplines participated, thus revealing the wide reach of the Gothic, whether this was explicit or implicit. This special issue of *Aeternum* presents a number of papers from the conference, which seek to explore Death and the Gothic in a range of ways.

In 'Presumed Dead: Gothic Representations of the Missing Person in Contemporary Australian Literature', Emma Doolan reveals the anxieties evoked when death is indefinite. In considering how two contemporary Australian writers – Sarah Armstrong and Jessie Cole – use the Gothic to articulate the uncertainties of the state of being missing, Doolan discusses the undead body and the liminality of being between life and death. In this way, she represents the missing person as liminal in Victor Turner's sense, a kind of undead figure who mediates between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead.

What could be described as transgressive television is becoming increasingly popular and the *Six Feet Under* series was an early example, especially in how it dealt with death bravely and irreverently. As Jo Coghlan, Lynda Hawryluk and Louise Whitaker argue in '*Six Feet Under: A Gothic Reading of Liminality, Death and Grief*', reading this series through a Gothic lens can help stimulate new ways of thinking about family, love, and loss. This article suggests that, no matter how privileged we may be in life, we will all incur the consequences of indignities, unfinished business, and inability to control how surviving friends and families will react to our passing.

Gruesome deaths are standard for the millions of viewers who tune in to popular crime television series such as *CSI*, *NCIS*, and *Criminal Minds*. While settings, motives, and characters vary in these shows, the murder board is a common and connecting motif used by writers and directors. In 'Murder Across the Board: Murder Boards as a Liminal Space for the Dead on Popular Television', Rachel Franks argues that this board functions like a table centrepiece, drawing together the victim, perpetrator, and the problem solving detectives. It is in this physical and metaphorical space that all of the players meet, even though they may never have thus come together in life. The mysteries and everyday activities they once engaged in are displayed on the murder board, like disjointed pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Impossibly, uncannily, the end of life is presented in a one dimensional flow-chart, dispassionately considered and, in this moment, the dead communicate with the living.

Visits to lunatic asylums provide another portal to the idea of death. In a sense, these experiences provide a near-death, but not-death, experience for visitors. In 'Psychiatric Museums: The Return of the Undead Asylum', the editors of this issue, Margaret McAllister and Donna Lee Brien, posit that contemporary psychiatric museums are the living embodiment of the long dead asylum. In a Gothic sense, these

are sites expressing the ongoing cultural anxieties we hold about insanity, wherein unreason is the flip side of our own more rational personas.

A companion special issue on the subject of 'Writing Death and the Gothic', will be published in a forthcoming issue of *TEXT: The Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, in October, 2016.

References

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Presumed Dead: Gothic Representations of the Missing Person in Contemporary Australian Literature

ABSTRACT

*Thirty-five thousand people are reported missing in Australia each year – one every fifteen minutes. Most return home, unharmed. Some don't. Missing person figures haunt the Australian cultural imagination. In literature and in life, explorers are swallowed by the desert, children are lost in the bush, schoolgirls vanish at picnics, hitchhikers are abducted by serial killers, and a prime minister mysteriously disappears while swimming. This article considers the ways contemporary Australian writers Sarah Armstrong (in *Salt Rain*, 2004) and Jessie Cole (in *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, 2012) use the Gothic to articulate the uncertainties of the state of being missing, representing the missing person as liminal in Victor Turner's sense, a kind of undead figure who mediates between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead.*

Keywords: Australian Gothic, liminality, hinterland, missing person

In the Australian cultural imagination, the missing person exercises a peculiar fascination. In literature and in life, explorers are swallowed by the desert, children are lost in the bush, schoolgirls vanish from picnics, hitchhikers are abducted off highways, and even a prime minister mysteriously disappears while swimming. This cultural fascination has been widely acknowledged (Haynes 1998; Kociumbas 2001; Lawson 2004; Pierce 1999; Rudd 2010; Scheckter 1998; Tilley 2012; Torney 2005);

however, critics of film, literature, and art have tended to focus on 'lost child' rather than 'missing adult' narratives. Analyses of Australian missing person narratives have also neglected the connections between the figure of the missing person and the Gothic, although concepts of liminality, the uncanny, and hybridity are raised. This is the case even when the texts under analysis are written by authors associated with the Australian Gothic tradition. Fred Botting has characterised the Gothic as focusing on "situations where the suspension of normal rules leads to tension and ambivalence" (Botting 2014, 5). Unresolved disappearances disrupt the 'normal rules' of legal, "social and domestic regulation" (ibid.), because the missing person can be considered neither certainly dead, nor certainly alive. The usual processes of mourning, funerary arrangements, and legal settlements cannot be undertaken. Instead, the missing person exists in a liminal state, an uncanny figure mediating the boundary between life and death.

Mysterious disappearances – some temporary, some indefinite – are a staple of classic Gothic literature, feeding evocations of dread, uncertainty, and suspense. In Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Emily alternates between believing her aunt has died locked in the castle's east turret, and that she has escaped. Her fears lead her into flights of fancy in which she, as Terry Castle points out, imagines death all around, even mistaking a pile of old clothes for a corpse (Castle 1995, 131). Likewise, Emily imagines that her absent lover, Valancourt, may be dead and haunting the parapet outside her room with ghostly wails (ibid., 124). Often, acts of disappearance function as a catalyst for change. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Heathcliff disappears for a period of three years and returns a gentleman. Even Jane Eyre deliberately goes missing from Thornfield Hall following her aborted wedding to Rochester, and in her absence becomes an heiress. Each of these missing characters is represented as a liminal figure, a transitional being situated between social categories, or between life and death.

Victor Turner identifies the liminal being as "structurally indefinable" (Turner 1964, 235), even "structurally 'dead'" (ibid., 236), because she exists between fixed states and categories of representation. As such, she can only be described via metaphors, usually of death, hybridity, and rebirth. In the Gothic, the liminal often emerges via monstrous or hybrid figures, such as the vampire or ghost. The missing person, like the ghost, is "an absent presence, a liminal being" (Smith 2007, 147) that haunts those left behind. Like the vampire, the missing person unsettles established boundaries and categories, becoming a "creature of aesthetic liminality" (Piatti-Farnell 2014b, 52) and a "source of unease and confusion" (ibid.).

This article examines Gothic representations of the missing person as a liminal figure in two recent Australian novels, *Salt Rain* (2004) by Sarah Armstrong and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (2012) by Jessie Cole. Each of these novels represents the missing person as a liminal figure through metaphoric language of death, hybridity, and rebirth, aligning the missing person with the vampire, zombie, ghost, and even the mermaid. As in Turner's theory of liminality, the liminal *state* of the missing person in these novels is accompanied by their physical passage through liminal *space*.

In both novels, this liminal space is the northern New South Wales hinterland. This reading uncovers hitherto overlooked connections between the missing person trope and the Gothic in Australian literature, and points to the ways in which Turner's theory of liminality, so often revised and reapplied in diverse ways in contemporary analysis, remains relevant for understanding and articulating the otherwise unrepresentable figure of the missing person.

The Missing Person in Australian Literature and Culture

An estimated thirty-five thousand people are reported missing in Australia each year – one every fifteen minutes (James, Anderson & Putt 2008, xi; Wayland 2009, 30). High-profile cases, such as the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain (1980) or the doomed Burke and Wills expedition (1861), remain in the cultural imagination for decades, even across centuries, returning again and again in public discourse and fictional representations. This cultural preoccupation with the missing person has been widely recognised by scholars, although often it is the figure of the child lost in the bush rather than the lost or missing adult that is the focus of attention. In *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (1999), Peter Pierce acknowledges the lack of attention paid to the "vital strain" (Pierce 1999, 7) of lost or missing adult texts in Australian literature. Pierce recognises similarities between lost child and lost adult narratives (ibid., 4); however, his own analysis nonetheless excludes adult missing person texts. For Pierce, the death or loss of children "plays more heavily on the fears of Australians than adult catastrophes in the bush" (ibid., 6), which are only a "predictable price of colonial expansion into the wilderness" (ibid., 6). Elspeth Tilley, however, has criticised the tendency to separate texts about the lost child from those about missing adults, arguing that they ought to be read alongside one another, as part of an overarching tradition.

For Tilley, analyses of lost child texts are limited by the "assum[ption] from the outset that the youthfulness of those lost [is] their defining characteristic" (Tilley 2012, 7). She argues that this assumption colours the readings of all metaphors and possibilities of the trope. In a number of cases, this appears to be true. John Scheckter, for example, reads the youth and innocence of the lost child as an invitation to "the author to load the child's fate with a symbolic representation of the nation's future" (Scheckter 1998, 49). Pierce similarly reads the lost child as enabling the development of "the discourse of 'young Australia'" (Pierce 1999, 8), and standing for a variety of anxieties about the national future. Most readings of the lost child trope consider colonial guilt and anxieties over land tenure and belonging to be among the reasons for its recurrence. Tilley's own analysis focuses on the political and racial dimensions of the missing person trope. She argues that narratives of "white vanishing" – she finds no similar vein of literature in Indigenous writing (Tilley 2009, 34) – rather than serving to articulate white guilt and ambivalence in fact perform a sense of white belonging to the land through metaphors of spatial and racial separation. Jan Kociumbas similarly reads the "stereotype of the lost white 'baby' as the victim of the bush" (2001, 51) as a means of displacing colonial guilt by "conveniently suggesting that it was the white family which had borne the brunt and paid the price of

colonisation" (ibid.). Other discussions of the Australian lost child trope in visual art, literature, film, and real life have been carried out by Kim Torney (2005), Susan Dermody (1980), Alan Lawson (1980), Roslynn Haynes (1998), Alison Rudd (2010), and many others. Tilley points out that when instances of adult disappearance do arise in such analyses they are often "normalized as analogies or metaphors of childhood experiences" (Tilley 2012, 7). This is certainly true of Pierce's reading of the works of Frank Moorhouse, in which the figure of the lost child is as often a "child-adult" (Pierce 1999, 128) as an actual child. This tendency means that the full range of possibilities and significance behind the missing person trope in Australian literature has not yet been explored, including its affinity with the Gothic.

The Gothic is rarely mentioned in analyses of Australian lost child and missing person texts, even when concepts of the uncanny, liminality, and hybridity are raised, or when the texts under analysis are written by authors usually associated with the Australian Gothic tradition. Works by Marcus Clarke, Barbara Baynton, and Patrick White, for example, are routinely analysed as lost or missing person texts, yet the Gothic aspects of the missing person figure are not considered. I argue that Australian missing person and lost child narratives can be read as part of the Australian Gothic tradition. While there is no room herein for a comprehensive re-reading of the Gothic aspects of such narratives, two points are worth addressing. Firstly, the spatial pattern distinguished by many critics as common to lost child narratives is the same as that which Manuel Aguirre identifies as the basic geometry of Gothic texts (Aguirre 2008, 2). Secondly, the figure of the lost child often evinces uncanny aspects associated with liminality and hybridity.

Gothic Geometry: The 'Other' Space

For Aguirre, the paradigmatic spatial pattern of the Gothic consists of a series of movements between two zones, "on the one hand, the human domain of rationality and intelligible events; on the other hand, the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic Numinous which transcends human reason" (ibid., 2-3). 'Numinous', for Aguirre, means "not the merely supernatural but that which the world of horror fiction systematically defines as non-human, as alien, as Other: that which we are not" (Aguirre 1990, 3). The Gothic "Other space" (Aguirre 2008, 4) is a realm of "threat or danger [...] or of some manner of destruction or existence beyond the pale" (ibid.). The 'Other' is a construct constituted primarily through what is rejected, different from the norm or "different from oneself" (Mountz 2009, 328). This corresponds with what Robert Mighall calls the "originary definition of Gothic space as that which civilisation rejects or demonises" (Mighall 2007, 61). For Mighall, the very premise of the Gothic is the division of "the civilised from the barbarous, the progressive from the retrograde" (ibid., 55) and its "dangers derive from the proximity of these two distinct worlds" (ibid.). In Aguirre's Gothic geometry, these two realms are separated and simultaneously joined by a liminal, threshold space, a boundary that is constantly violated or transgressed (Aguirre 2008, 3-4).

This Gothic movement between a 'normal' or familiar realm, and an unfamiliar 'Other' realm, is the same pattern that Tilley, Pierce, and others identify as common to lost child narratives. Tilley writes that the "transition from predictable space to frighteningly uncanny space through the act of becoming lost is typical of white-vanishing texts" (Tilley 2009, 34). Before they disappear, "protagonists occupy space marked as safe, known, familiar, and reliable, while the terror and trauma invoked by the act of vanishing demonize the Othered sites of vanishing as irrevocably horrific" (ibid., 35). In this dialectic, "Fearful space [...] functions to oppose and highlight the nature of settled space" (ibid.). Both Tilley and Pierce place a particular emphasis on the liminal moment of threshold crossing—commonly a creek crossing (Pierce 1999, 50; Tilley 2012, 224). For Pierce, the child's journey over the threshold and into the dangerous, yet alluring, unknown is an adventure, and an inherently liminal act, a kind of "rite of passage" (Pierce 1999, 42).

Liminality and hybridity

The concept of liminality arises from studies of rites of passage in tribal societies conducted in the field of cultural anthropology by Arnold van Gennep and later developed by Victor Turner (Garner 2013, 401). Van Gennep "proposed that all human subjects experience a liminal period of transition (often brought about by the advance of adulthood, marriage, or parenthood) before full integration into the community at large" (ibid.). According to Turner, this process of social transition was mirrored by "a geographical movement from one place to another. This may take the form of a mere opening of doors or the literal crossing of a threshold which separates two distinct areas" (Turner in Klapcsik 2012, 7). During the "betwixt and between period" (Turner 1964, 55) of the rite, the liminal subject is both "no longer classified and not yet classified" (ibid., 48) according to accepted social categories. She is a hybrid being: "unclear" and thus considered "unclean" or "polluting" (ibid.), a danger to others who have not yet been "inoculated" (ibid.) by undergoing a similar ritual.

The same concerns with 'pollution' and hybridity surround the lost child in narratives analysed by Tilley and Pierce. In Tilley's analysis, the lost child is linked to "colonial 'going native' anxieties" (Tilley 2011, 3) and "settler fears about miscegenation, contamination and the instability of categories of racial difference" (ibid., 7). The vanishing of white children is accompanied by "metaphors of physical or psychological taint" (ibid., 3), such as "metaphors of stain, contamination, ebb, or decline" (ibid., 6). Both Tilley and Pierce read such metaphors in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), in which a European child, Gemmy, is marooned and taken in by an Aboriginal tribe. Later, he returns to European society but he is irrevocably changed. Pierce reads the returned Gemmy as an "[u]nwelcome revenant" (Pierce 1999, 148) or "daemon" (ibid., 149); "a liminal creature, one who properly belongs to the margins, but which trespasses over them now by crossing a borderline [...] as if an emissary from a non-human order of beings" (ibid.). He represents the "atavistic fears" (ibid.) white settler society held towards Aborigines. As a result, Gemmy is punished and exiled, a "surrogate for the elusive and menacing Aborigines, not least because the fate of this once lost European child was to have become, to some

extent, aboriginal himself" (ibid., 148). In Tilley's reading, if a child returns after being lost in the bush, "rituals of cleansing and cleaning" (Tilley 2011, 10) are undertaken to remove the 'taint'. Gemmy, however, "cannot be 'cleaned', [and] the text ultimately manages his threat of contamination in another way – he is returned to the bush and banished again, permanently" (ibid., 10). In both these readings, Gemmy is represented as a liminal figure – hybrid, monstrous, demonic, tainted, otherworldly, inhuman – yet the Gothic aspects of such a characterisation are not raised.

Liminality, of course, is not an exclusively Gothic domain; the fact of the missing person's liminality does not render her an inherently Gothic subject. In recent decades, the concept of liminality has been applied across a variety of fields, including postcolonialism, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, narratology, and cultural studies (Klapcsik 2012, 1). In each instance, liminality has been adapted and re-theorised until it has assumed a range of connotations and applications. Undoubtedly, the concept of liminality has "become somewhat de-coupled from its original theoretical underpinnings and dislodged from its anthropological moorings" (Andrews and Roberts 2012, 4). Some, such as Bjørn Thomassen, protest that "the term is increasingly used to talk about almost *anything*" (Thomassen 2012, 22; emphasis in original). Various critics have tried to rehabilitate the concept of liminality for the modern world, by going back to the original work of Turner and Arnold van Gennep, as Thomassen suggests, or by drawing on the range of meanings and associations ascribed to liminality as "a 'box of tools'" (Klapcsik 2012, 1) as Sandor Klapcsik recommends. It is my contention that Turner's concept of liminality as a transitional state associated with metaphors of death, hybridity, and rebirth remains relevant in the modern world as a means of articulating figures such as the missing person, who might otherwise remain unrepresentable. I also argue that in Australian lost child and missing person novels, the liminal operates within a particularly Gothic mode.

The Missing Person and the Gothic Mode in *Salt Rain* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town*

Despite having been largely marketed and reviewed as literary fiction, the recent Australian novels *Salt Rain* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (referred to simply as *Darkness* from hereon) evince "the dark aesthetics of the Gothic mode" (Piatti-Farnell and Mercer 2014, 5). Lorna Piatti-Farnell has characterised the contemporary Gothic as being both backward- and forward-looking, noting the relationships between new and old, or canonical, forms of Gothic, the "interdependent structures – conceptual, stylistic, and metaphorical – that highlight the Gothic as a multi-faceted, tentacled, and networked entity" (Piatti-Farnell 2014a, ii). Both *Salt Rain* and *Darkness* demonstrate this interdependence and entanglement of new and old. Although set in present-day Australian hinterlands, each novel follows a familiar Gothic plot. Claire Kahane, drawing on classic and modern Gothic works from Ann Radcliffe through to Flannery O'Connor, has defined the "conventional Gothic plot" (Kahane 1985, 334):

a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the center of a mystery, while vague and usually sexual threats to her person from some

powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness. Following clues [...] she penetrates the obscure recesses of a dark, labyrinthine space and discovers a secret room sealed off by its association with death. In this dark, secret center of the Gothic structure, the boundaries of life and death seem confused. Who died? Has there been a murder? Or merely a disappearance? (ibid.)

Both *Salt Rain* and *Darkness* follow this basic plot, and in each the 'labyrinthine space' is a Gothicised northern New South Wales hinterland of blurred boundaries and excess. In *Salt Rain*, Mae disappears while swimming in Sydney Harbour. Her teenage daughter, Allie, returns to the family farm in the hinterland, where she tries to piece together the secrets of Mae's past in order to understand her disappearance. In *Darkness*, Rachel chooses to disappear. She is on the run from her abusive boyfriend when she crashes her car on the road outside the hinterland home of Vince and his stepdaughter, Gemma. In both cases, the figure of the missing person is represented via the metaphorical language of liminality: as uncanny, hybrid, and undead. Mae and Rachel are associated by turns with the vampire, the zombie, the mermaid, and the ghost. Their missing status seems to overflow its bounds of human-ness, affecting and infecting both those surrounding them, and those left behind.

The Hinterland as a Liminal Space

Both *Salt Rain* and *Darkness* enact a classic Gothic movement from centre to periphery, the movement Victor Sage identifies as "the paradigm of the horror-plot: the journey from the capital [...] to the provinces" (Sage 1988, 8), and that Aguirre identifies as a movement from rational, familiar space to Numinous, 'Other' space (Aguirre 2008, 2-3). In each case, the familiar central space is Sydney and the peripheral Othered space that of the northern New South Wales hinterland. The lush, fertile landscape of the hinterland is not often associated with the Gothic mode in Australian literature. Studies of Australian Gothic tend to focus on the iconic Australian landscapes of dry Outback and rough Bush as the unlikely but effective settings of a distinctly Australian Gothic mode (see, for example, Gelder 2007; Rudd 2010; Turcotte 2009). Critics emphasise the "Weird Melancholy" of the Australian bush (Gelder 2007, 116) and the threat of annihilation found in the vastness of the desert (Haynes 1998). In these and other representations, the Australian landscape is read as hostile, inhospitable, and alien to European settlers. The landscape of the northern New South Wales hinterland is at odds with such representations as the subtropical climate and abundant rainfall create a luxuriant, green landscape where dense stands of native rainforest border fertile farmland.

In this way, the hinterlands of *Salt Rain* and *Darkness* more closely resemble the European Gothic landscapes of Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole—with their mountains, dark forests, and labyrinthine roads (Railo 1974, 12)—than the iconic landscapes of Australian Gothic. This is a landscape of lush excess, and a liminal space where boundaries are constantly erased and transgressed. In fact, literally speaking, the hinterland is a quintessential liminal space. It is the "land behind" (Soanes and

Stevenson 2008, 674) something else; a region “lying beyond what is visible or known” (ibid.). In the language of Imperialism, the hinterland is also the uncertainly-possessed territory between the borders of two or more expanding powers (Davis 2000, 100; Kerr 2008, 11). It is associated with boundaries, frontiers, peripheries, and the in-between. In this way, the northern New South Wales hinterland is also a geographically liminal space, situated between what is commonly figured as the familiar, populated coast and the ‘dead centre’ of Australia’s desert interior. Like the missing person, the hinterland mediates between realms.

Various critics have commented on the uncanny capacity of frontier or border spaces to incorporate aspects of both the threshold and the other space around, or adjacent to, it. Aguirre has argued that “the distinction between threshold and Other space may be an equivocal, if not a spurious one: *for the threshold is part of the Other*” (Aguirre 2008, 5; emphasis in original). The threshold “is already that which it delimits and isolates, and becomes what it defines” (ibid.). Likewise, Michel de Certeau articulates the paradoxical nature of the frontier: “Within the frontiers, the alien is already there ... as though delimitation itself were the bridge that opens the inside to its other” (de Certeau in Klapcsik 2012, 14). The hinterland in *Salt Rain* and *Darkness* functions in this manner: it is both threshold and Other space, a liminal space of suspension and, ultimately, transition. Like the liminal subject, liminal space is betwixt-and-between, “neither here nor there” (Turner 1964, 48). As a result, according to Chris van der Merwe and Hein Viljoen, liminal space “cannot be expressed in ordinary language, but has to be described in metaphors or states of the in-between, like death, going underground or under water, going into eclipse” (van der Merwe and Viljoen 2007, 10).

Liminal Space in *Salt Rain* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town*

In *Salt Rain*, as Allie’s train crosses into the hinterland, it begins to rain, marking the entry into liminal space: she is going ‘under water’. The rain is unceasing; creeks flood and roads are cut off. Even if she could cross the swollen creeks, Allie could not leave: trains run back to Sydney only every two days. She finds herself in a closed space, cut off from the everyday world. The family farmhouse, the Gothic structure at the heart of the novel, is beset on all sides by encroaching floodwaters, a “great sheet of water creeping up the paddocks” (Armstrong 2004, 177), and by the dense rainforest that closes in on all sides. Allie’s aunt, Julia, has let the house and surrounding paddocks go to ruin following the death of her violent, overbearing father. The roof leaks and the rain seeps into the house, confusing the boundaries between outside and inside. Weeds grow through the boards of the verandah, vines curl through the kitchen window. The cows that used to graze the pastures around the house are gone and in their place Julia has planted native saplings, erasing the boundary between the wilderness of the rainforest and the domesticated space of the yard and farm.

In *Darkness*, liminal space is described via the metaphors of ‘edges’ and ‘the in-between’. Vince and Gemma live beyond the edge of town, separated from its civilisation by a boundary of rainforest and a stretch of long, winding road. To Vince,

the house has “always seemed just like a truck stop, not a real home” (Cole 2012, 269). It is a half-way house, a place of transition, full of half-broken, half-functional things. This is a liminal space, “no proper space itself” (Aguirre 2008, 4), a “place that is not a place” (Turner in Aguirre 2008, 5). Even Gemma is not Vince’s biological daughter but his step-daughter, abandoned by her mother (Cole 2012, 14). It is in front of this half-way house with its uncanny family that Rachel crashes her car, killing her infant son. Vince and Gemma take her in. The following scenes in this novel take place in locations rendered liminal by their position at the edges of things, or by time of day – trips into the central space of the town only take place in the middle of night, or very early in the morning, or on Sundays when shops shut early and everything is rendered strange. On a visit to Rachel’s doctor in town, Vince notices this suddenly uncanny aspect of people and places that were once familiar: “It was strange being in the surgery early like that. No secretaries, no waiting. The heating hadn’t been turned on and it was cold. The place felt kind of eerie” (ibid., 49). The doctor, a friend of Vince’s from football training, is rendered uncanny too, out of place and somehow “different” (ibid.) in his tidy work clothes instead of the dishevelled football gear in which Vince is used to seeing him.

Scenes in *Darkness* often take place on the road. The main characters are introduced while they are in transit: Vince is driving home when he sees Rachel’s crashed car; we are first introduced to Gemma while she is on the bus. Even the season is liminal, autumn, and Rachel collects red leaves and tries to slow their process of decay, but “they go brown. They curl up. [...] In a few days, it’s all gone. [...] All the life” (ibid., 296). Vince teaches her to preserve the leaves in jars of methylated spirits, a metaphor for the stasis that can delay transition through liminal space (Andrews and Roberts 2012, 12); the same stasis that holds Rachel in Vince’s half-way house. Like the autumn leaves, she is trapped in a moment of turning, a moment between two states. In *Salt Rain*, Mae is also suspended in a liminal state, first because her status as alive or dead is unknown, and later because Allie cannot come to terms with the means of her mother’s death by suicide. As a result, Mae remains a ghostly presence in the text, animated by Allie’s imagination. In the Gothic, the “recursive appearance of ghosts often articulates both the return of the repressed and the longing (having allowed the repressed to surface) to let it rest in peace” (Cavallaro 2002, 68). A ghost might “return not so much in order to unsettle the status quo as in order to mend a damaged fabric” (ibid., 69). Mae’s ghost can’t be laid to rest until Allie is able to mend the ‘damaged fabric’ of her identity caused by her mother’s death.

The Liminal Subject and (Un)Death

The liminal subject is, for Turner, between categories and states, “neither living nor dead from one aspect, and *both* living *and* dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox” (Turner 1964, 48; emphasis in original). The liminal subject is represented via symbols of death and decomposition; in ritual they may even be treated like a corpse. Conversely, they may also be represented via symbols of transformation and rebirth, such as “a pupa changing from grub to moth” (ibid., 46). In *Salt Rain* and *Darkness*, metaphorical language of death and hybridity characterises

the figure of the missing person. Both Mae and Rachel have, like the liminal subject of a rite of passage, left behind their homes, lives, and identities and entered into a transitional state of undeath.

In *Salt Rain*, Mae is a ghostly presence both during the period of her disappearance and once her death by drowning is confirmed. Mae's own theory of death is that "Bodies go back to dust but we leave traces here and there, atoms of ourselves. We float in the air everywhere we have ever been. Every word spoken, every breath exhaled. Every drop of sweat" (Armstrong 2004, 41). According to this theory, one needn't be dead in order to haunt, and it is in this way that Allie imagines her missing mother haunting the hinterland of her childhood. She senses her presence at a patch of earth where Mae's "childish sandal might have pressed for a moment" (ibid., 19); in the floorboards of her bedroom, worn "soft and satiny from the stroke of her mother's feet" (ibid., 31); even in the body of Mae's childhood sweetheart, Saul, who Allie believes must "hold the strongest traces of her mother. His skin would still carry her touch" (ibid., 42). Terry Castle has noted a similar process of spectralisation in the works of Ann Radcliffe, wherein characters are haunted by spectres of absent loved ones, who may be either living or dead (Castle 1995, 123). She relates the process to both an "obsession with the internalized images of other people" (ibid., 125) and the infantile stage of development, "at which we did not fully distinguish individuals from one another, or recognize other people as wholly separate beings" (ibid., 128). In the novels of Radcliffe, the boundaries between life and death break down, and "the dead seem to 'live' again, while conversely, the living 'haunt' the mind's eye in the manner of ghosts" (ibid., 129).

A similar process occurs in *Salt Rain*, in which Allie undergoes a kind of wilful possession by her missing mother's spectre. She strongly resembles Mae, to the extent that locals half-believe Mae's ghost has returned. In an attempt to conjure her mother, Allie deliberately wears Mae's clothes and repeats her actions, finally even seducing Saul, a man she believes might be her father. Frequently, mother and daughter are conflated. Saul recalls "the feel of Allie's body. And Mae's body. Their flesh, their softness, their hair" (Armstrong 2004, 171). In *Darkness*, Rachel is also haunted by her own mother, as Rachel is herself the daughter of a missing woman. Her mother, having probably conceived Rachel as the result of being raped, fled her family home in Queensland to raise her daughter in Sydney. Rachel's hair is black streaked with startling strands of red, inherited from her mother, as if she is two people, as if her mother's ghost lives on in her. And like Allie, she repeats her mother's actions, though unwillingly, finding herself trapped in and then fleeing from an abusive relationship with a man old enough to be her father, and who had, moreover, previously been pursuing her mother.

Besides ghostliness, other images of death and the undead characterise both Rachel and Mae. In *Salt Rain*, Allie imagines her mother as a vampire. She and Mae both have a crooked canine; "Our vampire tooth" (Armstrong 2004, 44) Mae calls it, blurring the boundaries between mother and daughter. Piatti-Farnell writes that the "potential dissolution of and defiance of borders, or the inability to even identify those

borders as existing in the first place, is what marks the body of the vampire as different" (2014b, 52). Allie recalls Mae gently biting her neck, imprinting her with the tooth's mark. She used to watch Mae sleep, imagining her in the vampire's state of undeath, searching "for the flicker of a pulse at her neck, a sign that the heart was still urging the blood around her body" (Armstrong 2004, 44). Likewise, descriptions of Rachel frequently evoke the image of the zombie. She has an air of vacancy and her face is described as being "still, like a mask" (Cole 2012, 66). She tells Vince that she is unable to feel, "Like I'm numb on the inside" (ibid., 142). She walks with a slow, aimless step and her eyes are alternately "bottomless" (ibid., 66), "glazed" (ibid., 22), and animalistic (ibid., 3). Her doctor recalls another victim of domestic violence he has treated: "[S]he still couldn't taste anything six months later. Her hair stopped growing. Fingernails too. It's like everything goes into shutdown" (ibid., 59). Rachel, too, is unable to taste anything. Whether as a result of domestic violence, grief over the death of her child, or her liminal state as a missing person, she has entered a state of suspended animation, as if she is undead.

For the first forty pages of the novel, Rachel doesn't even have a name. Shock has rendered her unable to speak, and she isn't carrying any identification. She has no belongings and is forced to wear borrowed clothes. She is a woman without an identity, a non-person. Of the liminal subject in rites of passage, Turner writes that "often their very names are taken from them" (Turner 1964, 48) and that it is "characteristic of transitional beings that they have nothing" (ibid., 49). Mae, too, is in a condition of "sacred poverty" (ibid., 48) when she disappears; she is swimming completely naked. The state of nakedness, Turner reminds us, is "at once the mark of a newborn infant and a corpse prepared for burial" (ibid., 49).

The Liminal Subject and Hybridity

Both Mae and Rachel are also portrayed via hybrid imagery, particularly that of the mermaid. Vince, seeing Rachel in the bath with her broken arm wrapped up in plastic, thinks she is like "a beautiful, maimed mermaid" (Cole 2012, 34). A man who sees Mae a moment before she drowns thinks he's seen "a mermaid floating on the swell" (Armstrong 2004, 151). Rather than accept the reality of her mother's drowning, Allie instead imagines her transformed into a hybrid creature that is only part human: "Mae's skin would be silvery scales now, seaweed and fish tangled in her hair. [...] Mae was long gone, fast and lithe through the water with her muscular mermaid's tail" (ibid., 154). This description recalls Pierce's reading of Gemmy in *Remembering Babylon*. Pierce quotes the moment the Aborigines first see Gemmy: he is "half-child, half-seacalf, his hair swarming with spirits in the shape of tiny phosphorescent crabs, his mouth stopped with coral" (Malouf in Pierce 1999, 148). Pierce reads this state of hybridity as a marker that Gemmy is "freed from history and the particularity of his origins, in a state of metamorphosis, half a creature of the land, half of the sea; half human, half animal" (Pierce 1999, 148). This same state of hybridity attends him when he returns to European civilisation, where he is considered racially tainted (ibid.). Feared and reviled, he is separated from the rest of society and sent to live on the outskirts of town. Gemmy – like Rachel and Mae – occupies the same state as Turner's

liminal, transitional subject: both no longer categorised and not yet categorised, a state that can be captured only through metaphors of hybridity (or pollution) and death.

Pollution, Transition, and Transformation

Like Gemmy, Rachel and Mae exercise a kind of polluting influence over others. Through both their presences and their absences, they render the lives of those around them uncanny. Mae's disappearance causes Allie to feel that she is herself 'going missing'. She is reluctant to accompany her aunt back to the family farm in the hinterland because, she says, if Mae returns, "The house will be empty. How will she know where I am?" (Armstrong 2004, 5). Rachel's 'taint' is inscribed on her body. She emits a strange smell of cabbage from the leaves she wears down her shirt to relieve mastitis; her breasts continue to leak milk for her dead baby. His ghost, she explains, calls it forth. When Rachel's ex-boyfriend finally finds her, he says her disappearance made him feel like he "never even happened" (Cole 2012, 304); it rendered him ghostly to himself.

Ultimately, both Mae and Rachel complete their transition through liminal space. Mae's ghost is metaphorically laid to rest when Allie discovers the secret behind her parentage and the underlying reason for her mother's suicide. The sense of closure is expressed in the same liminal terms of going 'under water' as Allie's entrance into the liminal space of the hinterland at the start of the novel. Allie and her aunt Julia swim every day in the creek. No longer menacing, as it was when it flooded and threatened the boundaries of the house, the creek is now a site of healing. The water, Allie says, tastes less bitter every day, because there is "less grief" (Armstrong 2004, 217) leaking into it. The creek carries away the boards of the dismantled barn, the Gothic secret or closed room (Kahane 1985, 334; Aguirre 1990, 112) in which Mae's father committed his acts of incestuous rape, and Allie was conceived. In *Darkness*, Vince's mother locates Rachel's grandparents in Queensland, restoring Rachel to her family and thus restoring, also, her sense of identity. Vince realises that "with somewhere else to go, [Rachel is] free" (Cole 2012, 295). Where earlier, Vince sees Rachel sleeping "wrapped up in the doona like a caterpillar" (ibid., 136), cocooned in liminal stasis, she is now associated with the butterflies Gemma draws on her cast (ibid., 248), a metaphor of regeneration and rebirth. To Gemma's eyes, Rachel is like a bird, "luminous somehow. Fragile and wounded but still pulsing with life (ibid., 317). Rachel is no longer trapped in stasis in the liminal state: she has a new life, a new identity. When she runs away to begin this new life, however, she leaves Vince in a state of liminality. Gemma observes that "his face look[s] blurred, its edges dissolving" (ibid., 324), as if he has been contaminated by his proximity to Rachel's liminality.

Conclusion

Both *Salt Rain* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* make use of the language and conventions of the Gothic to articulate the uncertainties and ambiguities that arise when a person goes missing. In both these novels, the missing person is represented

as a liminal, undead figure and metaphorically aligned with the vampire, zombie, ghost, and mermaid. Although Australian lost child and missing person texts have not previously been read as part of an Australian Gothic tradition, nor the hinterland generally considered a potentially Gothic landscape, the treatment of both the missing person and the northern New South Wales hinterland in *Salt Rain* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* suggests that a re-evaluation of lost child and missing person texts and a broader consideration of the landscapes of Australian Gothic are required. Turner's theory of liminality as a transitional state associated with metaphors of death, hybridity, and rebirth remains highly relevant in this context as a means of articulating figures such as the missing person, who might otherwise remain unrepresentable in such narratives.

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Six Feet Under: A Gothic Reading of Liminality, Death and Grief

ABSTRACT

*Death is no longer considered a social taboo. News coverage reports death on a daily basis. Literature, art, film, and television have a long history of portraying death. Disciplines ranging from anthropology, sociology, and social welfare conceptualise death at an individual and community level in terms of ritual and power. Yet, how death and grief are performed is still largely shaped by social conventions. The critically-acclaimed HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) uses Gothic tropes to challenge many of the social conventions that shape how individuals perform death and grief. Set in a Los Angeles funeral home run by the Fisher family, death is voiced by the episodic dead, while the complexities of grief are voiced by the families who come to the funeral home to arrange burial services. The Fishers themselves experience death and grief in the pilot episode. At each turn, normative understandings of how death and grief are performed are challenged. While there are conventional Gothic tropes evident in *Six Feet Under*, notably the dead occupying liminal spaces, it is via a California Gothic trope that the fragility of the American middle class family and its precarious existence in the dystopian American suburb is explored, underpinning the discursive power of the series.*

Keywords: *Six Feet Under*, liminality, grief, death, California Gothic

California Gothic and Tropes in *Six Feet Under*

Death is no longer considered a social taboo. While news coverage reports death on a daily basis, literature, art, film, and television have a long history of portraying death. Disciplines ranging from anthropology, sociology, and social welfare conceptualise death at an individual and community level in terms of ritual and power. Yet, how death and grief are performed is still largely shaped by social conventions. The critically-acclaimed HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), uses Gothic tropes to challenge many of the social conventions that shape how individuals perform death and grief.

As a drama set in a funeral home, death, the dead, and burials emphasize the Gothic nature of *Six Feet Under*. The funeral home portrayed is also the Fisher family home, making the series also a family drama. Set in Los Angeles, “the world capital of the denial of death” (Fahey 2013, ix), not only are the Gothic tendencies toward parody evident but this location also sites *Six Feet Under* in the genre of California Gothic. For Martin and Savoy (1998) and Crow (2014), two of the central tropes of California Gothic are the Americanised version of the haunted house and the dysfunctional and under-threat suburban middle class. While the haunted house is a trope of British and European Gothic that symbolises the ‘space’ within which horror occurs as entrapment, entombment, confinement, or madness, in the American Gothic the house symbolises the very ‘location’ of American anxiety. When located in California, the haunted house trope is reworked to symbolise the threat faced by its occupants from its own dysfunction or from external forces. Those outside are framed as the racial or sexual ‘Other’ or larger forces such as corrupt governments, environmental disaster, or economic ruin. Edwards (2016) considers that space and location have always been central determinants in understanding Gothic literature and culture. For those with a home, and particularly those with a suburban home, that house represents the success of the American Dream. However, the cost of this home is the American project of imperial nation building, achieved via slavery and frontier genocide. The American home, therefore, in American Gothic is the very ‘location’ of anxiety. With the haunted house being transposed into the suburban home, American Gothic seeks to expose, or make visible, the domestic, economic, and social ideology of American nationhood. The American home therefore also fits neatly into the genre of American Suburban Gothic where the home is not only the location, but also the cause of horror. Murphy (2009, 3) explains that the threat and horror of the American home comes from within, not without, where the home is the “claustrophobic breeding ground for dysfunctionality and abuse”.

In its more recent incarnations in the post-War period of increasing consumerism and changing social roles, American Gothic has taken the trope of the suburban home and framed it as what could be termed ‘an overdetermined model of the home’. That is, the modern suburban American home in American Gothic is juxtaposed to lampoon the ‘homeliness’ propagated in American family drama and soap opera. This is particularly evident when coupled with the other trait of American Gothic: that of the declining plight of the American middle class (Smith

2013, 163). Wheatley (2006, 201) considers that when the haunted house-suburban home trope is combined with fears of the declining middle class, the Suburban Gothic trope of American Gothic is replaced with more geo-specific generic conventions. One of the most notable is California Gothic. For Wheatley (2006, 201), the Californian family is particularly “haunted, tortured or troubled” from both internal dysfunction and external socio-political threats. The menace of internal and external forces is one narrative that sets California Gothic apart from Suburban Gothic and the broader generic conventions of American Gothic (Murphy 2009, 3-4).

The haunted house is often represented as having a particular architectural style with a labyrinth of basement rooms in which people are entombed or trapped, often for eternity. While the Fisher home is not represented as physically haunted, it does contain the bodies of the dead who for a liminal period are contained within the embalming and funeral rooms of the Fisher home. The plight of the middle class family living in violent and decaying suburbs is a trope specific to California Gothic (Bailey 1999). Two examples of this are noted in *Six Feet Under*: David is attacked and brutalised and Nate’s wife is murdered. That such violence is experienced in what should be the safe suburbs of America is not only a central theme of American Gothic, but is used by both American and California Gothic writers to make visible the hypocrisy of the American Dream (Coghlan 2016). It is here that key tropes of California Gothic are particularly evident: the re-worked haunted-suburban home and the threats posed to it from within and without.

Gothic texts have historically allowed writers to make the invisible become visible (Lloyd-Smith 2004). *Six Feet Under* allows the dead to become visible for audiences. More so, the fears and even, at times, relief felt by the dead are portrayed, allowing a narrative to emerge within which audiences can engage with diverse perspectives on death. By showing different ways death is experienced, no one normative understanding of death is validated. In this way, dominant social conventions of death are challenged and possibly disrupted. An example of this is the appearance of the family patriarch, Nathaniel Senior, at his own funeral, dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and mocking sentimentality. This allows audiences to more meaningfully engage with complex views about death. The regular reappearances of Nathaniel through the series also allow his family’s grief to move from what could also be considered as invisible, or hidden, to visible and expressed. Over numerous appearances and engagements between Nathaniel and each member of the Fisher family, their grief is able to be expressed. This grief ranges from sadness and anger to resentment and acceptance. With grief made visible, *Six Feet Under* thus offers a set of frames and narratives within which audiences are exposed to the myriad range of emotions that accompany grief. With both the dead and grief becoming visible, *Six Feet Under* presents alternative ways that death and grief can be performed. Performance in this sense, is that of the Butlerian view that there exists in society a “forced reiteration of norms” (Butler as cited in Salih 2004, 344). This means that how we act in terms of gender, sexuality, and emotion is shaped by social norms rather than an independent self-expression of gender, sexual, or emotional freedom.

We assert that *Six Feet Under* is a Gothic text, but more in the tradition of American Gothic than British or European Gothic. British and European Gothic stories tend to be set in the decaying and haunted rural castles of the aristocracy, framing their moral corruption as the cause of the ruin of empires, families, and family fortunes (Lawrence 2008). The family remains central in American Gothic, sometimes positioned as morally corrupt because of its obsession with consumerism and celebrity, and sometimes positioned as suburban victims of a corrupt political metropolis (Luck 2014, 124-136). American Gothic re-images Gothic as a space of moral corruption but in a variety of historically and culturally specific geolocations: Southern Gothic, New England Gothic, Frontier Gothic and the like (Crow 2014). Central to *Six Feet Under* is California Gothic. Central tropes of California Gothic are the making visible of the violent and dysfunctional metropolis, complete with its consumerism obsessed, facile suburban middle class. In California Gothic, these two tropes are often conjoined to posit a dystopian future (Murphy 2009, 3-4). Apart from the geolocation of California Gothic, the genre is identifiable by its coupling of urban architecture, suburbanisation often confronted with anxiety or violence, threats to family units often from social or political factors, such as racial tension or corrupt governments likely leading to envitable dystopian future and, because of its locale, its narratives are often informed by Hollywood concepts of dreams, truth, reality, and fakery. Drawing on Crow's (2014) understanding of California Gothic, it is suggested that tropes of California Gothic can be found in the early Ridley Scott film, *Blade Runner* (1982) where a neo-noir retrofitted future provides a space for the juxtaposition of gleaming technology and cyborgs with a decaying city and an immoral hero (Magistrate 2011, 144-145). California Gothic is also evident in David Lynch's 2001 film *Mulholland Drive* where death, dreams, identity, reality, illusion, and truth are variously made visible and invisible (Lindop 2014). Both this neo-noir mystery and *Blade Runner* are set in Los Angeles. *Mulholland Drive* shares California Gothic tropes with the 2010 film *Inception* with dreams and identities counter-posed against the unstable Los Angeles metropolis (Redling 2015, 189-190). The television series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015-) and the film *Terminator Genisys* (2015) both posit an apocalyptic Californian future, the latter also dealing with time and memory. The 2015 film *The Gift* examines the inauthenticity of inhabitants in a middle class Californian suburb whereas the 2008 film *Already Dead* deals with the visible and psychological dangers faced by a suburban family. The 1998 film *The Truman Show* is a good example of how California Gothic aims to make visible America's obsession with consumerism and celebrity (Peters 2016). Edin Lepucki's 2014 novel *California* sees a pregnant couple leave the crumbling metropolis of Los Angeles only to find themselves in a small Californian town that is dark and paranoid, with a secret past.

A central theme in California Gothic is the "locus of horror, violence and corruption" found in the modern city and more so in its suburban homes (Botting 2014, 105). Themes of a decaying city, suburban violence and fakery, vulnerable and dysfunctional middle class families, and consumerist obsessions, are tropes variously found in *Six Feet Under*. In this way, via the auteurship of Alan Ball, the Fisher family make visible many of the concerns of California Gothic. A discussion of how liminality, grief and death function as Gothic devices in *Six Feet Under* can

therefore inform a better understanding of California Gothic tropes as well as how television can challenge normative social conventions about performing death and grief.

***Six Feet Under*: Setting and Storylines**

The television series *Six Feet Under* is set in an independent, family-run funeral home in a middle-class Los Angeles suburb. Each episode begins with the events leading up to a death, often occurring in uncanny circumstances, but sometimes from old age or illness. Arriving at the Fisher family funeral home, the dead are embalmed and prepared for burial, sometimes requiring facial or body reconstructions. An actual large Queen Anne style house known as the Auguste Marquis Residence (LDCP 2016) is a central location for the series. This is an incongruous architectural style for the Los Angeles region, and provides an instant evocation of California Gothic each time it appears in the establishing shots introducing the storyline for the episode.

The grieving families of the deceased attend the Fisher funeral home to make burial arrangements. The embalming and reconstruction is done in the Fisher's basement with the funeral service conducted on the ground floor. The Fisher family live on the first floor. With the exception of the patriarch Nathaniel (Richard Jenkins), in each episode the dead speak and move between the basement and the ground floor, sometimes attending their own funeral services. The dead do not appear as ghost-like, rather they appear as they were in life. Sometimes their injuries or embalming scars are visible but they are not overly wan, repulsive, or otherwise designed to shock. The dead speak to Fisher son David (Michael J. Hall) and his older brother Nate (Peter Krause) only in the liminal period between their death and their funeral service. During this period, the dead speak freely articulating their own reactions to their deaths. Their reactions range from fear and uncertainty about what occurs next, to relief that life need no longer be endured. Once buried, these episodic dead are no longer seen or heard.

The families of the episodic dead share their grief with Nate and David, as well as with Rico (Freddy Rodriguez), a reconstruction artist and embalmer employed by the Fisher family. Just as a variety of emotions are experienced by the episodic dead, the grieving families express vastly different and often complex emotional responses to death. It is in the coupling of hearing and seeing the dead with their families' grief that *Six Feet Under* challenges normative understandings of how death and grief are performed. Adding a layer of complexity to this is the ongoing grief the Fisher family themselves experience for Nathaniel, the family patriarch who is killed in the opening minutes of the pilot episode. This storyline of their grief runs across the series, providing audiences with not only a representation of intimate experiences of grief but also with its changing states. Nathaniel's reappearances to each of the family members: his wife Ruth (Francis Conroy), Nate and David, and to daughter Claire (Lauren Ambrose) act to reveal how grief is experienced differently by each member of the family. Kubler-Ross defined the five stages of grief in the best known model (1969). In *Six Feet Under*, we see these stages

acted out through the actions of the principal characters grieving Nathaniel who becomes the embodiment of grief enacted. He functions in the narrative the way grief does, appearing unexpectedly and often as an unwanted presence.

The grief experienced by each member of the Fisher family is bound up with their memories of Nathaniel. For wife Ruth, her grief relates to her guilt about an extra-marital affair. For Nate, his grief is bound up in his realisations that he did not know the truth about his father. For David, his grief is a mix of his belief that his father did not respect his work and his hidden homosexuality. For Claire, her grief is a longing for closeness with her father. Claire's grief is further compounded by the death of her boyfriend, Gabe (Eric Balfour). While Nathaniel appears to each member of the Fisher family as life-like, at home and in public spaces and sometimes in dream-like sequences, Gabe only appears to Claire in her dreams. The backdrop of Nathaniel's appearances is the California Gothic landscape, with tall palm trees lined up behind ornate black hearses at lawn cemeteries, peppered with solid marble headstones. Nathaniel often appears dressed in a bright Hawaiian shirt, sipping from a colourful cocktail, underscoring the series' acknowledgement of the juxtapositions at play in this California Gothic drama. The nature and space within which Nathaniel and Gabe appear also provide multiple perspectives on how the living can image the dead: either as in a heavenly state or as living among the grieving.

Representations of Grief in *Six Feet Under*

Grief has been described as a defined presence (Ellet 2013). This is expressed in *Six Feet Under* by the episodic dead taking on a living form and speaking to the living. The living speak back and, in doing so, give their grief words, enacting it for the audience. Grief is evoked verbally, physically, and emotionally, the experience brought to life by the characters with dramatic and sometimes humorous effect. This mirrors the expression of grief by the bereaved as a corporeal manifestation, described in words like substantial, solid, and intrusive. Grief has been described as "the price we pay for love" by Queen Elizabeth II of England (Sapsted et al 2001) and by poets and the bereaved alike as something with corporeal mass. We see this in the work of Mary Oliver, who describes grief as a "heart-load for each of us" (2008, 15), reminiscent of Dickinson, who "measure(s) every Grief", sizing it up, to "wonder if It weighs like mine/or has an easier size" (1994, 27).

Grief is a normal and natural act (Kübler-Ross, 2003) but is depicted in *Six Feet Under* as an uncomfortable experience. David, the more conservative of the Fisher brothers in *Six Feet Under*, regularly escorts the weeping and distressed bereaved away from public view. Culturally and critically, Western society demands grieving to be conducted in private and for set periods. Andrew Riemer, for instance, reprimanded writer Joan Didion for exposing her season of grief to the world (2011). This translates into bureaucratic expectations: in Australia, the prescribed period set by the Fair Work Ombudsman for leave for mourning is two days. This is a day short of the requirement by Orthodox Christians to mourn their dead on the third

day after death. This observation occurs again on the ninth and fortieth day after death (Thyateira, 2015), in an initial mourning period lasting 40 days. Chinese mourners grieve for 100 days. Kaddish is said for eleven months in Judaism. In Edwardian times, mourning garments were worn by the bereaved for up to six years (Holland, 2014). These practices acknowledge the length of time mourning takes, and the lasting impact of grief. However, in more recent depictions and practices related to grief, we see a codified admonishment of grief taking more than arbitrarily set periods.

Before the psychological language of grief emerged, and since, many have laid claim to the fact of grief being wordless (Atchley, 2004), or mute (Wittgenstein 2001, 33), with an experience of mental pain that is like a wordless sense of self-rupture (Akhtar, 2000). Despite Kubler-Ross providing guidance for the grieving through her articulation of a series of stages, grief often defies reason and order. Grief is raw, unkempt and reckless, frightening in its ferocity. It is animalistic and primal (Addison 2001, 14). This is demonstrated in Nate's expression of grief at his father's funeral in the pilot episode, which sets the tone for his ongoing battle with the social mores surrounding grieving. Nate rails against the restrictions and euphemisms surrounding death and grieving that writers like Mitford (2000) and Waugh (1948) wrote about, exposing the funeral industry's commodification of grieving and changing society in the process. At Nathaniel's funeral, Nate is handed a salt shaker to sprinkle the symbolic dirt on his father's casket. The following is Nate's reaction as he bends and picks up a handful of dirt.

Nate: No! I refuse to sanitise this anymore.

David: This is how it's done.

Nate: Yeah well it's wacked. What is this stupid salt shaker? What is this hermetically sealed box? What is this phoney Astroturf around the grave? Jesus David it's like surgery, clean, antiseptic. Business. He was our father ...

David: Please don't do this.

Nate: You pump him full of chemicals. You can put makeup on him and you can prop him up for a nap in the slumber room. But the fact remains David that the only father we are ever going to have is gone. Forever. And that sucks. But it's a God-damn part of life and you can't really accept it without getting your hands dirty. Well I do accept it and I intend to honour the old bastard by letting the whole world see just how fucked up and shitty I feel that he's dead. (Episode 1, Season 1)

In our society, acts of grief can be moderated by experts and industry professionals, as represented by David in the above *mise-en-scene*. The language surrounding grief insists that grief itself has an end, and will eventually resolve. This is demonstrated in the final stages of the Kubler-Ross model of the grieving process, where "acceptance" means "closure" or "detachment from the dead" (Jalland 2005, 355). In *Six Feet Under*, the act of closure can mean a more visceral experience, as when Nate's grief above is then echoed by his mother with guttural anguish, meeting Atchley's (2004, 335) claim that "without a loss of language ... there is no

mourning". The mourning period that follows is in line with the Derridean view that the act of mourning is a way to recover and revisit the past, but also as a kind of Derridean "impossible bereavement". The reappearance of the dead Nathaniel speaks to this ongoing grieving.

Derrida's work on mourning can be used to read *Six Feet Under*, particularly his description of "impossible bereavement" where the "only possible way to mourn is to be unable to do so" (Reynolds 2010), owing to the dichotomous relationship between the self and other (Derrida 1989). Derrida also suffers the difficulties of finding words for grief, but does, delivering a eulogy for Althusser (Derrida 2001, 114) and, in doing so, giving his grief words (Henderson 2009, 3). It is noted that in each entry in *The Work of Mourning*, "almost every piece begins with the impossibility of speaking or saying or meaning" but, then, "each one ... evoke[s] memories, relationships and the spirit of endurance" (Derrida 2001, 3). The episodic dead in *Six Feet Under* bridge this gap, appearing to the characters who own Fisher and Son's funeral home in a physical representation of the *apophenia* many bereaved experience. William Gibson defines *apophenia* as "the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things" (Graham 2003) and those experiencing *apophenia* exhibit a tendency to make connections between events where there are none (Conrad 1958). This occurs when the dead appear to the living in different forms, in a meaningful song, via a significant bird, or through seemingly uncanny incidences (Arnold 2010). In *Six Feet Under*, the anguish of bereavement is depicted as a kind of psychosis, a fugue state with very little rationality. This depiction of grief is raw and authentic, and provides an insight into the experience.

Liminality, Grief and Death in *Six Feet Under*

The themes of death and the dead, the house that entombs the dead, suburban violence and moral decay, and liminal appearances by the dead, are all themes of California Gothic (Merck 2005, 60). Liminality is a common trope in California Gothic as well as in British and European Gothic. Liminal representations of death in Gothic texts tend to frame the dead as ghosts or apparitions, sometimes as gruesome or hideous (Baker 2014). *Six Feet Under* mirrors trends in more recent American Gothic literature where the dead are seen as naturalistically life-like and not "corpse-like" (Ni Fblainn 2014, 140). It is reasonable to suppose that audiences are more likely to engage with complex narratives pertaining to death when the dead are represented as life-like and not fear-provoking. Because of the life-like representations of the dead, even when the dead are shown in *Six Feet Under* with injuries or embalming scars, Nate, David, and Rico show no fear or trepidation and converse with the episodic dead in everyday conversation. Not only do they not show repulsion, but Nate, David, and Rico often show little sympathy for the dead's fears. Dialogue between Nate and a young footballer, Joshua (Page Kennedy) who has died during a football tryout from heat stroke, is illustrative of this.

Joshua: I'm scared. What's going to happen to me now?

Nate: Well that's not my problem pal ...

Joshua: I was so young. Why me?

Nate: Why the fuck not you ... do you think you were immune to this? Everybody dies. Everybody. What makes you so special? (Episode 2, Season 2)

Joshua isn't shown as gruesome or hideous, rather his narrative is one that points to his humanity, and the emotion he feels due to his situation. His comments are unbound by social conventions, a point elaborated further in this discussion. Nate's response can be read as cynical, but is, more likely, indicative of his own grief for his father. How the scene is played out means audiences might empathise with the theme that death is unfair but grief, in this sense, has robbed Nate of his ability to empathise. In most instances Nate, David, and Rico do not know the dead they are preparing for burial. Hence, their conversations with the episodic dead generally lack compassion. Initially, in Nate and David's conversations with their recently deceased father, there is also a lack of empathy, however, as the series evolves their father's life becomes more visible and, as a result, Nate and David become more benevolent towards Nathaniel.

The use of liminal spaces allows these understandings of death and grief to emerge. Akass and McCabe (2005, 15) indicate the way liminal spaces free the living and the dead from social boundaries that act to repress how death and grief are talked about.

A good funeral, like a good poem, is driven by voices, images, intellections and the permanent. It moves us up and back the cognitive and imaginative and emotive register. The transport seems effortless, inspired, natural as breathing or the loss of it. In the space between what is said and unsaid, in the pause between utterance, whole histories are told; whole galaxies glimpsed in the margins, if only momentarily... Good poems and good funerals are stories well told (ibid.).

The space referred to by Akass and McCabe above is that of the liminal, a key concept in the Gothic. Liminality, from the Latin *limen*, meaning entrance or threshold, signifies an "opening between the world of living humans and other worlds" (Klass 1995, 244-245). In this case, liminal space is not just a philosophical juxtaposition of life and death. It is a socio-cultural space within which there are no social boundaries. This lack of social boundaries means that "conventional propriety and the politeness of everyday life" do not exist. Gothic texts use this space to allow the dead to "utter uncomfortable truths" (Turnock 2005, 44), and this is what occurs in *Six Feet Under*. The episodic dead appear in each episode in a liminal space, freed from social conventions and demonstrating this in their language, dress, and behaviour. They can speak freely about their own deaths in ways that shock and challenge the living. In the following dialogue, for instance, Nathaniel tells Claire of his relief in being dead. Social conventions suggest a father would not likely share his desire to be dead with his child. Yet in a liminal space, where there are no boundaries, truth can be made visible.

Claire: You're really lucky, you know that.

Nathaniel: You're kidding. It was over in a second. I didn't have to be afraid of it. I didn't have to think about it.

Claire: No more bullshit.

Nathaniel: No more responsibility.

Claire: No more having to care.

Nathaniel: No more boredom.

Claire: No more waiting to die. (Episode 1, Season 1)

This demonstrates the unique position the dead occupy in this series, not only feeling a freedom from societal constraints, but expressing this in a way to which the living respond with envy.

This utilisation of a sense of liminality in *Six Feet Under* posits that in liminal spaces anything and everything is possible because the "normal rules are suspended" (Akass and McCabe 2005, 11). The dead can say what they wish, as seen in the above example of Nathaniel's confession to Claire. The device of Nathaniel's reappearances also means that this liminality provides a means for him to continue to make truth visible. Nathaniel's ongoing liminal appearances allow him to continue to speak freely, without social constraint, most notably to Nate and David. While Nate and David see their conversations with Nathaniel as those of judgement and admonishment, it is more a case of Nathaniel making truths about himself visible in ways that allow Nate and David to explore, and ultimately resolve, their own grief. In a conversation between Nathaniel and David after he has been brutalised in a violent attack, Nathaniel allows David to consider the simplicity of life, countering David's need to understand the complexity of it.

Nathaniel: Don't give me this phony existential bullshit. I expect better from you. The point's right in front of your face.

David: Well I'm sorry but I don't see it.

Nathaniel: You're not even grateful are you?

David: Grateful for the worst fucking experience of my life?

Nathaniel: You hang onto your pain like it means something. Like its worth something. Well let me tell you it's not worth shit. Let it go. Infinite possibilities and all he can do is whine.

David: What am I supposed to do?

Nathaniel: What do you think ... You can do anything you like you lucky bastard, you're alive. What is a little pain compared to that.

David: It can't be so simple.

Nathaniel: What if it is? (Episode 12, Season 4)

In the two above examples of conversations, firstly between Nathaniel and Claire and then between Nathaniel and David, a sense of liminality is central in allowing audiences to both imagine death and examine their own feelings of grief in highly individualised ways that posit the multiple and complex ways that death and grief

are performed. No one frame or narrative is validated over the other, furthering a view that there is no one social convention that should shape the meanings and experiences of death and grief.

By making the dead the central characters within these liminal spaces, *Six Feet Under* provides audiences with multiple perspectives about what death can mean existentially, emotionally, and spiritually. This space, lacking normal social boundaries, allows “everything” and “anything” to be possible (Lynch 2005, 215). For Alan Ball, the positioning of the dead in a liminal space is a device which reinforces the central theme of *Six Feet Under*: we are all going to die. This, argues Lavery (2005, 27), is the surprisingly simple narrative thread that drives *Six Feet Under*. Ball takes “something everybody knows – we are all going to die – and calmly repeats, with a surprising lack of morbidity and next to no moralising, until everybody understands – we’re all going to die”. By examining multiple responses to death, *Six Feet Under* posits that there is no one normative view about what death is, or how it should respond to it, rather death and grief will be experienced differently by us all and no one mode or convention has more social value than another.

In this way, representations of death in popular culture can function to address anxieties about death. Similarly, representations about grief can be informative. For Schmid (2005, 19) such representations serve an important social function in managing anxieties and can prove cathartic. While the families of the episodic dead provide multiple representations of grief, it is the ongoing grief experienced by the Fisher family that reveals the complexity of grief. The liminal reappearances of Nathaniel act as a device to show the changing nature of grief and challenge many of the social conventions that shape how grief is performed. This is the value of *Six Feet Under* in examining grief and death.

The Living and Dead Speak

For Tagore (1913), death does not taint life, rather, death and life co-exist. In *Six Feet Under*, the dead are entwined in the lives of the living and the series explores multiple ways in which the dead and the living co-exist. In examining representations of death in *Six Feet Under*, this article asks what the conversations between the dead and the living signify about how the dead are conceptualised. What do the dead offer the living? Or, perhaps, what do the living look to the dead for? Nathaniel’s death and his liminal reappearances in subsequent episodes are insightful in considering these questions.

While some of the Fisher family members converse with other episodic dead in the period of liminality between death and funeral, the conversations and contacts between Nathaniel and each of the members of the Fisher family function differently. The interactions between Nathaniel and his family rely on shared familial memories, an element common to California Gothic. Yet, the interactions between those who engage with the bodies during the period of liminality (notably

Nate, David, and to a lesser extent Rico) have mostly no familiar relations or memory, real or imagined, with the episodic dead. In these instances, the only memories shared are by those known by the dead. Yet, repeated flashbacks are used in *Six Feet Under* to narrate both remembered and imagined memory scenes between Nathaniel and his family. These are informative in understanding the relationship between the living and the dead. Examples of memory are, for instance, shared of the young Fisher family playing in the front yard of the family business. Scenes like this are juxtaposed with the discovery by Nate of a secret room kept by Nathaniel. Here the Gothic trope of making the invisible become visible is evident. In this room Nate imagines possible scenarios of his father having sex, shooting at passers-by, and taking drugs. When family members have flashbacks of memories shared with the deceased, does that contact signify mourning? Sifting through memories and imagining possibilities about the deceased is part of the process of what Worden (1991) refers to as coming to terms with the reality of the loss.

Neimeyer (2009) states that we recoil from death, we avoid it. *Six Feet Under* challenges the idea that we shun the dead. It shows the subtle, yet influential ways in which connections between the living and dead continue in a California Gothic setting, using key elements of the genre to deliver the message to the viewer.

Conclusion

Alan Ball's *Six Feet Under* is a provocative and insightful text that acts to challenge how death and grief is understood, practiced, and performed. This article has demonstrated how Alan Ball has taken Gothic tropes of liminality, dead and undead bodies, and burials, and woven them into a particularly California Gothic text that focuses on how one family responds to, engages with, and finally comes to terms with death. Via the appearances of Nathaniel, each member of the Fisher family examines their own grief and arguably benefits from the experience. As the series follows the life of each family member, grief is experienced as ongoing although ultimately accepted. In the final episode of the series, each member of the Fisher family (as well as their spouses) die. David, Nate, Claire, and Ruth, particularly, appear calm as they face their own deaths.

While the episodic dead provide multiple representations of death and grief which are informative, it is the individuals of the Fisher family and their various lives in Los Angeles, surrounded by death, violence, dysfunction, drugs, consumerism, and an uncertain future, who inform how this California Gothic text challenges the performance of death and grief. While other popular culture products have featured death, the dead in periods of transition, and grief, rarely (if ever) have audiences been exposed to the human complexity that accompanies the realisations of death and living with grief in such a sustained manner. From fear and uncertainty to relief and calm, the dead and grieving in Ball's liminal spaces provide multiple representations of the emotions that we may experience when facing our own death. Not only is there a diversity of representations that posit how death may be faced, but the series' central theme that death is inevitable is also informative. In this way,

Six Feet Under not only contributes to the canon of California Gothic texts by using key Gothic concepts, informed by characterisation and interactivity between the dead and undead, but also makes a considerable contribution to the representation of death and grief in contemporary society.

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Murder Across the Board: Murder Boards as a Liminal Space for the Dead on Popular Television

ABSTRACT

*The murder board is a comparatively new phenomenon, and yet this tool has become an almost standard feature of crime fiction television series. The murder board, which this article argues is a Gothic-inspired storytelling device, comes in a variety of formats but, essentially, each board serves as a point of collaborative concentration; clues are assembled in a restricted space and offer investigators a focal point for the solving of a puzzle. Typically, the central component of the board is a photograph of the victim. Thus, the dead are positioned in an 'in-between' space: not directly engaging with investigators but, nevertheless, participating in a series of communications with those who stare intently at the board. It is this liminality, a central trope of the Gothic, that anchors this feature of crime fiction television in the tradition of the Gothic tale. This article explores – through three case studies: *Midsomer Murders* (1997–); *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008–); and *Castle* (2009–2016) – how the murder board is crafted, how it contributes to storytelling, and how the dead are given a temporary 'extension' to actively reside amongst the living via the threshold offered by these boards. Posthumous harm and murder boards is also discussed.*

Keywords: Murder Board, *Castle*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Murdoch Mysteries*, Liminality

The murder board – a large flat surface upon which clues and relevant criminal case materials are consolidated – is a comparatively new phenomenon in crime narratives. These boards are now seen within many crime television series and are a particularly popular motif in the televised police procedural. The pictorial nature of such boards,

which this article argues is a Gothic-inspired storytelling device, fits more easily into the frames of small and large screens than onto the pages of short stories and novels. The murder board also offers a visual shorthand; the opportunity to present, in a predictable way, significant amounts of important information in a single screen shot. This article looks at the murder board, and how these pictorial narratives adapted from ideas of Gothic fiction, today, have become an almost standard trope for televised versions of crime fiction's police procedural.

Murder boards come in a variety of formats: blackboards, pin boards, magnetic whiteboards and Perspex sheets. This flexibility of format fits well with the "highly unstable genre" that is the Gothic (Hogle 2008, 1) and how both the murder board and the Gothic can be adapted for a variety of audiences as demonstrated by their use in crime fiction and, especially, the police procedural sub-genre. There are, also, an increasing number of digitally driven boards that connect clues in a range of formats – from city maps to video footage – bringing together large data sets that are easily brought into view through touch screens. Yet, the purposes of all these boards, regardless of type, is the same. Essentially, boards operate as a point of collaborative concentration; clues are assembled in a restricted space, traditionally at a police station – making these a standard supplement to more familiar storytelling devices for the police procedural such those offered by the uniformed officer and plain-clothes detective.

Murder boards offer a sense of false-realism for they simultaneously offer hope but fail to offer a resolution; for all that is presented on a murder board, as part of a criminal investigation, there is much that remains hidden. This reflects the liminal nature of these boards and how, as a threshold space, they offer neither a complete truth nor a complete fiction. Yet, through these boards, viewers can feel a part of the investigative team as they review the case material from the same perspective as their favourite detectives. The idea of engaging with crime fiction and Gothic tropes in this way reinforces a general perception of "the Gothic as a 'mixed' genre, assembled, like Frankenstein's monster, out of other discourses" (Gamer 2002, 86). The boards that are offered for entertainment are a much more elaborate interpretation of boards utilised for non-fabricated cases. As retired detective and Professor of Criminal Justice, Tim Dees, explains:

One of the problems in creating one of these charts was that they took up a lot of room. Our detective bureau of maybe 25 officers had a single large bulletin board where such a chart could be posted, and there were often several major cases (plus numerous minor or routine cases) working at one time. The chart had to be covered most of the time, as a suspect or a friend of a suspect might see it and get a leg up on the investigation. All told, they weren't very practical. (2014, online)

Furthermore, as Dees notes, these boards – regardless of how humble or sophisticated they might be – serve to "reinforce the myth that detectives work on a single case at a time" (2014, online). The single case, however, is a crucial component of the crime

fiction formula. The formula, for what has become the world's largest genre (Knight 2010, x), whether on the screen or on the page, is very important for as John Cawelti has observed: "The formula provides a means for the rapid and efficient production of new works. [...] Thus, formulaic creators [including those working on television series] tend to be extremely prolific" (1977, 9).

One of the features of the formula for crime fiction is the dominant case. There are numerous examples of running plots that connect a series of novels, or a series of television episodes, but there is an expectation of at least some regular closure by readers and viewers. In *Castle*, discussed below, the dominant case is especially Gothic as Kate Beckett searches for her mother's killer over several seasons of the series – a type of plot that Claire Kahane has noted in her work on the Gothic as an "imposing structure", one that details how "a protagonist, typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the centre of a mystery" (1985, 334). To facilitate such closure, the vast majority of crime fiction works offer detectives who focus on one case at a time, in sharp contrast to the efforts of real-world investigators.

Some of the murder boards discussed here are neat and ordered, carefully structured composites of clues that reinforce a desire for social order. Other boards are built up over an extended period of time to reveal the worst humanity has to offer, indicative of a breakdown of basic social structures, such as the chaotic and crowded boards that feature in the first season of *True Detective* (2014). It is important to note that boards can also be put together in more private spaces. An excellent example of this type of board is the one created by Susan Gray in *The Bletchley Circle* (2012–2014), a former code breaker during World War II at the, now famous, Bletchley Park. After the war, Susan Gray marries, has children, and adopts a comparatively normal life. This normalcy is shattered when her code breaking skills allow her to identify the pattern of a serial killer murdering young women in London. Working on the case in secret, she constructs a board on the back of her dressing table mirror. These images show Gray as herself, ordinary housewife and mother on the reflective surface, in addition to her struggle for a different identity: a simple swivel action revealing a murder board and a competent crime-fighter. In this way, she engages in an "ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other" (Kahane 1985, 337), a battle Kahane observes as "at the centre of the Gothic structure" (*ibid.*, 337). Such a structure is difficult to resolve and residing on the threshold – of mother and other – torments the character for multiple seasons.

Fascinatingly, the simple swivel action of the mirror, that has a reflective surface on one side and the clues to catch a killer on the other, allows for a swift transition between her normal and secret lives. This murder board does not reveal the monster who is the serial killer (Murley 2008, 1), but rather foreshadows the appearance of the monster and so reinforces Gothic ideals around the monster in which these beasts "typically do not show themselves as fully formed monsters when they make their entry into the fictional worlds that resist them" (Ortiz-Robles 2015, 11). The mirror as motif is particularly important, for, as explored by René Berger: "The mirror is more than an object, more than an instrument; it is not limited to the

physical phenomenon of the reflection of rays of light; it sets into place a process of re-flexion, from the observer to the image and from the image to the observer” (1994, 116).

Berger goes on to suggest that the mirror, in essence, is a question of deciphering and of interrogation (116), moreover, the mirror – from Victorian Gothic to postcolonial Gothic – suggests that Gothic “fantasies, fears, and desires will mirror those of the times and of the people” (Wisker 2007, 414). It is argued here that both sides of the mirror – the reflective surface and the plain timber backing transformed into a murder board – offer reflections of the viewer physically and the viewer mentally. Interestingly, the boards in *The Bletchley Circle* become more traditional, and a more significant feature of the program, when more characters are required to consider them.

This article explores how the murder board is crafted, how it contributes to storytelling and how, through it, the dead are given a temporary ‘extension’ of life – an opportunity to be, again, amongst the living. This is, most obviously, a liminal space; a doorway that in some Gothic fictions is represented as offering a transit point for “ghosts, spectres, or monsters [...] to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully hidden from view” (Hogle 2002, 2). This offers an extension to those items traditionally addressed by Gothic studies, for, as noted by Lorna Piatti-Farnell, the Gothic is not, as is often assumed, “just about literature” (2014, i) but is about various forms of storytelling. In this view, the Gothic is a broad genre encompassing a range of narratives, “whatever form that narrative might take, in whatever cultural context” (ibid., ii).

The capacity of the Gothic as a genre to produce numerous narrative forms is demonstrated here through brief case studies of three crime television series: *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008–); *Midsomer Murders* (1997–); and *Castle* (2009–2016), and the discussion of the contribution a consideration of liminality can make to the Gothic trope of the “imprisoning structure” in which a protagonist finds themselves (Kahane 1985, 334). The murder board, despite its multitude of formats, remains a restrictive structure; the (usual) four sides of the board reminiscent of Gothic spaces of confinement such as the “secret room” (ibid.). These three series have been selected for their geographical diversity, their longevity, and their use of different types of murder boards that reveal how the Gothic trope of the liminal space slips easily into this type of narrative. In this way, using the Gothic, it is the intention of this work to highlight the power of the murder board, an under-researched tool of crime fiction storytelling, and explore the power the dead can wield – or at least maintain for a short period of time when thus represented. This work also addresses the role that these boards can play in inflicting posthumous harm.

The Case File: As Archive and Souvenir

Case files once dominated crime fiction textual works and their various celluloid adaptations. Such files were easily transferred from the realm of true crime: a world

where heavy filing cabinets, storing a seemingly never-ending supply of folders, held the records of murder cases and other crimes. Some of these case files are presented as an archive, while others are presented as a souvenir. Examples of case files as archives are found in the various repositories of police forces from around the world, while an example of the case file as souvenir is the scrapbook of Frank Fahy. Known by his colleagues as 'The Shadow' (Kelly 1954), Fahy worked as an undercover policeman in Sydney and collected newspaper clippings as well as photographs into a neat, personal collection that covered cases between 1920 and 1952 (State Library of New South Wales MLMSS 7198).

Case files have also been presented as entertainment. A notable example of this is the book by Dennis Wheatley, *Murder off Miami* (1936), which does not present as a crime fiction novel but as a crime fiction case to be solved by the reader. The book presents all the clues required to solve the crime. If these clues are carefully examined, the reader may compare their conclusions with the solution that is included in a sealed section at the back of the book. Some of the clues presented are facsimile documents, others are more tactile. The catalogue record for a copy of this work held in the Rare Books section of the State Library of NSW, notes: "Includes realia (hair, a match, piece of stained cloth) glued in" (State Library of New South Wales RB/DQ823.9/W557.2/1).

This article argues that the transition from various official files and personal albums, detailing criminals and their crimes, to the more open nature of the murder board is a reflection of an increased fear of crime. Liminality is emphasised through how such information can change format, morph, and transition in much the same way as the living can become the dead and re-emerge as "spectres, monsters, demons" or the other spiritual apparitions that dominate the Gothic canon (Botting 1996, 2). Exposed on these boards, murder and other crimes are no longer neatly contained or able to be hidden away. Fear of a multitude of violent acts, and the perpetrators of these, as noted by Dennis Loo, "reached unprecedented levels of public concern" – especially in the United States – in the 1960s (2009, 12). Crime fiction, in the formats of print and film, has been accused of taking these fears, and the suffering of victims, and cynically repackaging them as "popular entertainment" (James 2009, 164). The murder board can be seen as contributing to this exacerbation of fear as it brings evil out into the open: physically and symbolically shedding light on those events that can frighten us the most. Intriguingly, the genre of fiction in which it is popular simultaneously alleviates these fears, for many examples of crime fiction exemplify the notion of a "moral and benevolent universe" (ibid., 174) and, by extension, the idea of the restoration of justice. Televised images of the Gothic can be particularly potent in this regard as a "three-dimensional space [...that] reveals and reconstitutes an underlying link between fear and the manipulation of space around a human body" (Kavka 2002, 210). Readers and viewers demand such resolutions.

The Murder Board: A Gothic Motif

Typically, the central component of a murder board is an image of the victim, or

victims. Photographs of a murdered individual are often ones in which the victim is shown as a living person, well-groomed and full of life (despite the confines of a two-dimensional structure). Some programs will place photographs of the corpse, often mutilated, as a reminder of the focus of the investigation (which is often posited as a battle with the killer). In some examples both ante-mortem and post-mortem images are displayed, offering – through the juxtaposition of life and death – a further incentive to solve the crime. These images reinforce one of the core narratives of crime fiction: the competition between good and evil. Such photographs are often supplemented with timelines, arrows and other forms of connections, the trails of chalk and whiteboard markers implying Botting’s “horrors of the labyrinth” (2008, 81), and the confusion and fear the labyrinthine nature of a murder case can present to an investigation team, which cycle back to the Gothic text’s “labyrinthine qualities” (Fyhr 2003, 338). No case offers a straightforward path to the truth.

The dead, through their placement on the murder board, occupy a liminal, in-between space, not directly engaging with the living but, nevertheless, participating in a series of communications with the investigators who often stare, intently, at the board created for their latest case. In this manner, the murder board re-enacts stories that focus on the liminal while concurrently paying homage to the “standard Gothic device of portraits assuming life” (Botting 2008, 11). Although murder victims are not physically re-animated as a result of their placement on a murder board, they are positioned somewhere “between life and death” (Aguirre 2007, 229) in a way that allows for their, albeit passive, interaction with investigators. The dead also communicate with the other clues posted to the board such as location shots and those of possible weapons, forensic reports and, critically, mug shots and other photographs of suspects. Thus, the dead often continue to share the environment, for a short time at least, with their killer/s. Most importantly, however, the dead continue to converse with those investigating their murder.

Communing with the dead via such a mechanism, one that has been deliberately conceived and constructed, is less dramatic than the more overt supernatural activities found in classic Gothic texts, and certainly less problematic for employees of the State than using Ouija boards or engaging in séances, yet the murder board offers similar opportunities for the living to interact, meaningfully, with the dead. Moreover, the murder board examines a past event but, mobilising a Gothic strategy, concerns are “no longer projected on to the past but are relocated into the future” (Botting 2008, 156). As Catherine Spooner has pointed out in her work on Gothic fiction, crime, although committed in the past, “has continuing and visceral effects within the present” (2010, 245). This motif that can be traced back to the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (ibid.) and confirms the return of the past upon the present as “the narrative feature that most closely links Gothic and crime fiction” (ibid., 250). Murder boards, as liminal spaces, offer examples of how a range of popular literary texts and popular television programs, over recent decades, have offered “various ways in which the ordinary intersects and interacts with the extraordinary” (McGuire and Buchbinder 2010, 290). In another echo of traditional Gothic storytelling, such boards also address the power of fear and terror

through sequestering, symbolically at least, many of the horrors that frighten us the most. Much like the confinement of evil to the rundown household or the darkened forest, the murder board offers boundaries in which evil can be confined, identified, and (in many cases in crime fiction) overcome, when the murderer is identified and apprehended.

Murdoch Mysteries

Set in Toronto, Ontario, as the nineteenth century gives way to the twentieth, *Murdoch Mysteries* first aired in 2008 and is now in its ninth season. The series is dominated by the central characters: Detective William Murdoch, a conservative Roman Catholic with a talent for technological innovation; Inspector Thomas Brackenreid, a Boer War veteran who loves his job, his family and his whiskey; Constable George Crabtree, an enthusiastic, if overly-imaginative, assistant; and Dr Julia Ogden, a coroner with an interest in psychiatry. The murder boards in this series reflect the era in which the series is set and heavy, timber-framed blackboards are used. Chalk is deployed to draw crime scenes, write lists of names, construct maps, and to solve crime's ultimate puzzles: murders.

The primary setting is a large city, yet many episodes see Detective Murdoch and his companions venture into the wilderness, overtly recreating the north American "naturalistic Gothic fiction" of the eighteenth century (Worthington 2010, 17). The series is described as "forensic sleuthing in the age of invention" (DVD Cover Season 2: 2009), however, the technology utilised in the majority of contemporary crime fiction television series is not seen in *Murdoch Mysteries*, simply because such technology was not available at the historical point selected for the position of this program. Photographic processes, for example, are available but, as a comparatively recent invention in the late 1800s and early 1900s, is an expensive and time-consuming option and so not used for every investigation. This is in stark contrast to today's cases where photographic evidence is standard, though it should be noted that forensic clues are particularly important in this series and the murder board is regularly supplemented with physical evidence as well as three-dimensional boards presented as models of crime scenes. The regular adoption of new technologies capture how both crime fiction and Gothic fiction are genres that are reflexive and not bound to a single location or time period.

The murder boards within *Murdoch Mysteries* more closely reflect crime fiction's printed products: text is essential. The victim may not, for instance, be represented by a full colour photograph – today provided by a family member or friend, or supplied by a government agency via a copy of a driver's licence or a prison record – but is routinely identified by name. Here, nomenclature facilitates not only the identification of a victim but a connection to them, thus fulfilling a basic human need to identify in order to understand. Even those victims who are not immediately identified – in crime fiction and in true crime cases – are given a name, temporarily at least. John and Jane Does dominate many stories, the puzzle of the victim being solved alongside the puzzle of the killer. Interestingly, naming is also critical to the liminal

spaces within many colonial texts, “those *terra nullis* locations ready to be written upon, interpreted, stolen, and named” (Wisker 2007, 412). In this way, names, or rather the lack of a name, can in some contexts identify that which is liminal.

Some victims are pictured in a particularly sanitised way; a childish figure wedged into the mouth of a rough chalk-drawn dinosaur is not at all realistic. The imagery certainly does not convey the disruption, and the gore, of the crime scene which took place at a local museum. In this way, the murder board can fulfil another purpose: to deliberately protect the viewer from a site of trauma; to repackage a violent crime scene as a palatable picture that allows viewers to engage, safely, with murder. This more broadly reflects *Murdoch Mysteries*’ positioning as family viewing. Indeed, the program’s crime narratives are supplemented by storylines that are populated by celebrities of North American history, and insights into technological developments as well as several romantic sub-plots suggestive of the “powerful male figure” (Kahane 1985, 334) that dominate Gothic storylines alongside a “repositioning of the woman to fix her in an architectural and political space” (Milbank 2002, 146). This is most clearly seen in the character of Ogden who marries Murdoch but also is regularly engaged in promoting women’s rights.

Midsomer Murders

Murdoch Mysteries is subject to numerous parameters – the restrictions applied to the historical mystery are many – and, so, while the murder boards present the dead, they do so in ways that are often unfamiliar or, at least, unusual for contemporary audiences. Crime fiction series that employ more contemporary settings enjoy much greater freedom and flexibility in presenting murder boards. For the long-running *Midsomer Murders* (1997–) – “a delightful fantasy of English market-town life, with our favourite pastime of a little light killing thrown in” (McElvoy 2011, 1) – the boards are restricted by attempts to represent the budgetary constraints associated with police stations in rural environments. A popular program that follows the cases of Detective Chief Inspector Barnaby (first Tom, then his cousin John) and his sergeant, the series has recently been renewed for an extraordinary eighteenth season. One of the more interesting elements of this program is the juxtaposition of violent murder and domestic normalcy, another threshold seen within Gothic fiction and another play on the trope of the secret from the past; with the nature of the secret demonstrating, again, how “the generic boundaries between Gothic and detective fiction are irrevocably blurred” (Spooner 2010, 248). The dramatic action is divided into episodes each of which features a single crime with continuity offered by characters (Caughie 2012, 51), predominately by both Barnabys who each balance their investigations into increasingly gruesome crimes with a home life focused on the investigator’s wife and respective (small) families. The murder boards in this series, with an average of three deaths per episode, have an especially high turnover. Midsomer County is perhaps the most dangerous rural area in all of England: at the conclusion of the fourteenth season there had been: “246 murders; twelve accidental deaths, eleven suicides and eight deaths from natural causes” (“Visit Midsomer’ 2015: online).

Such a long-running series will, inevitably, see change. Some murder boards in the series, for example, are quite traditional in their presentation of images, including maps, various documents, lines connecting clues and the unpacking of plausible solutions to the crime under consideration. Innovation can be seen, however, with one of the most striking evolutions of the murder board within *Midsomer Murders* being the adoption of Perspex. The change from blackboard, to whiteboard, to a clear board may seem inconsequential: each type of board serves to support the collation of evidence; each, too, shares similarities of size and shape. Yet the Perspex board, in the context of this research, provides something unique: the positioning of the dead in direct conversation with the living.

This occurs in two ways. Firstly, the detectives are positioned on one side of the board with the viewers on the other, drawing a direct connection between the investigators, the murder victim residing in this liminal space, and the viewer: a three-way conversation between the living and the dead. Secondly, an extension of this concept is seen when the investigative team members work to position themselves on either side of the board, generating a situation in which detectives are in direct conversation with each other and the victim. The transparency of the Perspex boards challenges two of the Gothic's strongest tropes: the secret, and the notion that a "secret history" can be looked upon as "the motor of gothic fiction" (Tennenhouse 2007, 109), with these boards allowing investigators to metaphorically 'see through' the puzzle; and the liminal, a fascination for the Gothic novelist (Carson 1996, 259), with these boards more closely integrating the dead into the space of the living than other types of boards.

Castle

Castle first aired in 2009, season eight screened in 2015, and the show was cancelled in 2016. Set in New York City, the original premise of this program revolved around the developing relationship between international bestselling crime fiction writer, Richard Castle, working as a consultant for the New York Police Department, and Detective Kate Beckett. Additional characters include Castle's mother and daughter and Beckett's closest colleagues, Detectives Javier Esposito and Kevin Ryan. The show has undergone numerous changes since the pilot episode, with the signature light-hearted dialogue and regular literary references no longer staples of the show's storylines. Another change is in the style of murder boards within the series, and – more importantly – the way they are used.

Within *Castle*, two types of boards are regularly employed: the public boards that are utilised at the precinct; and the private boards that are utilised in the private homes of both Richard Castle and Kate Beckett. The first type of board consistently follows the same format: a whiteboard with colour photographs – usually enlarged from driver's licences – of victims and suspects. Whiteboard markers are used to write lists, build timelines, and draw connections between those represented on the board. The whiteboard markers also offer an interesting parallel with death; the impermanent notes, maps, and timelines that can be presented with a whiteboard

marker but then easily and quickly erased, offering a reflection of the temporary nature of life. Despite, however, reinforcing the inevitability of death – through representing the act of murder and via the eventual removal of all trace of the victim, and the case around them, from the murder board – the boards in *Castle* also reinforce life. The most common style of shot, across episodes and throughout the series, facilitate a clear view of the victim/s. In this way, the dead are privileged as light is focused upon those who have been murdered (and occasionally those associated with the murder) their faces clearly visible as they look forward towards the viewer. In contrast, the active investigators – those counted among the living – are often shot in profile or in silhouette.

As with most murder boards for police procedurals, the board is set in a prominent place within the precinct. It is both a repository of relevant information and a gathering place that gives reassurance to both investigators and, by extension, to the victim, by providing a site of camaraderie for the living and discussion with the dead. This allows bodies that “have lost their claim to a discrete and integral identity, a fully human existence” (Hurley 2002, 190) to comfortably reside in the liminal space offered by the murder board. The second type of board utilised within *Castle* is, arguably, much more interesting in that it strays from the mainstream expectations of the board, that is, as a tool used by a team of investigators working together to solve a crime. These private boards are more intimate. One such board is in Beckett’s home and is used by her as a focal point for a cold case: the murder of her mother. The dialogue with the dead on these boards is more direct. Beckett’s history with her mother allows for the details of the life of the victim to be easily superimposed on the surface, unlike on a board that focuses on an anonymous, or at least much lesser known, victim and where the lack of body language, personal habits and vocal expressions is often unable to complete the picture that murder boards attempt to produce. With most cases conveniently solved within a single episode, the dead enjoy only an extra hour, less advertising, with the living. In this, their ability to occupy an awkward space between life and death is as easily truncated by the rolling of credits as life was terminated by the hands of a killer (though potentially easily resurrected through re-screenings and on-demand viewing). Cold cases are very different. The extensions offered to the dead, in these instances, can be of many years.

Posthumous Harm

This suggests the idea of posthumous harm, and raises questions about it. Firstly, is such harm possible? And, secondly, if posthumous harm is possible, does the concept of the murder board serve to alleviate or exacerbate such harm? The idea of posthumous harm suggests harm can be done to us after we have died, a particularly useful idea for the Gothic as a genre that is often concerned about matters beyond the grave. It sounds absurd, surely, if death is the most disastrous event that can befall us then – excluding any theological frameworks – nothing worse could be inflicted. And, if we are dead, are we to know? While Aristotle suggested that “it is held that things good and evil can happen to him who is dead, exactly as they can to him who is alive but not aware of them” (Aristotle 1869, 1.10, 24), Epicurus argued that neither death,

nor anything that occurs after death, can cause harm because those who die “are not made to suffer from either” (Luper 2004, 63). As Epicurus wrote in a letter to Menoeceus, “death is nothing to us” (n.d., online), and this is supported by the belief that while life contains both positives and negatives, death is the point where all things, good and bad, cease to impact us, that, once we die, our “ledger of harms and benefits is closed” (Keller 2014, 181).

On the surface, such an argument appears simple; yet there are inevitable questions that require resolution. “Can dead persons be harmed? Can they be said to have interests? Can any justification be made for the claim that the reputations or wills of the dead should be respected?” (Partridge 1981, 243). Certainly interventions of the dead in the lives of the living across Gothic fiction as “suggestive figures of imagined and realistic threats” (Botting 1996, 2) indicates that dead persons “have interests” (Partridge 1981, 243). If this debate takes place within a wider discussion around welfare, the “question of posthumous harm, then, is the question of whether anything that happens after your death can advance or set back your welfare” (Keller 2014, 182). In the context of crime fiction, the act of dying – if brought about by a killer – is usually an event of extreme suffering. Similarly, further harm can be inflicted once the act of murder is complete and the body mutilated post-mortem. Although it is acknowledged there is a legal equivalent found in organ donation schemes, the motivations are wildly different but the outcome is the same: a broken body carved up for a purpose that is disconnected from that body. Moving from the notion of *physical* posthumous harm to *reputational* posthumous harm, Douglas W. Portmore has written:

Acts such as those that betray, destroy one’s reputation, or undermine one’s achievements can harm a person while she is alive even if they never affect her experiences. [...] Since you desire to be respected not only while alive but also after your death, the slandering of our reputation, even after your death, harms you. [...] Your death makes it only all the more certain that you will never learn of, or be experientially affected by, the slander. (2004, 27)

Partridge has posited that “plausible, well-considered arguments can be presented to support either affirmative or negative answers to [such] questions” (Partridge 1981, 243). Focusing on reputation the murder board, and what it assists in revealing, can underwrite both posthumous harm and posthumous benefit. Two examples are given below:

Murder Victim A: Jane Smith. Jane was discovered in her suburban home. Immediate evidence indicated Jane was a victim of a brutal home invasion. The investigation, undertaken with a murder board, ultimately reveals Jane had been having multiple affairs, was eight weeks pregnant and was murdered by her husband. These revelations destroy Jane’s reputation and inflict upon her a posthumous harm.

Murder Victim B: John Smith. John was discovered in a back alley-way. Immediate evidence indicated John was a drug addict. The investigation,

undertaken with a murder board, ultimately reveals John had been kidnapped by drug runners and this had led to his murder and the dumping of his body. These revelations restore John's reputation and provide him with a posthumous benefit.

When the dead, this article argues, are given an opportunity to reside in the liminal space of the murder board, the board serves as a storytelling device and provides a physical iteration of the ledger of harms and benefits for that dead person. The notion of the ledger remains difficult and uncomfortable, "these questions seem to be such that no answer can put us fully at ease" (Partridge 1981, 243), yet it is suggested here that the murder board has an important role in this conversation because as a common, contemporary device for storytelling, it is the narrative tool that most frequently draws those most affected by death into the conversation around posthumous harm: the dead.

Returning to the three television series focused upon in this article, the capacity for the murder board to facilitate posthumous harm can be seen more clearly. In *Murdoch Mysteries*, the potential for posthumous harm is limited as traditional motives for murder – love, greed, revenge – dominate and the focus is very much on seeking the killer, uncovering their secrets. In *Midsomer Murders*, many of the victims have their own secrets; as cases are investigated these secrets, from incest and other illicit liaisons, to family scandals and thefts, are revealed. Much like Murder Victim A: Jane Smith, above, the exposure of information about the activities of some of these victims – activities kept secret in life – irreparably damage reputations in death. In this way, the murder boards assist in the pursuit of justice and the catching of a killer but also demonstrate the capacity of these boards to inflict posthumous harm.

The most obvious example of a murder board producing posthumous harm, in the examples offered here, is seen in *Castle*. The public boards are predominantly concerned with bringing harm to the living, that is, harm to those responsible for murder. In sharp contrast, in relation to the private boards, despite the rhetoric around justice for the victims that occupy the central space of these boards, there is a significant perpetration of posthumous harm. In working to solve the murder of her mother, Kate Beckett's energy into, and emotional engagement with, the private murder board she crafts for this case prevents her from developing meaningful relationships with the living; this board creates, therefore, a liminal space that, rather than drawing *out* the dead, draws *in* the living. In working to solve the murder of her mother, Beckett invests more heavily in the dead and with her past than with those who live alongside her in the present. Johanna Beckett is, therefore, subjected to posthumous harm as the murder board contributes to Kate Beckett's obsession with this murder case and her refusal to seek the type of life her mother wanted her to live.

Conclusion

Stephen Rosenbaum suggests that the "prospect of death is at best a disquieting annoyance; it is at worst a terrifying mystery" (1986, 119). This paper has examined

how the murder board is crafted, how it contributes to storytelling, and how the dead are given a temporary 'extension' to be amongst the living. Three case studies of crime television series *Murdoch Mysteries*, *Midsomer Murders*, and *Castle* have provided examples and, in addition, this article has acknowledged the idea of posthumous harm, which is important in relation to crime fiction because, as death is "central to philosophy, as testified by the ancient Greek opinion that to philosophise is to learn to die" (Hoffmann 2013, xx), death, too, offers a starting point for the majority of crime stories and is often a focal point for Gothic tales. How these two genres interact, and overlap, has been highlighted here through crime fiction's adoption of the Gothic trope of the liminal and the identification of the murder board as a liminal space.

While the murder board is a device that helps investigators solve a crime, it can also help viewers to resolve some of the many issues around the ethics of murder, including those issues that relate to philosophies of posthumous harm. In attempts to bring a wrongdoer to account, standard ideas of justice and punishment are fulfilled while concurrently presenting a risk to the deceased as any investigation may generate a posthumous harm instead of a posthumous benefit. Thus, the murder board does far more than allow a fictional detective to uncover the secrets that dominate crime and Gothic fiction; it allows us to interrogate ideas around life, death, and reputation in this liminal space that accommodates the dead as well as the living.

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Psychiatric Museums: The Return of the Undead Asylum

ABSTRACT

Two hundred years ago the Bethlem Asylum of London, also known as Bedlam, is reported to have 'welcomed' 96,000 visitors who, after paying the entry price of a penny, were permitted to use sticks to poke and enrage inmates (BBC, Aug 2008). Making a special excursion, and then paying money, to enter an asylum may seem strange, but still today people are taking such tours, even though the asylums themselves have long outlived their intended purposes. Asylums are a familiar element in Gothic texts, triggering tension and unease for many reasons. To begin with, asylums embody the terror of being confined, often against one's will. On another level, they can signify paradox and a sense of the uncanny – while they may be a haven, for many they are a place of exclusion. Asylums are also often identifiably liminal and unhomely spaces, where inhabitants are forced to live a life that imitates reality, but is not fully real. Moreover, as sites of both experience and contemplation, asylums reveal the uncomfortable dichotomies between reason and unreason. In mirroring the negative aesthetics of the historical asylum, contemporary psychiatric museums may thus reawaken buried anxieties. This paper uses a Gothic lens to explore the psychiatric museum as a site which offers reminders that there is a fine line between reason and unreason for all of us.

Keywords: Asylum, Gothic Tourism, Mental illness, Psychiatric Museum

It is not difficult to appreciate why insane asylums are such a commonly used Gothic motif in both written and filmed narratives (Packer 2012; McAllister and Brien 2015). While many have been demolished, the few asylums that remain in the western world today, whether derelict or repurposed for such uses as hotels, apartments, aged care homes, educational facilities, galleries, museums, or other affable purposes, still convey a powerful sense of foreboding (Kearns et al. 2010). Their size alone is daunting and it is unsettling to remember how many people have raved, suffered, lived, and died there. These places are also sites of secrets including the torment endured by many who were therein incarcerated. Although once a common feature of cities and the surrounding countryside, only a few physical examples of past asylums still stand and, although their functions have changed, they remain haunted and haunting places. Many are, indeed, the locus for such activities as ghost tours, and ghost hunting.

Many of the monolithic structures that housed asylums were built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were located on the outskirts of towns, often in heavily wooded acreage. Asylum architecture was modelled after the prison, and seen as a way of protecting the interests of 'normal society'. Thousands of those classified as 'mad' or 'lunatic' were locked away, reflecting society's fear of the Other (Foucault 1988). Madness was thought to involve demonic possession, or result from a criminal, despotic mind (Goffman 1961; Scull 1977), and the prominent view was that the madman was a beast. Engaging with these supposedly dangerous individuals engendered a pleasure in visitors that came from a mixture of both fear and fascination. As Foucault (1988, 70) describes, "madness had become a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself, but an animal with strange mechanisms, a bestiality from which man had long since been repressed". Engaging at a close distance with this fearful Other, visitors to the asylum could be, at the same time, frightened, but cocooned from the danger the mad represented.

As industrialisation saw urban populations soar, and diseases that affect the mind such as syphilis reach epidemic proportions, these already poorly funded institutions became overcrowded, and inmates suffered desperately deprived conditions (Grob 1980; Linsley Starks and Braslow 2005). Rather than being treated and then discharged, once interred, most patients were destined to live out their lives separated from their families and society. There were few medications, and treatments such as hot or cold baths, and spinning chairs, were used to supposedly shock the brain back to normal. Straitjackets, padded rooms, and isolation wards, were used to manage and contain those who were imaged as unruly and, therefore, even more dangerous than the withdrawn. The rules controlling everyday life in these institutions were strict, patients laboured for little payment, and the system of care was closed and, largely, unaccountable to society more widely (Grob 1980). Patients lost hope, became apathetic and helpless, whilst overworked staff were controlling, rigid and, sometimes, cruel. This led to an incarceration which was, by today's standards, barbaric and dehumanising (Wahl 2003). As a result, in the mid-

twentieth century, most asylums in the developed world were closed in response to a policy known as deinstitutionalisation (Barham 1997).

Even though contemporary mental health services operate out of mainstream hospitals and do not resemble the imposing asylums from the past, creative imaginings of past asylums and their practices remain well and truly alive – teddy bears are sold in straitjackets on Valentine’s Day with the tag line “crazy for you” (Eisenhauer 2008), ghost tours and other dark tourism excursions (White and Frew 2013) are conducted around both derelict and repurposed sites (White 2013), and a haunted house based on the horrors of a seventeenth century mental asylum, complete with actors pretending to be somnambulist inmates, is billed as family entertainment (Hiatt 2014). Viewing these practices through the lens of the contemporary Gothic helps to explain why the remnants of these long-dead institutions, and particularly those which have been reanimated in the form of psychiatric museums, evoke feelings of fear, horror, and terror.

The Gothic Lens

According to Spooner (2004), the Gothic provides a powerful lens to illuminate aspects of the irrational social world that often rest just below the surface of awareness. Freud’s (1919) concept of the uncanny is important in this view. The uncanny involves a conjunction between that which is familiar (homely or *heimlich*) and unfamiliar (unhomely or *unheimlich*). In an asylum from the past, for example, there may have been many semblances of comfort and domestic life, such as sun-rooms, gardens, and bathhouses, but these have become indelibly associated in present consciousness with enforced and confining treatments, mad doctors, and crazed inmates. Becoming aware that everyday objects such as these are imbued with – or haunted by – a past of struggle and powerlessness is what makes them uncanny, frightening, and Gothic.

In a classic paper on paradox and the Gothic novel, Dawson (1968) describes how Gothic texts often emphasise dichotomies, and paradoxes. Innocence, beauty, and composure, for instance, may be paired with guilt, the grotesque, and disarray, as is the case in texts such as Wilkie Collins’ (1860) novel *The Woman in White*, Mary Jane Ward’s (1947) autobiographical novel *The Snake Pit*, and Anatole Litvak’s (1948) film of the same title. Reason and rationality have long been used to characterise modernity, progress, and enlightenment (Rockmore 1989). In such a schema, asylums become the embodiment of unreason (Lloyd-Smith 2005). When a state of unreason proliferates, as it appears to do in an asylum, social anxieties about what is normal and reasonable are exacerbated and we fear what may happen should the inmates break free, or if the norms of the asylum take over. This is a commonly used Gothic trope in films from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) to contemporary examples such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (Packer 2012), as well as in novels. In these, and other such representations of the asylum in popular culture, the resident lunatics are seen as the embodiment of primal desires that need to be gratified and,

therefore, if these individuals are not secured, they may wreak havoc in the community. Common societal anxiety ultimately develops from the idea that the asylum *unsteadily* and *inadequately* contains this madness. Even the attendants who live in the asylum, tending to the wretched souls therein incarcerated, can be driven mad through association. But for some, consuming these fictional representations is a tantalisingly intriguing opportunity to feel fear, horror, and terror, albeit from a position of safety (Royle 2003). The contemporary ghost tours, hunts, and vigils that attract visitors to discontinued mental asylums (Farrugia 2015) can, therefore, be read as satisfying a desire in participants to be simultaneously titillated and terrified (McEvoy 2015).

A negative aesthetic is characteristic of the Gothic, and the negative aesthetic is ubiquitous in representations of asylums. Embedded in its vast, dark, and hidden spaces are stories of ruined lives, lost souls, and ruptured families. Time losing its meaning, long shadows, echoing voices, slamming doors, and no reprieve from personal tragedy, are common tropes about the asylum that come from Gothic literature (Moon, Kearns and Joseph 2015, 131), and there are many examples where these are repeated in representations of the asylum in popular culture. This includes in films such *Girl Interrupted* (2000), and *The Ward* (2010), and in the *Silent Hill* computer games (see, for example, 2012). As Botting (2014, 1) explains, this negative aesthetic mirrors the “dark spaces of the human psyche”.

Evoking a sense of the sublime is another important feature of the Gothic (Mishra 1994). Asylums, in their original form and as they persist in popular culture, are often in remote, impenetrable geographical locations that are abundant with natural beauty but, at the same time, subject to nature’s often destructive forces. This can be read as mirroring the beauty, fragility, and inevitable decline of the human mind. Thus, despite the very meaning of the word ‘asylum’ denoting rest and comfort, the image evoked is one of dread and unease. The opening scenes from Milos Forman’s film, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), and Martin Scorsese’s *Shutter Island* (2010), are clear examples of this (see, McAllister and Brien 2015).

There are many aspects of asylums that mark them as liminal spaces. Turner (1967) explains that liminality refers to a space where the usual boundaries are not in effect. Located on the outskirts of cities and towns, away from the watchful eyes of residents, asylums functioned under their own rules, and inmates, once committed, often fell outside the protections of the overarching legal system. The temporal was also warped, with many patients who resided in asylums having understood their stays as in some ways temporary, even if they were never to leave. Any power or authority they may have had in the other world was similarly denied to them, while they were deprived of any connections, relationships, or work that gave their life meaning.

Most asylums had elaborate boundaries setting them apart from the outside world, boundaries which made concrete the separation of the normal from

abnormal, the sane from the insane. Kew Lunatic Asylum in Melbourne, Australia, provides physical traces of the dissembling manner in which such borders were sometimes enforced. A description of how the complex was built in the “French Second Empire style which was popular in Victorian Melbourne” (Brown 2013) appears to suggest the asylum reflected the physical infrastructure outside its walls, but continues on to describe how, nevertheless, the asylum was separated from that outside with what were called “ha-ha walls” (ibid.). These were constructed to be low on one side, but falling away into a deep ditch on the other, thus deterring and preventing safe escape. Such a wall thus appeared like an everyday, even domestic, low fence when viewed from the asylum, but was in actuality a treacherous impasse, and yet another instrument of confinement, the “ha-ha” joke of which was on the inmate.

Botting (2014) explains that the Gothic emphasises such transgression. In relation to madness and the treatment of the mentally ill in asylums, there are many real-life examples, as well as cultural representations, of boundary transgressions. Pinel, Tuke, and Dix, famous reformers of the eighteenth century, exposed the deplorable treatment of inmates in French, English, and North American asylums, revealing how medical staff had violated their duties and harmed their patients (Dunham and Weinberg 1960). Such reviews of institutions have been repeated with depressing regularity throughout history, and feed into the prevailing way asylums are represented in both literature and popular culture. These representations repeatedly underscore that treatment will not lead to cure, medicine and science are not to be trusted, and treatments that appear progressive are ultimately barbaric (Packer 2012). At the wider systemic level, this criticism of progress has famously been described by Lyotard (1984) as “the postmodern condition”.

All these Gothic tropes that are so useful in understanding the source of an enduring anxiety about asylums, can also be used to understand the attraction of contemporary psychiatric museums. Two of these are discussed below.

Bethlem Museum of the Mind

In 2016, the Bethlem Museum of the Mind was shortlisted for U.K. Museum of the Year – an indication in itself of the ongoing popularity of asylums, even though they may not now exist in practice. This museum draws upon relics from the Royal Bethlem Hospital. Bethlem was established in 1247 in South London and is more widely known as the notorious Bedlam asylum – a name synonymous with disorder and chaos. Originally, the site functioned as a priory for an order of monks known as St. Mary of Bethlem, but soon extended operations to become the first institution in the United Kingdom to provide care for the indigent, and the mentally ill (Andrews et al. 1997; Chambers 2009). Monks believed in what came to be known, during the Enlightenment, as “moral management” (Hollander 1981). This approach to care involved firm handling, a basic diet, and isolation from society, to rid the mind and

body of the excesses of the world, and basically starve the disturbed part of the person's psyche in order to restore sanity (ibid.).

For 500 years, Bedlam continued as a charitable mental asylum for the poor although, over the centuries, its management shifted from the Church to Government. To house the growing population of mentally ill people in industrialised London, the small priory was rebuilt and enlarged in the seventeenth century to become an imposing institution (O'Donoghue 1914). The stately entrance gates to the enormous hospital were flanked by two oversized human figures named 'melancholy madness' and 'raving madness'. This ghoulish, larger-than-life pair perched for centuries chained to those gates, like wild animals about to leap upon intruders. Chaney (2015) suggested that the simple act of observing the sculptures, especially given the size of the institution, would have been awe-inspiring to tourists and other visitors, and would have served a distinct purpose; that of emphasising how technical and advanced asylum treatment then was. Now, it seems possible these creatures were also placed there to ward off evil spirits, warn those entering to prepare for what was inside the walls and, like stone sentinels, to deter anyone from inside who considered escaping.

These sculptures, as well as some past patients' medical records, and artwork, together with a small collection of objects from the asylum, are currently housed in an obscure little building in a corner of what is now the Royal Bethlem Hospital in South London. They are also reproduced in an online museum site. Now, when these sculptures are viewed, in their position flanking the staircase, despite being scrubbed clean, there is an overwhelming sense of decay, and an awareness of the impotency of the Enlightenment myth. The shackled torture they represent may be a thing of the past, but struggle and torment persist in these creatures' contorted body language and facial grimaces.

The museum also displays the elaborate iron poor box that was positioned near the entrance of the asylum to collect the pennies that thousands of visitors paid in order to peer at the "objects of charity" within, and whom they were encouraged to "poke and enrage" (Arnold 2008). This early version of Gothic tourism (Townshend 2014) provided an opportunity for people to gain pleasure from witnessing the horror of the asylum from the safety of a guided tour. Henry Mackenzie (1771) described such a visit in his novel, *The Man of Feeling*:

Their conductor led them first to the dismal mansions of those who are in the most horrid state of incurable madness. The clanking of chains, the wildness of their cries, and the imprecations which some of them uttered, formed a scene inexpressibly shocking (1854, 35).

Trainor (2010) reports that the hospital (and the sculptures) were a "must see" sight of London at the time, and it appears these "dismal mansions", and the shock they

engendered, were attractive to the public, because in one year alone - 1814 - Bedlam is reported to have hosted 96,000 such visitors (BBC, August 2008).

Observing the Other in this manner - those who, when compared to the tourists, were out of touch with reality, uncivilised, and uncouth - apparently offered those visitors an exciting frisson that can be aligned with that of experiencing the uncanny (Royle 2003). That so many would willingly seek, and pay, to experience the terror of approaching, as closely as possible, the state of unreason, can be read as illustrating what Freud (1920) describes as *Thanatos*, or a death wish. Freud theorises that there are two opposing unconscious drives motivating human behaviour - *Eros* (which produces creativity, harmony, and self-preservation) and *Thanatos* (which brings aggression, repetition, compulsion, and self-destruction). Freud's theory suggests that *both* drives may be present in humans, just as reason *and* unreason may also co-exist. This compulsion to delve into the dark side and to move "beyond the pleasure principle" is often discussed as one of the elements of human nature that fuels the popularity of Gothic literature (Smith 2013).

Having this uncanny, and certainly unhomely, experience constituted a profoundly transformative experience for some visitors, including artists and poets who found creative inspiration in viewing the inmates in such desperate conditions. Mackenzie is quoted above, and William Hogarth's series of paintings, *A Rake's Progress* (1830s), depicting a man's moral decay, culminated in his miserable demise, lying naked on the floor of Bedlam asylum being observed by fashionable society ladies (Sir John Soames Museum London). 'Tom o'Bedlam's Song' (probably early seventeenth century), is a much referenced anonymous poem written in the voice of a homeless 'Bedlamite' who has been driven mad by ghouls and witches (Ciardi 1960: 964). While this poem carries a warning that readers could easily be dragged down into this darkness, it also displays a level of empathy for the plight of such a wretched soul. These works have also been long appreciated as cultural commentaries, and referenced many times in the creative works of others. Stravinsky, for example, wrote an opera based on *A Rake's Progress*, and Scorsese references the painting and its narrative in *Shutter Island*, while both Mark Twain's (1882) *The Prince and the Pauper* and Steel Eye Span's music contain references to "poor old Tom".

Today, even though mere remnant traces of the powerful Bedlam asylum remain, they continue to evoke a sense of dread, and curiosity about what it might have been like to have been a patient in such an asylum. Aside from the massive sculptures, there are evocative objects such as faded photographs to view. Gazing at the intricate art produced by patients, such as Louis Wain's (1860-1939) drawings of cats, some of which are can be described as psychedelic (Latimer 2002) and Marion Patrick's (1940-1993) images of children who appear lost, isolated, and depressed (Howard 2002), offers a glimpse into how such patients may have perceived the world, and managed their strong emotions. There is sadness, and vulnerability in Patrick's children, and a whirlwind of confusing detail in Wain's cats.

Even when such objects and images are removed from the physical structure of the museum, and their own physicality, and viewed online, they are still frightening because the Gothic imagery of their environment of production – the asylum – is indelibly imprinted on viewers' minds and, thus, viewers can *feel* the torment and impotence of the people who created them. A virtual museum – also known as the Bethlem Museum of the Mind – offers an additional variety of fascinating content, including images of patient portraits and scanned letters, as well as a guide to reading various asylum records, however, like the physical museum, is a small scale site. In this way, like many other psychiatric museums, the Bethlem Museum of the Mind, both in its physical incarnation and virtual presence, reveals only ghostly fragments of a gruesome past (Coleborne 2003). What lingers for the visitor is an awareness that the museum is a powerful metaphor, and reminder, of the misery of mental illness, its power dependent upon our shared understanding of the asylum as a Gothic space.

The Old Hospital of Arles

Across the English Channel and into the South of France, another hospital museum also evokes powerful Gothic imaginings. The Hotel Dieu Saint-Espirit, also known as the Old Hospital of Arles, was built in the sixteenth century, and continued to function as a hospital until the 1980s. Treading the smooth, well-worn cobblestones to the entrance, the visitor becomes aware that he or she is retracing the steps of thousands of patients who convalesced or died here throughout the hospital's four hundred years of activity. Stone walls a metre thick circle the hospital. These illustrate how the inmates were locked in, and today serve to suggest how their secrets and suffering were similarly contained therein, thus animating a negative, and quite eerie, aesthetic in the mind of the visitor.

After a restoration project, two of its floors as well as the courtyard and kitchen garden now appear as they did when its most famous inmate – Vincent van Gogh – walked the halls and yards. Visitors enter the historical site through the old hospital gates and are encouraged to fall silent and follow a path that winds past irises, gnarled olive trees, swathes of lavender, fields of sunflowers, and resilient oleander. Looking at the sunflowers, a homely experience becomes suddenly unhomely: could these flowers be the very same ones that inspired Van Gogh? Entering the courtyard, visitors see the garden that Van Gogh painted many times, today uncannily resurrected with shades and colours redolent of the melancholy aesthetic Van Gogh so masterfully evoked.

Past the garden, the dark arches of the hospital beckon. Climbing rickety stairs takes the visitor to the first floor and to the tiny, inauspicious room furnished with a bed and a chair that was home for Van Gogh for the year of 1889 as he battled “acute mania with generalised delirium” (Arnold 1992, 174). In letters to his brother during this time, Van Gogh wrote, “Very difficult to write, my head is so disordered ...

terribly distressed because the attacks have come back ... for many days my mind has been absolutely wandering" (Letter 601, August 22, 1889, cited in Arnold 1992, 62). Van Gogh painted many of his famous works in this hospital, but *Ward in the Hospital in Arles* (1889) is especially haunting. In this oppressive and foreboding scene, male patients seeking the feeble warmth from a small black stove huddle in the foreground, as the ward stretches inexorably and coldly beyond them. The nursing nuns in the background are distant and self absorbed. Considering this painting, it is possible to imagine how desolate, lonely, and uncomfortable patients felt when thus confined with their thoughts and fears. There appears that there was nothing to do but nestle up with other tortured souls in the futile attempt to steal momentary comfort from a rudimentary heat source. In this, they vainly seek protection from the cold, stark, and unwelcoming ward, and from the presumably cruel world beyond. A walking tour of the nearby countryside offers an insight not only into the landscapes that inspired Van Gogh, but also to their history. Within eyesight are the ancient Roman ruins of Glanum, which date back to 14 A.D., revealing that this asylum stood on land that is, itself, haunted by past conflicts and tragedies, and still shows the marks of that suffering. On the triumphal arch of Glanum, for instance, the images of shackled and defeated prisoners etched into it can still be made out. Conflict, constraint, and distress, are palpable here.

Read as a metaphor for hospitalisation, Van Gogh's painting is powerfully suggestive of patients – whether mentally or physically ill – being caught in a liminal place (Whisker 2007). Here, the patients are represented as being suspended between living and dying, anxiously trying to recreate the warmth and familiar comfort of a fireplace in a domestic home. This attempt is, however, futile as beyond the small group is the cold, institutional, and unhomey institution that keeps them incarcerated. The sharp tilt of the three beds in the left foreground add to this atmosphere of unsettled, and unsettling, discomfort – anyone attempting to lie or sit on one of these would surely slide off – while the single hanging globe is clearly inadequate to offer much light. Such an engagement with the concept of the uncanny and unhomey, inescapable due to the suggestive association of the asylum with the Gothic, assists in appreciating the paradoxical complexity of both Van Gogh's paintings, and the man himself. Although talented, prolific, and loved, he was haunted by demons and anxieties. When his torment led him to shoot himself in the chest, and to die two days later in the arms of his brother, he murmured "*la tristesse durera toujours*" (sorrow never ends) (Pomfret 2006), epitomising Freud's (1920) theory of the compulsive and destructive human urges that some are unable to repress.

From this site's past during the Roman conquest, through the creation of the mental asylum, and Van Gogh's rendering of it, to its transformation into a prisoner of war camp during the First World War (Boulon 2005), physical history here embodies Freud's *thanatos*, wherein destructive impulses are compulsively re-experienced. Yet, there is also beauty, and the strength of the human spirit can also be appreciated. Visiting this site, however, the strongest emotional resonances are

those of the claustrophobia, insecurity, restlessness, and enclosure, that mirror the feelings it can be imagined Van Gogh himself experienced and which led to such unbearable anxiety on his part. That this arises from fields of bright sunflowers and a gorgeous courtyard garden attests to the power of the lingering Gothic associations of this site.

Conclusion: Sinister Pleasures?

Even though the psychiatric medical sciences have now developed various precise and effective psychotropic medications and psychological therapies, and widespread public education programs designed to raise general literacy in the population in terms of mental health, these strategies have not been fully effective in allaying fears regarding the inherent danger of those with mental illness, and the concern that society must be protected from them (Picart and Greek 2007). Evidence suggests that the public continue to hold negative attitudes towards people who struggle with mental health challenges, and the health professionals who work with, and care for, them. Evans-Lacko et al. (2009), for example, found that despite the fact that many are more educated about the facts and statistics of mental illness, there is little evidence that the stigma around mental illness is abating. Arboleda-Florez and Sartorius (2008) also found that whilst many people may no longer believe that madness is a result of demonic possession, the general public continue to consciously avoid people who may have had a mental illness, and to assume that mentally ill people are incapable of working, caring, or living productive lives. Thus, as a group, people with mental illness remain the Other in society, and the sites where these mentally ill were once incarcerated similarly Othered.

Today, visiting such sites allows tourists the pleasant prospect of being unsettled by being immersed in a negative aesthetic, wherein the unexpected contrasts with the expected, and the frisson of the uncanny is activated, just like it was for early Bethlem visitors, from a safe distance. Some of these asylums now are, ironically, sublimely picturesque. The Old Hospital of Arles, for example, although once a site of disease and despair, now offers pretty niches and charming glimpses of trees and gardens that Van Gogh must have gazed onto from his asylum window. Many of the old asylums visited on ghost tours are similarly architecturally magnificent, awe-inspiring, and beautiful. While visitors can, thus, be unaware that part of their enjoyment is anchored in a past in which the asylum functioned as a dangerous, and liminal place (Turner 1967), this understanding – which uses images and tropes from the Gothic – underpins the experience of such sites. Visits to psychiatric museums can thus unsettle, as both images of long dead asylums, and deeply held cultural anxieties, are reawakened. In this way, the Gothic asylum is reanimated, channelled into the present through these modern museums, its power evident in how these sites are experienced, as well as presented.

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