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Gothic Matters: Introduction

Once considered escapist or closely linked to fantasy, the Gothic genre (or mode, as scholars increasingly call it) has recently begun to be explored for its material concerns and engagement with real-world matters. This issue of *Text Matters* features essays that develop this line of inquiry, focusing on how the Gothic attempts to matter in concrete and critical ways, and mapping its rhetorical and aesthetic strategies of intervention and narration, affect and influence. The pun in the title of this volume—“Gothic Matters”—is intended to acknowledge both the material concerns of the Gothic as a genre and the continuing relevance and value of the cultural work performed by the Gothic, i.e. why it *matters*.

The Gothic is the brainchild of the eighteenth century, an eminently modern aesthetic mode, obsessed with the cultural changes that were re-mapping Europe and North America. Born in the wake of the first global war—the Seven Years War (also known as the French and Indian War)—the Gothic quickly became associated with violent and sensational plots, an aesthetics of emotional extremes, graphic depictions of bodily injury, and finally, revolution itself. De Sade famously linked the Gothic to the political violence of the era when he suggested that Gothic novels were the “necessary fruits of the revolutionary tremors felt by the whole of Europe.” More recent observers and scholars of the Gothic have noted its inherently political and reformist bent, often tackling controversial social issues such as the social control of women, aristocratic privilege and class power relations, as well as traditional institutions including the church, the prison and the family (cf. Ledoux). The body was inevitably at the center of these explorations: its pain, discipline and control at the heart of the Gothic’s critical concerns.

If revolutionary politics were the most obvious cultural context for some observers, the larger tectonic shifts in epistemology and moral judgment were also at stake. Changes in science, in political philosophy, and cultural values all impacted the Gothic, bringing with them a fascination with cultural relativism, the complexities of social justice, and a new self-awareness about history. The Gothic staged and interrogated these questions with its narratives of cultural otherness, excessive revenge, and repressed or

buried crimes that reverberated throughout family lines and local legends. Inherently sceptical of the Enlightenment values that nevertheless underpin its critiques of traditional institutions, the Gothic interested itself in alternative epistemologies such as folk culture, family legends, and rumors. A genre of the forgotten, unspoken and buried, the Gothic gave voice to characters that normally had no voice or weight in society. Although often subversive, the Gothic was not inherently or inevitably so, and more conservative or even paranoid and reactionary formations exist, most notably what critics recently have come to call the Imperial Gothic, which uses the rhetoric of monstrosity to depict racial and colonial others.

8 Nevertheless, the most interesting cultural work of the Gothic is linked to its creative explorations of the non-normative aspects of human life, such as the body in its queer, raced, gendered and physical materiality. It is no coincidence that many of the following essays focus specifically on the body and its subversive materiality. The volume opens with two essays that take up the issue of the body specifically within the context of the French Revolution. The first, by Agnieszka Łowczanin, examines representations of female bodies in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and argues that they serve as interventions in the debates around revolutionary violence taking place in England at the time. Making connections between the real-life treatment of Marie Antoinette and some of her entourage, for example, and the description of women characters in Lewis's novel, Łowczanin shows that Lewis expresses ambivalence about mob violence as well as contemporary conventions of femininity. The second essay continues with the French Revolution as backdrop for the early Gothic and takes up the work of Giovanni Aldini on freshly executed corpses. Aldini was the nephew of Luigi Galvani—the Italian physicist known for his work on galvanic electricity—and the better known of the two in England, travelling across Europe with widely publicized experiments on the dead. In her essay on Aldini, the guillotine, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Kristen Lacefield argues that the novel can be better understood in relation to the complex cultural meaning of the guillotine. Specifically, this instrument came to represent the double-edged nature of three cultural developments: the intrusions of modern science into natural biological processes, the emergence of materialist theories in science and medicine, and the sensational reports of revolutionary violence in France.

The next essay crosses the Atlantic and examines an autobiographical work by one of the great American Transcendentalists, Margaret Fuller. Monika Elbert shows how Fuller's *Memoirs* reveal a writer haunted by a younger sister's death and the memory of her strict and overbearing father, who travels to the Great Lakes on a Romantic search for wholeness,

only to discover a Gothic landscape of capitalist waste and Indian genocide. Elbert uses an EcoGothic approach in order to focus on Fuller's representations of nature as terrifying and savage on the one hand, but also a victim of the rapacious advances of greedy settlers. In a nuanced critique, Elbert analyzes the ambivalence and complexity of Fuller's depiction of a gothicized nature and demonstrates the usefulness of the Gothic as trope to evoke the painful but creatively generative alienation of being an exceptional woman in the nineteenth century. Finally, Elbert shows that Fuller's journey through the landscape of the Great Lakes is as much epistemological and political as it is physical and emotional.

Karen E. Macfarlane's essay continues the volume's investigation of how the Gothic navigates through shifting regimes of knowledge and specifically the epistemological anxieties that were inherent to the colonial enterprise. The body is once more the epicenter of this network of mappings—a charged interface between the classificatory ambitions of the Victorian era and the many aspects of the unknown and unclassifiable that regularly beguiled it. Focusing on stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Rider Haggart about mysterious and disembodied hands, Macfarlane examines the uncanniness that accompanies a colonial reduction of the other to commodified object. The next essay continues to explore the Gothic epistemologies generated by dismembered and disarticulated bodies. Neil Forsyth's "The Tell-Tale Hand," with its obvious allusion to Poe's famous "The Tell-Tale Heart," begins with Sherwood Anderson's story "Hands" from *Winesburg, Ohio*, and takes us on an extraordinary journey through the work of Caravaggio and Rodin, twentieth-century horror cinema, the Swiss hand surgeon Claude Verdan and the discoveries of contemporary cognitive science to explore some of the uncanny aspects of the embodied self. A theme that runs through the essay is the disjunction between what we know with our minds and what we know and do with our bodies, an epistemological gap that the Gothic has eloquently and forcefully thematized across a range of artistic media.

Marie Rose B. Arong's contribution examines another kind of uncanny not knowing, what we could call postcolonial amnesia. In "Nick Joaquin's *Cándido's Apocalypse*: Re-imagining the Gothic in a Postcolonial Philippines," Arong shows how Nick Joaquin, an Anglophone Philippine writer from the 1950s, uses the Gothic to explore the issue of the Philippine's repressed or forgotten history, i.e. in this case that of the Philippine's Hispanic past, as a form of resistance to the cultural and political domination of America ever since it occupied the island at the beginning of the century. *Cándido's Apocalypse* (1952), though sometimes understood as magical realism in the context of the Latin American Boom movement, is

in fact better served by being read in terms of the Gothic. The main character, a teenaged boy, begins to see underneath people's clothes and then skin and flesh, something like Roger Corman's *X: The Man With the X-Ray Eyes* (1963), until he sees nothing but skeletons. Arong proposes that Nick Joaquin uses the Gothic to dissect the nation's "neurosis," caused by an ideologically motivated repression of the full complexity of the island's colonial past, and to complicate its national narrative with a bracing dose of Postcolonial Gothic.

10 Similarly, John Armstrong's essay, "Gothic Matters of De-Composition: The Pastoral Dead in Contemporary American Fiction," explores how contemporary American writers use the Gothic to complicate the American pastoral by planting corpses in the garden of American innocence. Looking at stories and novels by Alice Walker, Stephen King, Raymond Carver, and Cormac McCarthy, Armstrong argues that each of these writers repurposes the pastoral with a Gothic twist in order to "confront America's darkest social and historical matters." More than simply interrogating America's history of violence, however, these narratives also speak "of the cruelties and injustices of the historical and global world we inhabit, cruelties and injustices we regularly put aside in order to live, prosper and consume." Armstrong suggests that Gothic narratives such as these are important to "our social awareness" and constitute "Gothic matters which reflect, delineate and de-compose the horrors of the everyday."

Among the most compelling of quotidian horrors to have emerged in recent decades is a world shaped by neoliberal economics and social philosophy. Many scholars believe that it is no accident that the Gothic has emerged so forcefully at precisely the same moment, and has provided a repertoire of images, tropes and monsters that both reflect and critically explore this new global order (cf. Blake). Marie Liénard-Yeterian's essay thus continues the reflections begun by Armstrong by closely analyzing how Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* turns to the Gothic as a way of confronting contemporary political and economic policies, which promote greed and unprecedented exploitation, surveillance and personal data gathering, and in which human beings are turned into consuming or consumed objects. The body is once more at the heart of these interrogations, the daily life of the protagonists generally preoccupied with procuring the basic necessities to survive as well as avoiding human predators who render literal the Gothic maxim underlying capitalist social relations: it's a dog eat dog world, or, in this case, man eats man. The traditional Gothic landscape of haunted castles or wilderness morphs in McCarthy's novel into a liminal post-apocalyptic space where human civilization has disappeared and

what is left is a bleak twilight backdrop to the real locus of Gothic horror: the human mind and body.

Glen Donnar's essay, "It's not just a dream. There is a storm coming!': Financial Crisis, Masculine Anxieties and Vulnerable Homes in American Film," also takes the contemporary economic and political landscape as its explicit focus, only this time the apocalypse has not yet happened but the protagonist feels its approach. The pervasive sense of precariousness created by the 2008 economic meltdown and the lack of hope for an economically sustainable future under current political conditions is figured by Gothic-inflected films like *Take Shelter* (2011) and *Winter's Bone* (2010), where protagonists struggle to survive economically in an everyday "made unfamiliar, unsettling and threatening in the face of metaphorical and real (socio-)economic crisis and disorder." Laying bare not only the historical and political anxieties of the moment, the two films also continue the Gothic tradition of interrogating gender from a critical perspective, scrutinizing "otherwise unspeakable national anxieties about male capacity to protect home and family, including through a focus on economic-cultural 'white Otherness.'" In both films, white men are shown as floundering in their expected roles as providers, overwhelmed by forces that threaten them from both outside and inside (including their own failure to master their inner demons), while women, as has always been the case in the Gothic, find themselves taking on protective and more active roles in order to cope with the crisis.

Gender is also the focus of the next essay, Agata Łuksza's "Excess and Lack: Genre Negotiations and Gender-Bending in the *Supernatural* Series," which examines the 11-season *Supernatural* series (CW, 2005–) about two monster-hunting brothers. Like many Gothic texts, the series addresses and complicates traditional masculinity, partly through self-reflexive and meta-fictional generic playfulness, also a recurring feature of the Gothic since Horace Walpole wrote the first Gothic novel as a formal experiment and gender-bending romp that began with a young man crushed by a giant helmet. The next essay also takes generic hybridity as its point of departure, examining the Gothic rewritings of the western that involve Native American vampires. Adopting a tacitly Postcolonial Gothic approach, Corinna Lenhardt teases out the difference between commodified versions of vampiric Indians used by white film-makers from a more critical repurposing of the vampire myth by Native American authors and film-makers. Many of these films take war as their backdrop, raising troubling questions about where savagery really lies. By using the ultra-malleable trope of the vampire, Lenhardt shows how contemporary Native American storytellers

deconstruct the myth of the Indian savage and interrogate the racial meanings of monster myths.

Justyna Stępień looks at another critical rewriting of the vampire trope, reading Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014) as an aesthetic response to contemporary postindustrial culture, which she argues has become a "culture of death." Against the Gothic industrial backdrop of today's post-apocalyptic Detroit, two ageless vampires attempt to use art, literature and music as fragments to shore themselves up, like T. S. Eliot, against the ruins of neoliberal America overtaken by zombie-like humans intent on turning everything into a commodity. Jarmusch's film is an homage to the lost culture of an indie and alternative America, a tradition carried on by the Gothic, the film seems to suggest, while the rest of the country sinks into the twilight afterlife of American empire. In such a world, it is the Gothic monster, now a hipster vampire, who has something to teach humans who have lost their humanity.

Finally, Barry Murnane concludes the volume with an analysis of a contemporary British series *In the Flesh* (BBC 2014–15) which imagines a world in which a zombie invasion has been stopped and "cured" medically by a private pharmaceutical company that produces an antidote allowing zombies to function "normally" and return to their families. In his article "*In the Flesh* and the Gothic Pharmacology of Everyday Life; or Into and Out of the Gothic," Murnane shows how the series poses anxious questions about our current world, where biopolitics and neoliberalism converge to produce entire pharmaceutically managed populations, to the greater profit of the corporate medicine industry which is only too eager to make people dependent on their products to function in their daily lives. Murnane argues that a preoccupation with medicine, narcotics, poisons and other mind-altering substances has defined the Gothic from the start, as has a recurring concern with the material forces shaping the modern subject. Taking this materialist tradition as a point of departure, Murnane examines how the show exposes the Gothic underpinnings of the way Big Pharma has undertaken to pacify and zombify populations rendered pathological or disabled by the economic ravages of austerity, financial speculation and unregulated market forces. In typical Gothic fashion, the show breaks down distinctions between the normal and the monstrous, and suggests that we are all subjects in a necropolitical economy. However, instead of ceding to despair or distraction, Murnane asks us to consider that the Gothic, like the *pharmakon*, may offer a "sly form of cultural therapeutics" through its narratives of monstrosity and horror (Baldick and Mighall 210). In this way, the Gothic may turn out to matter not only as a warning system and a critical lens, but also as a homeopathic antidote. If storytelling helps us

see the dark forces shaping our world, perhaps it can also help us narrate our way back to the radical and revolutionary human values that emerged alongside the Gothic at the dawn of modernity in the late eighteenth century—democracy, social justice, feminism, and a chastened universalism that can undo the legacy of race, class and colonial domination.

This volume, as always, also includes several articles, reviews, and interviews on slightly different topics. Małgorzata Dąbrowska, a historian specializing in the Middle Ages in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, contributes an article on Trebizond, a state of the Byzantine imperial family in the period from the thirteenth till the fifteenth century. Dąbrowska shows that, like Byzantium through the influence of Yeats, Trebizond has made a mark on English literature (though admittedly to a smaller extent). The best-known is Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956), but what is perhaps more interesting for readers of this volume is the Dracula connection. It was the same Turkish troops who conquered Trebizond in 1461 that were dispatched to meet with Vlad III Dracul, the Voivode of Wallachia, inviting him to pay the overdue ransom levied on "infidels" and provide five hundred boys for the Turkish army. Vlad Dracul suspected a trap and ambushed the Sultan's forces and impaled them, earning the now familiar moniker "Vlad the Impaler." Centuries later, Bram Stoker would make his descendant into a famous monster, the vampire Dracula.

Next, Dorota Filipczak examines how Malcolm Lowry alludes to Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz's "The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall" in his highly intertextual novella, "Through the Panama" (published posthumously in 1961), bringing new insight on how to read this unclassifiable late work by Lowry. Filipczak focuses on the importance of the machine in this work, arguing that an ambivalent sense of threat haunts the narrative, and exploring the various forms of liminality that this fictionalized travel memoir generates. Liminality is also the subject of the following essay, Agata G. Handley's examination of the work and poetic voice of Tony Harrison, a poet whose working-class background left him with a life-long sense of cultural and literary in-betweenness. Drawing on the sociological thought of Zygmunt Bauman and Stuart Hall, Handley considers the relationship between the ongoing process of poetic identity formation and the liminal position of the speaker in Harrison's poetry, exemplified in "On Not Being Milton," an initial poem in the sonnet sequence *The School of Eloquence*. Harrison's poetical reflection on liminality conveyed in the tropes of the opposition between the center and peripheries, the marginal and the mainstream, the deprived and the privileged, can be traced to his personal experience as a man who due to his education has never felt at home in either the world of literature or the reality of his working-class background, thus

subjecting himself to constantly transgressing the boundaries and experiencing perpetual change while commenting on cultural and social transformations in contemporary Britain.

Finally, three book reviews and two interviews. First, Tomasz Fisiak reviews the impressive collection of essays edited by Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, *Ann Radcliffe, Romanticism and the Gothic* (Cambridge UP 2014), which situates Radcliffe in her cultural context and particularly her relationship to Romanticism. A review of Charles I. Armstrong's *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History* by Wit Pietrzak continues the discussion of Yeats begun in Małgorzata Dąbrowska's essay on Trebizond and Byzantium. Pietrzak shows how Armstrong sets out to mark out a middle ground between the formalist criticism that dominated Yeats scholarship for much of the century and the recent resurgence of biographical criticism, but does not quite manage to escape existing critical paradigms. A third review by Antoni Górny examines Anna Pochmara's *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (2011), a study of how several major figures of the Harlem Renaissance dealt with the issue of black manhood and masculinity, a perennially vexed issue in African American culture.

The volume comes to a close with two interviews: Krzysztof Majer of the University of Łódź interviews Canadian novelist and playwright Bill Gaston, and Joanna Kosmalka (also from Łódź) interviews Uilleam Blacker (University College London), co-author, with Olesya Khromeychuk, of *Penetrating Europe, or Migrants Have Talent*, which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2016.

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