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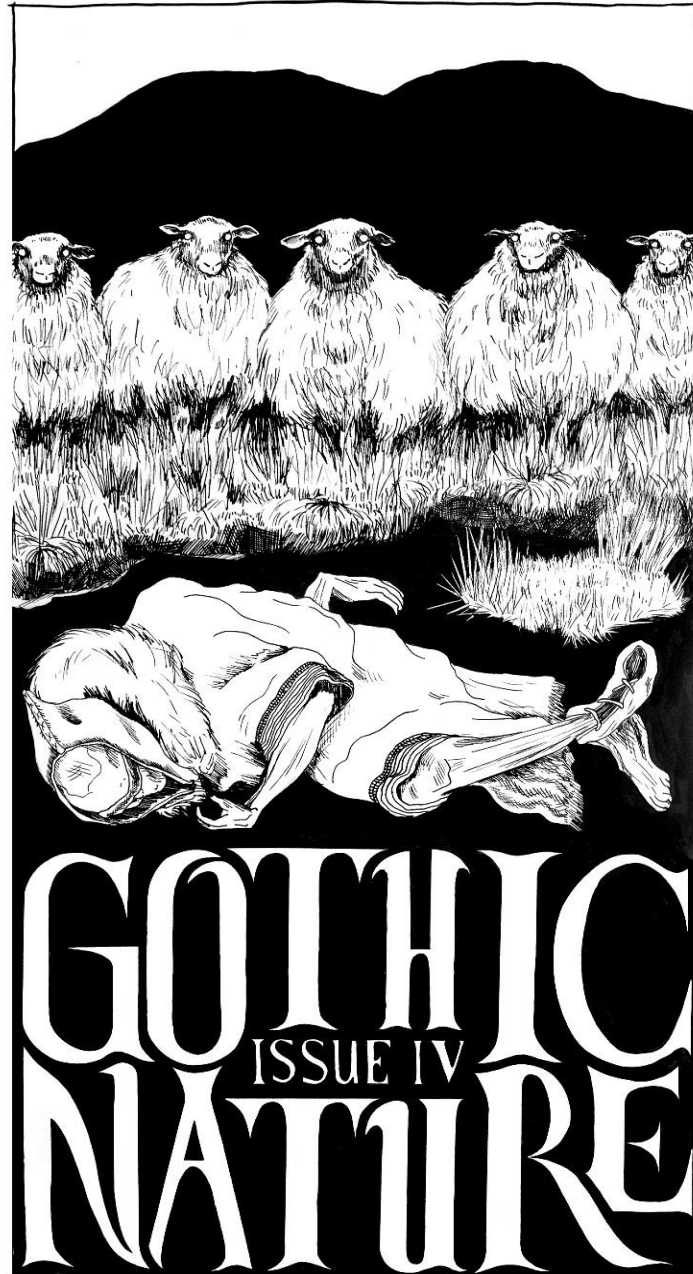
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GOTHIC NATURE

NEW DIRECTIONS IN ECOHORROR
AND THE ECOGOTHIC



ISSUE FOUR

FOUNDED BY: ELIZABETH PARKER
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Lydia Rose is an illustrator working with British landscapes and their stories, working primarily in ink through drawing and traditional printing processes.

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN ECOHORROR AND THE ECOGOTHIC

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ABOUT THIS JOURNAL

Gothic Nature is a peer-reviewed and open-access academic journal seeking to explore the latest evolutions of thought in the areas of ecohorror and the ecoGothic. It welcomes articles, reviews, interviews, and original creative pieces interrogating the darker sides of our relationship with the more-than-human world. The journal includes research from new and more revered scholars alike, working at the intersections of ecocriticism, Gothic and horror studies, and the wider environmental humanities and sciences.

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Michael Belcher

Gothic Nature Issue IV: Introduction

Elizabeth Parker and Harriet Stilley

Amidst extensive and ever-increasing deforestation, agricultural expansion, biodiversity loss, anthropogenic damage, and zoonotic disease outbreaks, it is hard to believe that it is just ten years since Andrew Smith and William Hughes opened a debate regarding the intimacy of ecology and horror—a debate which had previously been surprisingly largely overlooked in academic ecocriticism. Originally published in 2013, their seminal volume *Ecogothic* acknowledged the sinuous relationship between ‘the ecocritical aspects of the Gothic’ and ‘the Gothic elements of the ecocritical’ (p. 1), ultimately providing a provocative new lens which would come to reframe the study of the Gothic and ecocriticism. The short decade that has followed the publication of *Ecogothic* has certainly been overwhelmed with various literary, philosophical, historical, political, and popular cultural musings on the ‘darker side’ of our relationship with the more-than-human, thus indicating both a growth in eco-anxiety and an ensuing mainstream pullulation of the ecoGothic.¹ The respective flowering of such crucial preoccupations as plant-animal hybridity, animal-human relations, vegetarianism, waste theory, and the blue humanities across the wider ecocritical field—together with the recent wave of ecological horror novels, comics, films, television series and video games from a range of national traditions—further testifies to the relevance, resonance, and rapid evolution of ecoGothic as a necessary creative praxis for interrogating and understanding the uncanny socio-ecological climate we currently find ourselves in.

¹ Since its publication in 2013, *Ecogothic* has been succeeded by an extensive selection of full-length studies and edited collections, including titles such as *The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Del Principe, Ed., 2014); *Dark Nature* (Schneider, Ed., 2016); *The Creeping Terror: An Ecogothic Examination of the Haunted Houses, Women, and Plants* (DuPree, 2017); *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (Keetley and Tenga, Ed., 2017); *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Keetley & Sivils, 2017); *Consuming Gothic: Food and Horror in Film* (Piatti-Farnell, 2017); *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (Estok, 2018); *The Gothic Nature Journal* (2019-); *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (Meeker & Szabaru, 2019); *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation* (Bishop & Higgins, 2020); *Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century* (Crossen, 2020); *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny Flowers* (Edney, 2020); *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out* (Heholt & Edmundson, 2020); *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (Parker, 2020). For further details, please see Smith, A. & Hughes, W. (2023) ‘Ecogothic: Ten Years On’ in this issue (pp. 12-24).

For *Gothic Nature: Issue IV*, in celebration of the 10th anniversary of *Ecogothic*, we invited Smith and Hughes to reflect on the significant developments in the field ‘ten years on’—and we are delighted to be able to open this issue with their reflections. In addition to contemplating the place which ecoGothic as a critical approach has come to occupy, the *Ecogothic* editors place notable emphasis on the ‘organic mutability’ of the ecoGothic, in particular its tendency to grow in ‘intellectual presence’ and to transform into ‘new forms’ which variously ‘accommodate, cope with or else challenge’ the academic as well as ecological environment (Hughes & Smith, 2023: p. 13). With *Gothic Nature* playing host to a cross-pollination of ideas, theories, and practices, such mutability can naturally be traced throughout the journal’s array of featured articles, reviews, and creative submissions, all necessarily committed to exploring and forging new directions in ecohorror and the ecoGothic. Indeed, looking back, the previous three issues of the journal have covered a wide historical spectrum and geographical scope, contributing unique and intriguing approaches to a mixture of topics that expand and enrich the critical contours of *Gothic Nature*—from spectrality, sublimity, and monstrosity to interrogations of the wild, the Weird, and the realms of the uncanny. In 2022 we moved to a new model of alternating between ‘themed’ and ‘unthemed’ issues: seeking on the one hand to accommodate a variety of new editorial voices and deeper explorations into more specific areas in ecohorror and the ecoGothic, and on the other, to maintain the spontaneity and surprise of open calls for research in these broader and often imbricated fields. Most recently, Special Guest Editors Jimmy Packham, Emily Alder, and Joan Passey took the helm of our first themed issue, *Gothic Nature III: Haunted Shores*—an intricate, insightful, and inspired collection of critical commentaries, approaches, and perspectives that dives deep into the variable and vibrant zone of the ‘dark blue Gothic.’ Beyond just a sustained exploration of the littoral ecoGothic, this collaborate, multifaceted work of *Gothic Nature: Haunted Shores* is adept at revealing the unfathomably vast, fluid space of the nonhuman sphere in a broader sense, as well as the expansive, proactive potential that thereby inheres in the organically mutable/mutably organic terrain of *Gothic Nature*.

Looking forward, as we continue to embrace, facilitate, and invigorate such topics and discussions, we are, of course, acutely conscious that any relative interpretive freedoms afforded by the conceptual themes and concurrent tools of the ecoGothic may only be realised through eradicating existing boundaries, by ardently advocating, pursuing, and including a diversity of voices and nuances that have otherwise been occulted in these supposedly

‘universal’ environmental and bioethical debates. Hence, in our continued discussions of our increasingly ‘Gothic’ conceptions of—and relationships to—the natural world, it is essential that we explicitly chart the complex interplay of ecohorror and the ecoGothic with the social realities and histories embedded in their form/s, and furthermore confront the extent to which ecocritical concerns are intimately entangled with imperialist ideologies, capitalist practices, and colonial hierarchies; only then might we begin to destabilise and decentre the interface between nature and culture, animal and human, and actively participate in the decolonisation of environmental knowledge.

Much recent scholarship has, sure enough, called attention to the burgeoning alliance between postcolonial and environmental studies,² and it is clear that the field of postcolonial ecocriticism is imperative in not only challenging modes of socio-ecological imperialism and their neoliberal incarnations in the 21st century, but also in (re)conceptualising Gothic fears and Eurocentric frameworks imbued with colonial and environmental alterities—in order to constructively imagine possibilities for alternate, recuperative ecological futures that are compatible with anticolonial politics. Thus, in answer to these critical advancements, and with the aim of ultimately paving new directions towards decolonising ecohorror and the ecoGothic, we are delighted to announce Professor Kim Hester Williams as our Special Guest Editor for the next issue of *Gothic Nature, Issue V: Decolonising the EcoGothic*. This will be a special issue indeed and one which we hope will soon contribute to cultivating a theoretically astute methodology alert to the systemic nature of radically uneven development across the world-ecology, by way of providing revisionary insights into ecoGothic depictions and reflections on Nature from postcolonial, settler colonial, and decolonising regions and cultural traditions. Professor Williams is the co-editor of the fantastic *Racial Ecologies* (2018) collection and produces research in areas such as race, gender, economy, horror, and ecology in literature, music, media, popular culture, and film. She teaches in the English and American Multicultural Studies departments at Sonoma State University, California, and additionally publishes poetry grounded in womanism and eco-Afro-poetics. We are incredibly honoured and humbled to be working with Kim, and we look forward to sharing the *Issue V* Call for Papers in due course.

² See, for example, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Huggan & Tiffin, 2006); *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011); *Literary and Cultural Production, World-Ecology and the Global Food System* (Oloff, Niblett & Campbell, 2021); and *Decolonising Gothic* (Alder, 2022).

The keen anticipation of *Gothic Nature V: Decolonising the EcoGothic*, together with the popular success of *Gothic Nature III: Haunted Shores*, is indicative of our ever-flourishing fascination with, and arresting fear of, the ecosocial phenomena around us, as well as the remarkable quality of scholarship that is currently and consistently being generated throughout the ecoGothic field of study. And this present issue, *Gothic Nature, Issue IV*, is no exception, with articles transporting us to the Gothic tops of Everest and the melting sublime of the Arctic; exposing us to the Gothic significance of meat eating and monstrous ecofeminism; and confronting us with gravely relevant themes of extinction and mutation, while encouraging us to observe the arborescence in digital interactive design.

We must thank each and every one of our contributors. It is always a privilege to work with dozens of researchers, writers, and artists from around the world—this year from Australia to Ukraine—each contributing to this challenging and important discussion in the environmental humanities.

Issue IV opens with the reflective piece from Smith and Hughes, ‘Ecogothic: Ten Years On.’ Here, the original editors of the seminal *Ecogothic* review and discuss some of the key developments in the last decade since this volume’s publication. They look to the darker evolutions of ecocriticism—touching on everything from activism to animal studies to Covid-19—in their contemplation of the persistent and evolving role of the ecoGothic today. We then move to Jemma Stewart’s eerily enchanting article ‘Making Gothic Mountains: Everest and the Ecogothic.’ Stewart explores the truly Gothic phenomenon of Everest, with its allure and its dangers, recounting its darkly spectral place in both history and fiction. She examines how climate crisis and Dark Tourism result in humans’ waste and corpses alike littering the mountainside and argues that the Gothic aesthetic has significantly influenced mountaineering and contributed to both the creation and maintenance of an ‘ecoGothic Everest.’ Catherine Greenwood further builds on discussions around the north in her evocative and chilling essay ‘Defrosting the Gothic: Arctic Poetry in a Melting Sublime.’ Focusing on analysis of contemporary ecoGothic poetry by British and Canadian poets whose work engages with the Arctic, Greenwood traces Gothicised conceptions of the north as a sublime geographical space, arguing that as global heating effects material changes on the formerly frozen-solid Arctic, the *unheimlich* literary topography of the north must also change, from a site of obscure terror to one of exposed horror—that is, from a sublime realm of silent snows and icy climes to a

semiotics of sludge, a ‘muddy Gothic sub/slime’ saturated with grisly tales of erosion, pollution, exploitation, and cannibalism.

We then move to Andrew Smith’s ‘Machen, Meat Eating and the First World War: Arthur Machen’s Vegetarian Epiphany.’ Here, Smith—one of the original editors of *Ecogothic* (2013)—provides us with an intriguing and refreshingly unique take on Arthur Machen and the ecoGothic. He examines how the author’s views on meat eating were developed during the First World War and the importance of these evolutions. He explores Machen’s conceptions of national turmoil as spiritual turmoil, exploring how food, animals, and landscape can be linked to what was truly threatened on the Western front: the very question of what it means to be human. Brianna Anderson then lures us in with ‘Taking Bloody Revenge for the Environment: Monstrous Ecofeminism and the Eco-Vampire in *Dark Fang*.’ Here, drawing on the ecohorror comic series *Dark Fang* (2017), she examines the transformative potential of violent ecofeminist revenge as a counterpoint to trends in popular ‘green’ comics towards more pastoral and feel-good eco-activism. She argues for the real value in extending agency in our stories to more-than-human entities and the real need for darker ‘eco-heroines’ in a world of capitalism.

Continuing the study of comics, this time with Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä* manga series (1982-1994), Gregory Marks provides the thought-provoking penultimate essay of this issue, ‘Extinction and Utopia in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*.’ In this adroit analysis, Marks argues for a reading of the manga as a work of ecological Gothic that expands the themes of its 1984 animated film adaptation, from a simple ecofable into complex matters of mutation, manipulation, and extinction. For Marks, this Gothic subversion of the utopian expectations of ecological fiction confronts the abject ruin of those expectations in a world where the very conceptions of humanity and nature are no longer tenable. It is by way of this negativity, Marks contends, that the manga then supplants the film’s quixotic environmentalist message with a properly utopian narrative, one that desires not a simple natural harmony but a suitably complicated, difficult, and hard-earned redemption of a fallen humanity.

The final article in *Gothic Nature, Issue IV* is Kevan Manwaring’s ‘Many Paths Through the Forest: Exploring Arborescence and Ecological Themes in Digital Interactive Narrative.’ In this rich and fascinating essay, Manwaring reflects on his own creative process

of designing *Hyperion: Tower of the Winds* (2020): a digital interactive narrative that uses elements of biomimicry as an intrinsic part of the ecological themes it seeks to dramatise. For Manwaring, the resilient, reciprocal, and decidedly rhizomatic structure of digital platforms makes them an accessible means of sharing advice and resources, and ultimately engaging potentially large audiences. Referencing his own digital interactive fiction, the author thereby assesses the unique role Fantasy has to play in cultivating ecoliteracy, and of also modelling alternative, participatory modalities in response to the multiple challenges we face in the Climate Emergency.

In addition to the articles, this issue also features a wealth of book, TV, film, and game reviews, which promise, as ever, to leave readers with several new titles on their reading/watching/play lists. From the screen, these include multi-authored cluster reviews of David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021), Ben Wheatley's *In the Earth* (2021), and Jaco Bouwer's *Gaia* (2021), as well as individual readings of such anticipated texts as Mark Jenkin's *Enys Men* (2023). On the page, texts reviewed include Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *The Daughter of Dr Maureau* (2022), Tanya Krzywinska and Ruth Heholt's *Gothic Kernow: Cornwall as Strange Fiction* (2022), Kataryzna Ancut and Deimantas Valančiūnas' *South Asian Gothic: Haunted Cultures, Histories, and Media* (2021), and, interestingly, a standout review of *The Secret Life of Fungi* (2020), which satisfyingly resonates with the themes of fungal horror in several of the films reviewed. Our Creative Corner features a diverse range of creative submissions exploring intriguingly, provocatively, and sometimes heartbreakingly the darker intermeshings between the human and the more-than-human. Amidst the creative submissions received this year were a wealth of original pieces for our cover image, after we advertised an open call. We were in awe of many of the submissions received, but ultimately selected 'Watching and Waiting' by Lydia Rose. In every sense a work of art, this piece embodies for us so much of the mystery and dark enticement of everything that is Gothic Nature.

It is, as we have said already, hard to believe that it is just ten years since Smith and Hughes first explored the Gothic through theories of ecocriticism in their collection; but it is equally hard to fathom the amazing resilience and resolve of our contributors who, in the lingering aftermath of a devastating pandemic and the attendant academic instability and uncertainty, continue to inspire and embolden us with their commitment, creativity, and scholarly acumen: qualities which we feel reverberate throughout this fourth issue of *Gothic*

Nature. This journal, moreover, simply would not exist without the tireless support, dedication, and kindness from our Editorial Board, Peer Reviewers, and Reviews Editors. We wish in particular to thank the fantastic Ashley Kniss, our Film & TV Reviews Editor, for her tireless work, commitment, and organisation as well as the brilliant Jimmy Packham, our Book Reviews Editor, for his keen eye, hard work, and good humour. We also wish to thank Stacy Alaimo, Eric G. Anderson, Scott Brewster, Kevin Corstorphine, Rachele Dini, Simon C. Estok, Tom J. Hillard, William Hughes, Derek Johnston, Dawn Keetley, Ian Kinane, John Miller, Matthew Wynn Sivils, Andrew Smith, Samantha Walton, and Jennifer Schell. And last but not least, our Website Designer, Michael Belcher, for his patience and generosity—and without whom you’d be looking at a blank website, if that.

We sincerely hope you enjoy this next instalment of *Gothic Nature*—and we hope to see you again.

Elizabeth & Harriet

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Ecogothic: Ten Years On

William Hughes and Andrew Smith

ABSTRACT

Published by Manchester University Press in 2013, *Ecogothic* opened a debate regarding the intimacy of ecology and horror that had for the most part been ignored by an academic ecocriticism more focused upon Romanticism than Gothic. The subsequent decade has moved the genre from the margins to the centre of ecocritical debate and, reciprocally, has prompted a reconsideration of the boundaries of what might be regarded as Gothic in terms of content, interpretation or implications. In this essay, the two original editors of *Ecogothic* review some of the developments associated with a decade that has introduced a provocative, polemic, and often overtly activist edge to academic ecocriticism. Acknowledging the presence of such crucial preoccupations as animal studies and plant studies, and embracing threatened terrains as expansive as the oceans or as intimate as the physiology of human airways, the authors contemplate the place which ecoGothic as a critical approach has come to occupy across the ten years that followed the publication of *Ecogothic*, the critical volume.

When we were invited by the editors of *Gothic Nature Journal* to reflect on the progress of ecoGothic criticism over the decade following the publication of *Ecogothic* (2013) we were delighted—and, admittedly, somewhat daunted—at the prospect of trying to summarise developments in such a rich, and still expanding, critical field. In *Ecogothic* we, as commissioning editors as well as individual contributors, attempted to define, as a plural rather than singular entity, a nascent form of criticism the focus of which could not be limited to the then-accepted bounds of the Gothic as a genre or a mode. This critical focus was clearly capable of interrogating works—such as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), for example—which were not obvious contenders for a place in a conventionally ‘Gothic’ tradition, even where such works perceptibly mobilised a range of issues which were undoubtedly matters of generic concern, and embodied these within characterisations and figurative geographies that recalled, if only obliquely, creditably ‘Gothic’ sensibilities.

This effective expansion of the existing critical boundaries which demarcate the Gothic, and the associated coupling of the genre with an increasingly diverse range of texts and contexts, has inevitably been paralleled by a corresponding evolution of the theory and practice of ecoGothic as an integral—but still distinctive—reflex of academic ecocriticism. However arbitrary the temporality which marks developments through decades might be, the moment of reflection represented by both this introduction and the material which it prefaces, provides the ecocritical community with an opportune moment to review and assess what has come before, and speculate upon what might come after, a relatively short historical period in which ‘crisis’ became a cultural watchword, ‘activist’ a public profession, and the Anthropocene a concept the implications of which circulated far beyond university seminar rooms, specialist journals and academic conferences. Hence, the focus of this opening contribution to the fourth issue of *Gothic Nature Journal* is the organic mutability of ecoGothic—its tendency to both grow in intellectual presence and to evolve into new forms which variously accommodate, cope with or else challenge an intellectual as well as ecological environment still very much perceptibly rendered dynamic by crisis. In ten years, ecoGothic has comprehended, embraced, and sometimes problematised a variety of ecocritical and cultural preoccupations, from animal and plant studies to the blue plenitude (or projected wilderness) of the oceans, and from the flooded (or desiccated) vastness of global landscape to the microbiology of a pandemic virus equally capable of laying waste to lives, economies and treasured freedoms. This is the matter with which this opening essay is concerned.

The manner in which ecocriticism—which was, by 2013, an established theoretical standpoint—might be applied to disturbed, or disturbing, landscapes provided one way of contemplating how a Gothic presence might inhabit these spaces even in texts which seemed to be ostensibly less ‘Gothic’ than others. The cultural implications of spatial and organic (rather than purely economic) geography immediately suggested themselves as a theoretical entrepôt, a starting point at least from which a more substantial definition might be projected. The evident environmental crisis which so preoccupied academic ecocriticism in the first two decades of the current century thus opened up an immediate vista for consideration, the everyday Anthropocene having as much a capacity for the expression of horror as any extraordinary or supernatural environment. Hence, in fiction as well as the documentary mode, explorations of different terrains such as woods, ice caps, and islands, helped to identify the

places where a seemingly Gothic presence provoked troubling questions about ongoing or impending environmental damage. It was notable, indeed, that images of the wilderness—and critical readings suggesting how uncultivated and uninhabited space might be Gothically read—were perceptibly more prevalent in certain national contexts than others. This phenomenon was particularly acute in Continental North America—and in Canada specifically, in recent years—where the wilderness has long presented a vibrant and troubling presence within the cultural imaginary. If such desert places characteristically bespeak a primitive or early holocene past, variously populated by sentient vegetation or else the pre-human Wendigos of mythology, it must be acknowledged that their presence extrudes also into the temporal present of those who trespass upon untamed space, and the speculative future of deteriorating global culture and the post-Anthropocene.³ Logically, therefore, the initial issue regarding a necessary definition of the ecoGothic has, in the decade since the volume's publication, been superseded by a critical focus on the ecoWeird and forms of Science Fiction. This has in turn helped to broaden the field, and to critically enrich approaches to it also. Attempts to improve upon the historically vague definition of Weird Fiction, such as China Miéville's (2009) analysis of the form, has helped to shape more recent ecocritical approaches whose implications inevitably touch once more upon Gothic preoccupations. Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016), for example, has arguably become a critical touchstone for thinking about how the Eerie and the Weird can be employed to reflect on ideas about the environment as both a real and an imagined place. It is to the developing conceptuality of the eerie and the Weird that criticism must arguably look for the most immediate developments in ecoGothic theory.

Many of the chapters in *Ecogothic*, as has already been suggested, addressed representations of the landscape and while critically crucial interventions into the study of landscapes and seascapes continue to sustain the critical field, it is evident these are being influenced by a challenging of the ostensibly discrete nature of species—or, indeed, more broadly organic—existence. That the field of ecoGothic has significantly progressed over the past 10 years is reflected in the nature of the submissions made to *Gothic Nature* since the

³ Immediately, of course, these two visions of the wilderness evoke the work of Algernon Blackwood and in particular 'The Willows' (1907) and 'The Wendigo' (1910). Other relevant works, though, include L. T. C. Rolt's unjustly neglected Irish horror story 'Agony of Flame,' published in the 1948 collection *Sleep No More* and, somewhat later, Stephen King's 'The Mist' and 'Mrs Todd's Shortcut,' both included in *Skeleton Crew* (1985).

inception of the conferences in 2017 and the journal in 2019. As well as providing important commentary and perceptive reflection upon critical developments, the journal also bears witness to emerging interests in plant-animal hybridity, animal-human relations, vegetarianism, and the blue humanities. The range of analysis within *Gothic Nature Journal* addresses the generic tradition from the eighteenth century to the present day, by way of an exploration of novels, films, and music from a range of national traditions with due consideration being given also to the trans-national and trans-media exchanges between them. The journal thus provides a crucial forum for debate as well as reflecting developments in the wider critical field—and, as the preceding tabulation of its subject matter suggests, it is itself engaged in organic processes the nature of which may be said to embrace change by way of gradual evolution as well as through the uncanny processes of hybridity, association and incorporation.

The most significant advances in the field of ecoGothic have naturally taken place under an acute awareness of environmental crisis—and, indeed, of how academic and popular ecocriticism has contemplated the evidently fragile and perceptibly failing Anthropocene. There have been, in particular, a number of recent critical shifts which have focused upon those immediately affected by environmental devastation—most notably the animals which populate those regions subjected to climatic change and habitat destruction. Environmental damage also engenders obvious consequences for food production, and this in turn has implications for species variability, given the interdependence of ostensibly ‘natural’ and artificially ‘commercial’ cultural polities. As the processes of consumption so graphically described in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) may remind us, the demarcation of what is, and is not, ‘animal’ or ‘food’ may well be adjusted under extreme circumstances: in a paranoid, survivalist future, it may not just be vampires who systematically farm *homo sapiens* as a source of cumulative nutrition.⁴

The growth in animal studies as an academic discipline has created many exciting synergies with Gothic Studies. In *Ecogothic* we touched on how *Frankenstein* (1818, revised

⁴ In McCarthy’s work, a nuclear winter, which ends arable agriculture, provokes the consumption of both commercially farmed and wild animals as well as domestic pets; human flesh subsequently provides the only alternative to canned or preserved foods, in one case by way of an effective herd of survivors kept incarcerated in a cellar. Vampires, intriguingly, pursue a similar tactic in order to lessen the risk to their species posed by a hostile humanity or else to guarantee the purity of bloodstock in an age of viral infection: see, for example, the systematic breeding of a girl destined to satiate an international family of vampires in Lucius Shepard’s *The Golden* (1993), or the establishment of a ‘pantry’ of donors in Andrew Fox’s *Fat White Vampire Blues* (2003).

1831) critiqued the Romantic conception of nature by suggesting that ideas about the natural environment might lead to a contemplation of the alienating dead world of the polar ice cap, rather than Wordsworth's notion of bucolic plenitude promoted in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). What we did not consider was that the Creature is *explicitly* described as being composed of human and animal parts—he is assembled from fragments sourced from 'the dissecting room and the slaughter-house' (p. 82), the relative proportions of each not being specified—and so he constitutes a hybridity which addresses Mary Shelley's repeated, if tacitly expressed, question about what does it *mean* to be a person? It is this type of questioning that points towards the critical importance of the post-human, which is closely aligned with the ambitions of a particular strand of animal studies centred on exploring human and animal relations. Critical approaches which directly explore this species interface constitute a significant advancement in Gothic Studies and have obvious environmental implications as they seek to challenge anthropocentric conceptualisations of the natural world. Below we outline the contribution that a number of monographs and edited collections have made to developing the area, but it is important to acknowledge that many journal articles which have also played a significant role in advancing the field as well as the presence of dedicated websites.⁵ Many of the essays in *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out* (2020), edited by Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson, address how the uncanny presence of animals challenges models of 'humanity' in what is clearly an important and evolving area of critical enquiry. The volume is published in the series 'Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature,' which has played a key role in critically consolidating the field of animal studies.

The very act of perceiving an animal, though, interprets its significance and thereby arguably translates it into what are mystical, and implicitly mythical terms. It is but a small epistemological transition from the mythical to the mystical, and through this to the troublingly anthropomorphic. It is thus notable that there have been several recent critical studies of the werewolf in fiction, this being a hitherto overlooked (and truly species-hybrid) Gothic creature which has not, for example, received the type of interpretative attention that has so often been lavished on ghosts and vampires. As we, as Gothic scholars, critically manoeuvre beyond both

⁵ To mention some notable examples, see Eleanor Byrne's 'EcoGothic Dislocations in Hanya Yanagihara's *The People in the Trees*' (2017); Michelle Poland's 'Walking with the Goat God: Gothic Ecology in Algernon Blackwood's *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories*' (2017) and Daniel Arbino's "'The Ugliness of My Surroundings': Tip Marrugg's EcoGothic Poetics of Isolation' (2019). In terms of websites which explore the ecoGothic and creative writing, see Hilary Scharper's: <https://perditanovel.com/the-eco-gothic-2/> and Suzanne Roberts' <https://www.suzanneroberts.net/> both accessed 26 October 2022.

those earlier approaches to the genre which relied heavily on psychoanalysis (with its interests in spectrality) and later investigations informed by theories of the body (with its interests in vampires), so animal studies creates critical paradigms which enable the consideration of other Gothic ‘others’ such as the werewolf.⁶ Clearly, fictional lycanthropy may mobilise more than a fear of latent bestial violence, a naked and unmoderated Hyde who may contrast graphically with a clothed and urbane Jekyll. The werewolf, in its hairy viscerality, draws the perceiver to a mindfulness of spatial as well as physical abjection, to the margins of the forest as well as those of the mind—to the primitive pre-humanity and the mythological as much as to any atavistic persistence supposedly lurking within the clothed bodies of the contemporary world. While some of these engagements with Gothic animals are more environmentally inflected than others, it is clear that the study of both sentient animals and animal-human hybrids provides an important way of thinking about how animals might enact environments and, at times, articulate forms of environmental revenge, with examples ranging from *King Kong* (1933) to the satirical *Sharknado* series (2013-2018). The demarcation between sentient non-humanity and the conventionally human has never been so evidently blurred as it is under the gaze of contemporary criticism.

If this contemplation of the relative position (and congruent identity) of the human and the animal has been critically productive, so too has the growing—and possibly, within the field of criticism, developmentally rhizomic—interest in Gothic plants. *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (2016), edited by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, for example, consists of chapters which explore horrifying plants from the Fourteenth Century to the present day. Keetley’s introductory chapter provides a helpful overview of the various ways in which plants constitute the ultimate alterity to the human and therefore seemingly pose a unique threat to the species. Humanity, of course, also poses a unique and reciprocal threat to plants and the growing area of critical plant studies—also the title of a book series published by Brill since 2013—has produced important work which seeks to explore how philosophy, drawn from many traditions, can be applied to literary representations of singular or collective vegetation. Beyond the pioneering work done in Keetley and Tenga’s *Plant Horror*, Sue Edney’s edited collection *EcoGothic Gardens in the*

⁶Notable contributions to such scholarship include *Werewolves, Wolves and the Gothic* (2017), edited by Robert McKay and John Miller; *In the Company of Wolves: Werewolves, Wolves, and Wild Children*, edited by Sam George and Bill Hughes (2020); and *The Nature of the Beast: Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century* (2020) by Carys Crossen.

Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny Flowers (2020) focuses explicitly on how ecoGothic ideas can be applied to plants of various kinds (found in gardens and greenhouses, woods and flowerbeds) from the period and helps to develop what is an important, emerging, area of critical enquiry which has in turn been expanded further by Elizabeth Parker in *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (2020), a work which examines the Gothic intricacies and possibilities of our cultural perceptions of collective plant life found in the forest. Representations of interactions between humans and plants have likewise been explored in *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019) by Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, who argue that plants should be seen as active agents within their environments, rather than as passive ‘others.’ *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation* (2020), edited by Katherine E. Bishop, David Higgins, and Jerry Määttä likewise includes original essays which explore the politics of representing plants as agents that contribute to utopian, or dystopian worlds. Accounts of horrifying plants and Gothic botany thus provide an important reconsideration of how ecocriticism can be applied to various forms of fantasy in order to explore how plants have been tied, closely and historically, to notions of humanity (through models of vitalism) and have been made to reflect historical and cultural changes which have in turn influenced forms of cultivation. These intersecting and fruitful links between animals, plants, and food, develop further pathways through which the ecoGothic is likely to progress in the immediate future.

The politics of ecocriticism is what is at stake in these studies and the political intersections between environments and persons was also significantly developed by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils in their edited *EcoGothic in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (2017). The volume includes contributions which explore the different ways in which an environment characterised by plants, oceans, and swamps has been engaged with by American writers but also includes several chapters which discuss the impact of slavery and how it too can be read within an ecologically informed context.

The 2014 special issue of the journal *Gothic Studies* contemplating ‘The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century,’ edited by David del Principe, represented the first major revisiting of the defining premises of our 2013 volume. The influence of del Principe’s editorship, however, persists, underwriting again the ongoing revision of the critical complex which unites the animal, vegetable and human with the global and the local, and the historical,

contemporary and speculative, in the theoretical imbrication of Gothic with ecology. Del Principe's collection included several articles that addressed meat-eating in a variety of contexts which demonstrated how a carnivorous preference was, in the period, closely associated with issues of human identity, colonialism, and industrialisation. This is, arguably, a critical trend inaugurated, or certainly significantly developed, by Carol J. Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990), a provocative study which reflected on how forms of species objectification were shaped by gender narratives. The ecological considerations of eating, and the essentially human-benefitting processes of food production are politically clear and should be seen as increasingly important during a period of climate crisis. The significance of food studies is reflected in the number of institutions which offer qualifications on the topic and the presence of dedicated research centres such as the Food Studies Centre at SOAS and the Food Studies Research Network, established in 2011, the latter publishing both a journal and a book series, as well as organising annual symposia. EcoGothic has much to contribute to this ongoing debate, given that Gothic engagements with food have become a significant area of investigation: witness Lorna Piatti-Farnell's *Consuming Gothic: Food and Horror in Film* (2017) and Jimmy Packham's 'Children of the Quorn: *The Vegetarian, Raw* and the Horrors of Vegetarianism,' published in *Gothic Nature* in 2019. Andrew Smith's article in this current issue likewise addresses this important topic by considering how an analysis of Arthur Machen's representation of vegetarianism is related to how the author of 'The Bowmen' (1914) thinks about the environmental, and spiritual, carnage of World War One.

That the environment is a source of fear is never far from these considerations of why nature may seemingly turn upon us. Simon Estok's *The Ecophobic Hypothesis* (2018) makes an important contribution to these debates and helpfully addresses the different ways in which ecophobia continues to permeate an aggressive, and seemingly-self destructive political and cultural response to the environment. It is an approach which can helpfully contextualise our recent experiences of pandemics. Such experiences mean that the animals, plants and wildernesses that have preoccupied academic ecoGothic from its earliest days as an identifiable critical tendency must now be placed in the context of a more subtle and indeed microscopic aspect of the contemporary organic. Just as the ongoing climate crisis has the capacity to affect and undermine the relative well-being, viability and survival of all organic life on the planet, the persistence of viral pandemic disease in its various forms, from conventional influenza to

SARS, likewise threatens not merely the superficialities of human society but also the continued existence of humanity as a viable species itself. The advent of global SARS-COVID, a range of debilitating viral diseases which were identified as recently as 2003, must be contemplated in Gothic terms not merely on account of its transmission between species but also because its presence has profoundly affected the everyday conduct of civil society across the world.⁷ The changes brought about by COVID-19—or by the fear of COVID-19—far exceed the mere imposition of face-masks as a barrier to interpersonal contact. Economically, international trade has been disrupted to an unprecedented extent by labour shortages, a dearth of raw materials and a severely restricted system of transport and distribution that has broken established links between local as well global manufacturers and consumers. Misinformation, distortion and rumour have replaced what was once regarded as news or information, and guerrilla tactics appear to have become the most effective way of imposing one narrative to the exclusion of others. In certain places and at certain times, humanity appears to have lost its faith in science, or in God, or in nature, or in the ostensibly ‘special place’ occupied by the human with regard to any or all of those cultural entities. This situation has been recognised, needless to say, and a special issue of *Critical Quarterly*, published in December 2020 and tellingly entitled ‘CoronaGothic: Cultures of the Pandemic,’ may point the way to further developments in the micropolitics of airborne or water-based threats to the continuing tenure of the Anthropocene.⁸

As this brief snapshot of the preoccupations and projected aspirations of ecoGothic indicates we, as a mindful and critical community of ecoGoths, have come a long way over the past 10 years. As the climate crisis continues to escalate, so our field takes on an increasing political importance. The endurance of ecoGothic, and its commitment to the speculative future as well as to the documented past, enables us to reflect upon the Gothic tradition in order to produce new and provocative readings of old texts; more importantly, perhaps, it provides us also with a coherent and adaptable critical vehicle with which to make sense of our modern malaise.

⁷ For an overview, see Anon., ‘Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS),’ World Health Organisation, Health Topics, available online at https://www.who.int/health-topics/severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome#tab=tab_1, [accessed 26th October 2022].

⁸ This collection drew upon an online conference—the virtual nature of which was itself a consequence of global pandemic restrictions—hosted by @UMGothic, a research network based at the University of Macau, China. The term ‘CoronaGothic’ was coined by Matthew Gibson, another member of the faculty at the University of Macau.

BIOGRAPHIES

Andrew Smith is Professor of Nineteenth-Century English Literature at the University of Sheffield where he co-directs the Centre for the History of the Gothic. He is the author or editor of over 20 published books including *Gothic Fiction and the Writing of Trauma, 1914-1934: The Ghosts of World War One* (2022), *Gothic Death 1740-1914: A Literary History* (2016), *The Ghost Story 1840-1920: A Cultural History* (2010), *Gothic Literature* (2007, revised 2013), *Victorian Demons* (2004) and *Gothic Radicalism* (2000). With William Hughes he edited *EcoGothic* in 2013. With Ben Fisher he co-edits the series ‘Gothic Literary Studies’ and ‘Gothic Authors: Critical Revisions’ for the University of Wales Press. With William Hughes he co-edits the ‘Gothic Companions’ series for Edinburgh University Press. He is a past president of the International Gothic Association.

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GOTHIC NATURE



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Making Gothic Mountains: Everest and the EcoGothic

Jemma Stewart

ABSTRACT

An ecoGothic Everest is arguably a contemporary phenomenon, a lived experience, where human perceptions of the mountain as both monstrous and desirable are enacted through its commodified and environmentally unstable condition. Climate-change-induced alterations on Everest are exacerbated by commercialism: melting glaciers, thickening air, and corrupted waters as corpses and human waste litter the mountainside. Meanwhile, there are accusations that Dark Tourism has found a home on the crowning peak of ‘the roof of the world,’ as would-be summiters photograph bodies acting as route-markers, and droves of hopefuls pay large sums to swarm upon the slopes in their summit bids, regardless of numerous fatal tragedies fuelling the criticism of ‘bagging’ this most prestigious of peaks. Despite the contemporary nature of the ecoGothic on Everest, its manifestation is born out of a historical literary imagination which created the iconography of the Gothic mountain, alongside the rise of mountaineering and its accompanying literature. This article considers how the Gothic aesthetic has influenced mountaineering and in fact contributed to the creation and maintenance of an ecoGothic Everest. The Gothic terror of Everest today is not generated primarily through fictional reimaginings of the untameable wilderness, but through encountering the human-made degradation of the peak, consolidating the mountain as a site of lived ecoGothic in current times. By focalising Everest through the ecoGothic, George Mallory’s famous statement of intent to summit, ‘because it is there,’ no longer seems a legitimate motivation behind so-called human mastery of the mountain.

Mountains are monolithic icons of the Gothic. Scholars broadly agree that mountain landscapes became recurring features of a Gothic aesthetic after the eighteenth-century inauguration of a Romantic Gothic literary tradition (see, for example, Luckhurst, 2021: p. 118). Mountains remained a sinister presence through the meanderings of the Victorian Gothic and beyond, into the strange peaks of twentieth-century weird fiction. This article traces some of the Gothic

mountains found in literary productions to consider the ways that a Gothic aesthetic has influenced mountaineering literature and accounts of ascents. The motivations behind mountaineering have already been widely debated. As such, the urge to gain altitude has been accounted for through considerations of the sublime, the pursuit of scientific and geographical knowledge, the rise of the Victorian ‘New Mountaineer,’ the boom of ‘trippers’ and tourism, the cultural construction of masculinity, and the imperialist and capitalist rationales behind explorative mountaineering. My article offers a new perspective in its bid to stake a claim for Gothic among the aesthetic factors that inform the will to climb. The Gothic, perhaps characteristically surreptitiously, has informed conceptualisations of mountains that spill over from an aesthetic and literary genre into the vocabulary of the climber. Where Gothic has informed cultural attitudes towards mountains, including the values and outlooks of mountaineers, it becomes in part responsible for the current condition of mountainous environments, not least, Everest.

If Gothic has maintained a dialogue with cultural conceptions of mountains and mountaineering literature, it more brazenly asserts its presence in the lived ecoGothic Everest of our moment. The ecoGothic—conceived of as a tool to ‘reposition the ecological beyond the Wordsworthian tradition’ (Smith and Hughes, 2013: p. 3), a ‘theoretical lens of an emerging field of critical enquiry’ (Del Principe, 2014: p. 1), ‘a literary mode at the intersection of environmental writing and the gothic’ (Keetley and Wynn Sivils, 2018: p. 1) and a ‘flavoured mode’ which is ‘part-genre, part-critical lens’ (Parker, 2020: p. 36, p. 275)—has leapt out of the page/screen/canvas to become something that we can experience, or even suffer, as ‘lived.’ I contest that a lived ecoGothic can be as much informed by ‘Gothic’ or ‘ecoGothic’ textual and cultural productions as it is a phenomenon that may be responded to within their imaginative textual forms. Arguably, Gothic is now one of the dominant aesthetic experiences that characterises an ascent to the crowning peak of the Himalayan ‘roof of the world.’ Everest epitomises the ecoGothic in perhaps unanticipated ways: it not only provides the climber with a physical and mental challenge in a natural setting which is laced with fear and shock, but also an ecological encounter redolent with horrors that have evolved out of anthropogenic action. It is a harbinger and a case study of our collapsing climate and our inability to treat this fact with an appropriate response. EcoGothic Everest is the more hands-on, extrovert relative of the traditional Gothic mountain of the human imagination. It is an extreme manifestation of all our

baggage, mental and physical, that has been inflicted on the hillsides in the relatively short history of mountaineering. Gothic, along with the other distinct yet interconnected motivations to ‘master’ the mountain, can be held in part accountable for the ecoGothic Everest we are confronted with in current times. Accountable, because, on an ecoGothic Everest, the Gothic aesthetic is terrifyingly alive.

Three sections will follow to establish concepts of and connections between Gothic mountains, a climber’s Gothic and the current lived ecoGothic situation on Everest. ‘Gothic Mountains in Fiction’ argues that the mountain has stood stalwart as a feature of the Gothic imagination, its iconography evolving and enduring through to the present day. ‘The Mountaineer’s Gothic’ explores how the language and imagery of the Gothic was taken up within mountaineering literature, and how accounts of ascents perpetuate and continue to shape the view of mountains as Gothic, in league with the tropes of that genre. ‘Mountains of the Mind No More? Living an EcoGothic Everest’ discusses how Gothic is manifest and reflected back at us through environmental degradation and as a lived experience, in a case study of the world’s highest mountain.

Gothic Mountains in Fiction

Robert McFarlane’s *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (2003), traces the ups and downs of human perceptions of mountains and the predominantly Western methods of constructing them. Initially ‘aesthetically repellent,’ ‘the habitat of the supernatural and the hostile,’ mountains prior to the eighteenth century were not looked upon with awe or wonder, but as obscure and threatening sites to be avoided at all costs (McFarlane, 2003: p. 15). McFarlane follows the development of a ‘coherent sense’ of ‘the splendour of the mountainous landscape’ that emerged in the late-eighteenth century and arguably came to shape the way Western culture still venerates ‘the vertical, the ferocious, the icy’ (p. 15, p. 17, pp. 74–77). This binary and sharp shift from loathing to love, from abhorrence to desire, strikes a chord with arguments concerning the Gothicism’s preoccupation with the recoil of horror versus the spiritual elevation of terror (Beasley, 2019). It is in fact appeal, or a form of ecophilia, embroidered by a sense of the appalling or ecophobic, that continues to characterise Western

representations and treatment of mountains (on ecophobia, see Estok, 2009). When we perceive mountains as both monstrous and harbouring monsters, and simultaneously as sites of desire, we view them through an ecoGothic lens. Elizabeth Parker suggests that the term ecoGothic incorporates ‘that tinge of desire that can accompany terror’ (Parker, 2020: p. 138), and following this definition, we might easily imagine how ecoGothic speaks to the impressions, motivations and experiences of climbers. Therefore, the mountaineer, too, gradually ascends into a central role on the Gothic mountain, becoming as integral to the aesthetic as the peaks themselves.

As Fred Botting (1996) states, in the eighteenth century ‘mountains were the foremost objects of the natural sublime’ (p. 38). Edmund Burke (1757) suggested that their ‘greatness of dimension [...] vastness of extent, or quantity, has the most striking effect’ in summoning the paradoxical combination of terror and delight so integral to the elevated emotional state of the sublime (pp. 51–52, p. 13). The sublimity of mountains can be traced correspondingly in Romantic Gothic fiction. Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) and *The Italian* (1797), present majestic, lonely, savage, and even melting mountains (*A Sicilian Romance*, 1830: p. 58 and *The Italian*, 2008: pp. 86–87), tinged with picturesque beauty that coexists with uncertainty about the excesses of the wilderness (see Felsch on the picturesque in mountain environments, 2009: pp. 343–44, and Estok for an example of perceived excesses in nature, 2019: p. 44). In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Victor Frankenstein journeys through ‘the mighty Alps’ towards the valley of Chamounix and Mont Blanc (1993: p. 58, p. 59, p. 73). The language used to describe them is that of grandeur, the superlative, and speculative. The ethereal Alps are as agential as any human or abhuman character in this novel, and the mountains assert their presence equally as friends and assailants (p. 29, p. 30, p. 74 and p. 78).

The Gothic mountain appears to have receded in the cultural imagination after the waning of Romanticism and the domestication of the Gothic in the mid-nineteenth century. However, established tropes began to be reworked once they re-surfaced. Roger Robinson (2017) traces the ‘Mountain Gothic’ of Samuel Butler in nineteenth-century New Zealand, with a close reading of Gothic conventions in *Erewhon; or, Over the Range* (1872) to suggest a critique of ‘colonial arrogance’ (p. 155). Aligning colonial themes with the Gothic mountain

would prove a pattern—not, however, consistently with the intent to undermine the ideology of imperialism, but rather to embrace it. As the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic loomed, the mountain became embroiled in notions of the colonial confrontation (see Brantlinger for definitions of imperial Gothic, 2012). In the imperial Gothic of Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), for example, the feminised mountain topography of the fictional Sheba’s Breasts suggests a masculine-Gothic nightmare of ‘a land that refuses to nurture and refuses sustenance to man,’ as Rebecca Stott notes (1992: p. 93). Haggard’s peaks of ‘awful white solemnity’ are ‘like the pillars of a gigantic gateway’ and ‘shaped exactly like a woman’s breasts’ (*Fig. 1* and Haggard, 2016: p. 56). They are veiled in mystery, guarding a secret to be penetrated, and wrapped in ‘a curious gauzy mist’ which only permits the adventurers to ‘trace their pure and gigantic outline swelling ghost-like through the fleecy envelope’ (Haggard, 2016: p. 56). The coyness of these mountains—female, seductive, and incorrigible—is conveyed as simultaneously imposing and inviting. Equating wilderness with woman, creating a Gothic *femme fatale* of mountains, is equally important to the literature of the climber from the nineteenth century and beyond, as terrifying feminised landscapes require the dominance of man. The urge to crown virgin peaks and embark upon ‘peak bagging’ begin to suggest, in this context, the accumulation of notches in a bedpost.



Fig. 1, Russell Flint, in H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon’s Mines* (London: Cassell & Company, 1907), p.87.

Courtesy of Visual Haggard.org: <http://www.visualhaggard.org/illustrations/711>

The resurgence of a Romantic Gothic landscape in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) showed the continued importance of mountainous environments to the creation of Gothic affect with Jonathan Harker's journey through the Carpathians (2011: pp. 10–11). Harker's travels in the novel reinvigorated the mountainous terrain of the Romantic past for late Victorian Gothic fiction, as the craggy wilderness became emblematic of the uncivilised Other, Count Dracula's inhospitable homeland infested with magic, superstition, barbarity, and a hostile natural world. The novel dramatises reverse-colonisation of the modern world in subsequent chapters, as Stephen D. Arata (1990) has contended. Mountain wilderness then becomes a symbol of primitivism to be abhorred and shunned, foreshadowing another shift in focus, towards the 'weird' monstrous inhabitants of mountains. Weird mountains disclose the potency of alternative knowledge and hitherto unknown existences, their craggy rocks and unexplored caves presented the unknowable aspect of vertiginous terrain which was becoming increasingly probed and mapped. Unsurprisingly, explorative mountaineering became entangled with the Weird through the figure of the mountaineer.

H. G. Wells gives us a mountaineer protagonist with Nunez in the weird tale, 'The Country of the Blind' (1904). Nunez is the survivor of a climbing accident and unwitting explorer of a hidden valley populated by a race of humans inflicted with the 'disease' of blindness (2007: p. 323). He hopes to rule over this race with his seeming advantage of sight (p. 339). Nunez typifies the 'New Mountaineer' (McNee, 2016: p. 31), claiming climbing credentials and modern equipment that merit his supplanting a Swiss guide on an English expedition to the fictional Parascotopetl, 'the Matterhorn of the Andes' (p. 325). He proves susceptible to the sensoria of close physical proximity to the mountain, in thrall to the pleasure and pain of bloodstained and bruised limbs and equally to the 'beautiful desolations' of 'light and fire' immersing both views of mountain summits and the detail of rocks close at hand (p. 326, p. 346). The arrogance of the mountaineer is challenged through horror in the original version of Wells' tale, as Nunez must come to terms with loss rather than merely the prize of discovery and mastery—he must give up either his sight or the love of Medina-Saroté, one of the blind women in the valley. Mountain exploration then presents further dangers in Algernon Blackwood's 'The Glamour of the Snow' (1911). Blackwood's weird monster is a 'snow-being' in the form of a frosty seductress who coerces the writer-protagonist Hibbert higher up the mountains of the Valais Alps than anyone has ever been before (2023: p. 87, p. 94). Hibbert

escapes the precarious encounter with his life, but the concept of a mountain wilderness in equal parts compelling and horrifyingly desolate is personified in Blackwood's *femme fatale*, who embodies the allure and hazards of gaining altitude.

The encounters of the mountaineer are again at the forefront of the narrative in E. F. Benson's 'The Horror-Horn' (1922). Despite the setting of the fictional Ungeheuerhorn mountain in the Swiss Alps, Benson's story shows how Everest now looms large in the literary Gothic imagination. As well as presenting an opportunity for modern recreation and 'trippers,' the mountain becomes a location that harbours primitivism with direct reference to contemporaneous events on Everest: if 'the footprint seen by the climbers on Everest [...] is authentic' it implies that a 'be stranded remnant of mankind is in existence' (2021: p. 77). Inspiration has clearly come from reportage of the high-altitude footprints found during the 1921 Everest reconnaissance expedition, as noted in *The Times* (Anon., 1921: p. 10). The leader of the 1921 Everest reconnaissance mission, Lieutenant Colonel Howard-Bury, had reported human-like footprints crossing the Lhakpa' La, with expedition porters suggesting that the tracks were of the Wild Man of the Snows (Howard-Bury, 1922: p. 141). As Graham Hoyland (2018) points out, this is 'the moment of birth of the Western yeti' (2018: pp. 18–19), and Benson's tale imaginatively speculates upon this historical moment in order to fashion his own fantastic beasts of the mountain. The 'sensual and malevolent bestiality' of the Alpine creatures inspires a horror in the mountaineer and physiologist Professor Ingram that resounds with fears of evolutionary degeneration. Here, the 'abysmally degraded' humanity residing in the mountain caves present an evolutionary throwback threatening rape and cannibalism (Benson, 2021: pp. 76–77). Furthermore, Ingram's credentials contribute to the frisson of realism and the supernatural in the story—his mountaineering descriptions are full of the convincing terminology of climbing ascents and geographical features, his scientific interest in the effects of altitude aligning with those of Alexander Kellas, a member of the 1921 Everest expedition who died on the journey. As Kevan Manwaring (2021) points out, Benson's narrative discusses the stimulating, hallucinatory effects of altitude on the mind, and this physiological and psychological question mark, so important to Himalayan mountaineers in reality, provides the key to Benson's mountain horror (p. 86).

Gothic mountains in fiction and reality continued to collide. The Gothic Mountains in Antarctica were named as such in the 1980s due to their similarities with features of Gothic architecture, human-made structures, which, according to John Ruskin, were a by-product of creative inspiration derived from nature (1851–53: pp. 151–231).⁹ Two years after the Byrd Antarctic Expedition geological party encountered Antarctica’s Gothic Mountains in 1934, H. P. Lovecraft’s novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) was published. Lovecraft’s highest Antarctic mountain peaks are described as going ‘over thirty-five thousand feet’ and putting ‘Everest out of the running’ (2013: p. 192). In a story that seems to prophesise the perils of drilling into the Earth, there are clear ecoGothic aspects to the narrative through its forbidding atmosphere and the consequences of exploiting the natural world (Bressan, 2011 and Fox, 2012). The mountains of madness, ‘dark and sinister above the line of crevasse-riven snow and interstitial glaciers’ frequently recall to the narrator, William Dyer, the ‘strange and disturbing Asian paintings of Nicholas Roerich’ (2013: p. 219, p. 186, and *Fig. 2*). Lovecraft continually refers to Roerich’s Himalayan paintings to raise his own imaginative mountainous terrain: the eerie ‘witchlike cones and pinnacles’ and ‘stark nightmare spires’ epitomising material horrors. The mountain range extends indefinitely as further ‘monstrous exaggerations of nature’ are glimpsed at the conclusion, ‘those other violet westward mountains which the Old Ones had shunned’ (2013: pp. 207–208, p. 230, p. 249, p. 283).



Fig. 2 Nicholas Roerich, *Everest*. Original Title: *Эвепечм* (1938), canvas, tempera, 47 x 80 cm. Public domain, WikiArt: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/everest-1938>

⁹ [Antarctic Names | U.S. Geological Survey \(usgs.gov\)](https://www.usgs.gov/antarctic-names)

It is clear that the Gothic mountain loomed large within fiction and became extremely versatile, with representations of both existing and imagined peaks, conceived variously as spectral, as *femme fatales*, as monstrous and harbouring monsters.¹⁰ As the Gothic mountain existed prior to the explosion of mountaineering as a popular pastime and serious sport, its construction developed in dialogue with cultural conceptions of not only mountains, but the persona of the mountaineer. Where mountaineering literature then essentially followed and was to a degree in debt to the fictional representation of mountains, it becomes pertinent to ask how the mountaineer—and particularly those climbing Everest—assimilated the rhetoric and conventions of Gothic.

The Mountaineer's Gothic

If Gothic is formed of the language of fear (Punter, 1996: p. 18), so, undoubtably, is much of climbing literature. Seemingly courting death, the physical challenges faced by mountaineers were recounted succinctly by the English Himalayan mountaineer Eric Shipton in 1952:

‘No experienced mountaineer can be optimistic about the chances of finding a way up any great Himalayan peak. The vast scale of which these giants are built greatly increases the likelihood of the climber being faced by sheer impossibility—an unclimbable wall, slopes dominated by hanging glaciers, or avalanche-swept couloirs [...] the physical disabilities resulting from altitude, the disastrous consequences which threaten from bad weather.’ (1985: p. 598)

However, Himalayan climbing literature is haunted by the Victorian Golden Age of Alpinism. Queen Victoria is inextricable from empire and imperialism, and equally, her participation in and endorsement of mountaineering was celebrated (see Hatt and Marschner on Victoria and imperialism, 2022; McConnochie on Victoria's mountaineering, 1898). Additionally, Peter Hansen (1995) has demonstrated that the Victorians invented mountaineering as an aspect of

¹⁰ H. Russell Wakefield's 'The Third Shadow' (1950) further concentrates on the character of the climber and high altitude haunting. The story summons key elements of the Gothic Mountain and concerns the nature of mountaineering and who should be allowed to participate in it.

middle-class masculine gender identity and a method of bolstering imperial ideology. As such, many founding ideas about the merits of exploration, mapping the world, taming Nature, and pioneering in the Alpine regions arguably held fast beyond the period and into Himalayan mountaineering literature. Works that emerged out of the mid-nineteenth century and further into what Alan McNee (2016) defines as the *fin de siècle* rise of the ‘Victorian New Mountaineer’ employ the vocabulary of terror *and* horror: they descry something sinister in the mountainside, whether they are invoking the language of the Romantic sublime or the cold, stony reality of the ‘haptic sublime’ (p. 149). Climbers summon up monstrous imagery of the mountainous landscape in simile, metaphor, and symbolism as they perceive the Gothic in nature. Spectrality and monstrosity are born out of what McFarlane (2003) calls the ‘phantasmagoria on display in the high mountains’— ‘those fugitive effects—winds, blizzards, storms, snow-devils, technicoloured parahelia, Brocken Spectres, coronae, fog-bows—which hovered on the verge of the intangible and the invisible’ (p. 211). The condition now known as High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE), the anxiety and threat of injury, pain, and death induce feelings of horror as much as the thrilling effects of the scenery. Moreover, climbing literature often shapes mountains as sites of trauma, establishing a vocabulary of violence towards nature and nature’s reciprocal response in the specific context of mountaineering.

Nineteenth-century mountaineering writers invoke conceptions of the power of deep time, geographical change, personification, danger, and toil to shape their Gothic mountains. Alpine Club president T. G. Bonney sees the Gorner glacier in the Swiss Alps as ‘the giant claw of some hidden monster’ being ‘a fitting sign of the titanic force which has played so large a part in the sculpture of the earth’s surface’ (1868: p. 56). Edward Whymper’s *Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860 to 1869* (1871) gives us a Matterhorn suggestive of a colossal necropolis of ‘decay and ruin,’ a menacing rupture brought about by geological change to appear as ‘the grave-stones of giants’ (1900: p. 105). In *Glaciers of the Alps*, John Tyndall (1860) recalls a ‘thrill of horror’ at the prospect of human consumption within the ‘jaws’ of a glacial crevasse in the Valais Alps. His account of a descent of the Monte Rosa involves an avalanche encounter extolling fear of the unknown, as it ‘shook the air with its thunder. We could not see it, could form no estimate of its distance, could only hear its roar, which, coming to us through the darkness, had an undefinable element of horror in it’ (1906: p. 116, p. 217). Moving from the Alps to the Himalayas—in fact mirroring the attentions of mountaineers—

this trend continued, with George Mallory's famous first-look at Everest relying on the elusive, the obscure, and the monstrous to create its power (*Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance 1921, 1922*: pp. 183–202). Despite its charm, the mountain is a fearsome, all-consuming entity erupting from the earth, 'a prodigious white fang excrescent from the jaw of the world' (p. 184). Enveloped in a misty haze of 'mystery and grandeur,' Mallory is nevertheless 'satisfied that the highest of mountains would not disappoint us' (p. 184). And this, of course, signifies desire. Yet it seems that desire in turn fuels a determination to 'conquer' and to figure natural places as war zones, which provides another familiar motif in mountaineering discourse.

You may not find a more perfect example of a nationalistic drive to 'tame' nature, to triumph and exalt over others, than in the writing of Francis Younghusband. Craig Storti (2021) has narrated the 'hunt' for Mt Everest, wherein Younghusband was a key player, which transformed the reconnaissance and ascent of the mountain into a British national crusade, with the right to summit this most prestigious of 'virgin' peaks figured as a British prerogative (p. 138). Younghusband's contempt for Indigenous peoples and cocksureness about Everest as a 'doomed' mountain defines his prose (1926: p. 311). He paints the Sherpa disinclination to summit as a failure, a sign that they are 'faint-hearted' and 'lacking in spirit,' and he disdainfully aligns the female-goddess-mountain Chomolungma with irrational superstition. But, for Younghusband, the Mount Everest named by the British, can and must be tamed as 'the mountain remains stationary in capacity for defence while he [man] is increasing in capacity to conquer' (1926: p. 311). The war-cry of mountaineering was, by this time, well-established. It also persevered, perhaps even for those who recognised flaws in its conventions. The mountaineer Howard William Tilman wrote an account of the 1938 Everest expedition, and while he professed that he viewed the word 'conquer' as 'revolting,' elsewhere his prose fell into the language of battle as he considered 'besieging Himalayan giants' and making an 'attack on the summit' (1983: p. 430, p. 431, p. 436). The notion of summiteers as 'heroes' who 'conquer' the mountain persists in more recent journalism (see, for example, Natarajan and Jackson, 2022; Miller, 2003). This vocabulary of violence had pre-dated and to some degree informed the fascination with Everest. Edward Whymper, who coined the concept of Everest as 'The Third Pole' had reflected on his Matterhorn experience very much in terms of assault and military conquest, culminating in a tragic loss of life reckoned by the malignant mountain bent on vengeance (McFarlane, 2003: p. 231; Whymper, 1900: p. 393). However, there is a

vulnerability in the absolute conviction of these accounts: failure to conquer, catastrophe, and defeat haunts the texts and consequently opens the gateway to horror. This idea has inspired contemporary Gothic in Michelle Paver's historical fiction *Thin Air* (2016), which situates a Himalayan ghost story on Kanchenjunga, and documents the haunting of explorers by a previously doomed expedition party. The element of horror integral to the mountaineering experience is also pervasive in what might be described as a subgenre of disaster literature within current Everest accounts (Branch, 2017).¹¹ Across the spectrum of mountaineering literature, from its inception to the present day, the book titles themselves can provide us with clues about the attitudes of the authors—mountains are instrumental spaces for the human to play, to battle, to assault, to adventure, to conquer, to test themselves, to survive, to experience thrills and emotional catharsis. The extremes of these accounts are frequently conveyed, and were perhaps experienced, in a mood of susceptibility to Gothic motifs. Gothic literary devices, prominent in the mountaineering literature of the nineteenth century, have lasted. Turn to accounts of Everest encounters in more recent history and we still feel uncanny echoes of the Gothic mountain.

Mount Everest is, to British adventurer Bear Grylls, a *femme fatale*, who alternately sneers at your ambition, 'roars' through her jet stream, hides and conceals her secret, and tries to draw you into her 'ruthless jaws' (2000: p. 10, p. 20, p. 25, p. 54, p. 73, p. 113). Beck Weathers, a climbing client during the notorious 1996 commercial season on Everest, survived a night exposed to the elements on the mountainside after being 'left for dead' amidst a catastrophic storm. His return to camp the following morning is described in terms of a 'low-budget horror film,' his stumbling and frostbitten appearance portraying a gruesome transformation akin to a mummy 'risen from the dead' (Weathers, 2000: p. 83; Krakauer, 1997: p. 251). Beck also describes Everest at night as a place of biblical horror, an apocalyptic Golgotha where the chances of survival are minimal (*Storm over Everest*, 2008: at 8 minutes). The mountain seemingly revels in inducing psychological chaos, feelings of strangeness and deterioration. In the immediate wake of the same 1996 Everest disaster, at Camp Four, Jon Krakauer (1997) took stock in a traumatised vision of his surroundings:

¹¹ See, for example, Anatoli Boukreev and G. Weston DeWalt's *The Climb* (1997); Nick Heil's *Dark Summit* (2008); Lincoln Hall's *Dead Lucky* (2007); Jim Davidson's *The Next Everest* (2021).

‘As I gazed numbly at the sky, it seemed to have turned a preternaturally pale shade of blue, bleached of all but the faintest remnant of colour. The jagged horizon was limned with a coronalike glow that flickered and pulsed before my eyes. I wondered if I had begun the downward spiral into the nightmarish territory of the mad.’ (p. 245)

The mountain then remains an arena for contest, overwhelmingly between *man* and mountain, and continues to rely upon now long-established ‘Gothic’ themes to capture the peril and pull of the contemporary climb. This shows that Gothic, like several other cultural codes and aesthetic responses, is in many ways culpable in reinscribing narratives of mountaineering motivations. To consider how these aesthetic factors have, in turn, influenced our contemporary environment, I now traverse over to Mount Everest, to debate its ongoing evolution into an ecoGothic space.

Mountains of the Mind No More? Living an EcoGothic Everest

A lived ecoGothic takes our dirty work and exhibits it back at us. We no longer *need* to conjure sinister apparitions in the mountains, to plot conflict, envisage disintegration, to romanticise danger and horror on the slopes. Our transgressions become manifest in the most frightful of Gothic tropes—ecological collapse—making the lived ecoGothic a truly contemporary phenomenon. This section will consider the varying ways that Everest wears its ecoGothic credentials: from bodies to black carbon, microplastics to contaminated water, thickening air to litter, and exploitation in the name of personal ambitions.

Stranger than fiction, our methods for making mountains Gothic today find their foundations in the realm of an ongoing, human-made horror that you can consume in real-time and potentially even participate in. Everest epitomises this idea—it is no longer ‘A desert peopled by the storms alone’ as Shelley once described Mont Blanc (Shelley, 1817: p. 179). The mountain is now defined by human presence, it has become a testament to anthropogenic climate change, emblazoned with tropes and motifs of the ecoGothic. The swarming of tourism

on the mountainside and the vast numbers of amateur climbers pursuing what seem to be nightmarishly monomaniacal ‘summitting’ dreams expose our treatment of Everest in ecoGothic terms without so much as turning to narrative fiction or film. From the fearfully named Death Zone to the emergence of human corpses due to climate change, the association of Everest with the macabre, the grotesque, and the unsettling seems somewhat inescapable (Sharma and Schultz, 2019; Lankford, 2021).

Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland have recently discussed how COVID-19 ‘is a direct product of a Gothic environment of our own making’ (2021: p. 2), and conditions on Everest today also reveal a Gothic environment fostered by human activity. 2020, the initial COVID year, gave Everest some respite from the human swarms upon its slopes (Bisharat, 2020; Ethirajan, 2022). This lull, however, was not to last. The state of the mountain showcases the double damage inflicted on the environment through both the way we think and our resultant destructive actions. The lived ecoGothic on Everest is the literalisation of our love and fear of the mountain: realising these visions to generate environmental horror on the roof of the world.

While I have argued that Gothic mountains are raised by the westerner’s figurations of them as both terrifying and desirable, shaped out of human creativity, an ecoGothic Everest relies on stagnation rather than creative innovations or changes. EcoGothic Everest exists while current practices on the mountain are upheld, regardless of the continual, emerging evidence of the consequences pertaining to climate change and commercialisation. Part of the stagnation here may be due to the fact that often, an ecoGothic Everest remains mediated, not conveyed by direct personal experience (for most of us). Climbing Everest is hardly a democratised endeavour—the cost of climbing permits, guides, and all associated travel and paraphernalia still excludes vast numbers of the population from attempting an ascent (for current prices, see Arnette, 2023); as does, Julie Rak (2021) argues, cultural capital and the myth of masculinity—she notes that ‘The critique of amateurism sometimes includes an implicit critique of women, brown men and members of other minority groups who do not “belong” in the Death Zone with authentic climbers’ (p. 177). So, Everest continues to be a relatively exclusive place (and

contemporary mountaineers are keen to stress the continued challenges of a summit bid),¹² in spite of some outrage amongst the mountaineering community against its opening up through commercialisation, reiterating the point that for most of us, gaining knowledge of the situation on the world's highest peak comes through reporting, whether journalistic, sensational, or scientific. And yet, to stress the constructed nature of ecoGothic Everest is—probably unhelpfully—to deny the validity of this as a reality. An example of this relates to waste. It is disturbing to note that humanity has managed to distribute microplastics above 27,000 feet (Wilkinson, 2020). However, there are numerous reports of other, more immediately visible, traces of waste to be found on Everest. Documentaries such as *Sherpa* (2015), *Death Zone: Cleaning Mount Everest* (2018), and *The Porter: The Untold Story at Everest* (2020), combined with press coverage in recent years, which focuses on exploitation, overcrowding, rubbish, and the associated clean-ups, suggest that Everest has become a wasteland of human debris, a casualty of commercial climbing and hubris (Hammer, 2019; Safi and Budhathoki, 2019; Raistakka and Van Oss, 2021).

Everest is now the path well-trodden, and its commercial status in current times is a far cry from the Everest of the Golden Age of Himalayan climbing. Eric Shipton's 1951 expedition established what would eventually become the most popular route up the mountain through the Southern Nepali side—via the South Col, which involves passage through the Khumbu Ice Fall (Arnette, 2011; Moag, 2019). The Ice Fall, as Chris Bonington (1976) describes it, is 'one of the most dangerous sections of the route. It is a frozen cataract, the solid river of ice being broken up into huge blocks which are thrust inexorably downwards by the force of the glacier slowly floating down the Western Cwm' (p. 67). If it was precarious in 1976 when Bonington was writing, it has taken on a new level of danger now—the natural movement of the glacier, combined with more rapid melting caused by warming global temperatures, has exposed an increasing number of bodies as well as heightening risks from flooding and jeopardising the natural water supply (Khadka, 2019). Additionally, the necessity of moving Everest base camp, situated on the thinning Khumbu glacier, became apparent in 2022 due to the dangerous increase in crevasses, rockfall and melt water caused by global warming (Khadka, 2022). Higher up the hill, the South Col glacier has also suffered rapid ice loss since the 1990s

¹² Alan Arnette (2021), for instance, maintains that critics of commercial climbing have perpetuated 'the myth that Everest is easy, a walk-up for amateurs, no experience needed, and your guide will teach you everything you need to know and be there if you get in trouble, when in fact, it is difficult, deadly, and deeply rewarding.'

(Weymouth, 2022; Mulvaney, 2022). Black carbon, a contributing factor to global warming, meanwhile, has been identified as being influential in these cryospheric changes in the Himalaya (Kang et al., 2022). While climate change may result in thicker air and reduce the need for supplemental oxygen in an Everest summit bid, the transformation of Everest due to anthropogenic actions is not something to celebrate (Matthews et al, 2020; Mandel, 2020).

The ‘Gothic’ trajectory on Everest really emerged from the 1990s onwards. A contributing factor is that the body count has been exacerbated by the boom in commercial climbing over the past thirty years (Nuwer, 2015; Everest Queues, 2019; Hutchinson, 2021). Commercial climbing often (but as Jon Krakauer [1997] points out, not always) sees guides and commercial companies usher frequently wealthy, Western, paying clients up the mountain via a series of fixed ropes and ladders, pre-organised camps and porters carrying the lion’s share of equipment and creature comforts (pp. 74–77). This is climbing as adventure tourism, but how might such tourism be defined on an ecoGothic Everest? For Emma McEvoy (2016), Gothic tourism involves ‘the act of visiting, for the purposes of leisure, a location that is presented in terms of the Gothic’ (p. 3). Yet, would-be summiteers are probably not visiting the Himalayas to explicitly engage with Gothic tropes for the purposes of entertainment. Where tourism has in fact fed the ecoGothic on Everest is through its unrelenting offer of human remains in the form (most abysmally) of bodies, with the addition of bodily excretions and the aforementioned unretrieved rubbish. The morbid assessment of Everest as the ‘world’s largest open-air graveyard’ (Serena, 2021) has been buoyed by the challenges of body recovery: the frozen conditions and financial costs of removing the dead. Equally, public fascination with the bodies on Everest is unquestionable and the outcry against this voyeurism is just as prevalent.¹³ *Memento mori*, eyesore, friend, landmark, loved one, pollutant: the corpses on Everest are an undeniable presence. Disrespect for the mountain dead has allegedly extended to selfie-taking with some of the more famous Everest casualties, including Scott Fischer, entangling the

¹³ See, for example, Joe Simpson’s condemnation of the 1999 Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition, which involved the discovery, search, documentation and exhibition of George Mallory’s corpse (2003, pp. 117–124). Simpson describes the treatment of Mallory’s body as amounting ‘to little more than modern-day grave robbing’ (p. 124).

See also the descriptions Simpson takes offence to and some of the photographs presented (nos. 18, 19, 20), in Anker & Roberts, 1999: pp. 20–22, pp. 64–65. See also the film, *The Wildest Dream: Conquest of Everest* (2010).

mountain in moral debates surrounding Dark Tourism.¹⁴ Regardless of highly publicised calamities such as the 1996 Everest disaster—the subject of Jon Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* (1997) and the 2015 *Everest* feature film—summit fever shows no signs of abating. Viral photos exposing overcrowding and the accusations of callous selfishness attributed to contemporary climbers, even from figureheads of mountaineering like Sir Edmund Hillary, consolidate the idea that we are in a new age on Everest (Simpson, 2003: pp. 123–124; *Dying for Everest*, 2007: film). Meanwhile, the attempt by the government of Nepal to impose a photo ban, avoiding negative press for Everest tourism, highlights yet another entanglement between capitalism and climate breakdown (Narula, 2021).

As Jonathan Westaway has reminded us, the stratification of the dead on Everest is enlightening—with most Indigenous labourers dying in the Khumbu Icefall, where they work as icefall doctors, fixing the ropes for the use of paying clients (Westaway, 2022). Westerners seem more often to perish in the Death Zone, where their corpses then act as route markers in their committal to the disingenuously named ‘Rainbow Valley’ (Larkin, 2018; Booth, 2021; Ithal, 2021). Human bodies and the mountain environment are intermeshed, with a variety of consequences that include water contamination and further mortal dangers (most often to Sherpas attempting body recovery—see Branch, 2017). Where early mountaineers figured their desire to summit as a disease infecting their thoughts and behaviour (Storti, 2021: p. 45 on de Sasure), an ecoGothic Everest reveals a reversal. The idea of nature contaminating humanity, undermining the human-Nature dualism, dissolving boundaries, is inverted: human bodies impose themselves on the mountain where they detrimentally recur and reconstitute, causing environmental problems. This is Stacy Alaimo’s trans-corporeality at work, where Everest is ‘a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors’ (2010: p. 3). There is no separation between environment and human, as climbers who die on the mountain are left where they fell and seemingly become fused to the slopes. Despite this perception of mummified fusion, the bodies cannot be thought of as fully inert, as the mountain

¹⁴ Scott Fischer’s widow, Jeannie Price (2015), writes that ‘Still, when part of the thrill for clients now summiting Everest includes taking pictures of Scott Fischer’s body on the descent, and then posting those pictures online or using them for self-promotion in powerpoint presentations, the disgust becomes not only very real, but palpable and simply nauseating.’ See also Usbourne (2019) on Dark Tourism.

actually moves, recirculating the remains. As Everest morphs through continental plate collision, erosion and glacial melting (Constable, 2022), the topography changes and the corpses which are supposedly suspended, preserved, or stuck to the mountainside do in fact shift. The bodies may not, in fact, be quite as ‘frozen and as inanimate as the boulders around’ (Branch, 2017) or embody the state of permanence that we imagine. Their movement, as much as their supposed stasis as route markers, is disturbing. It may not be in a timeframe we can appreciate with the naked eye, but with the appearance of body parts at base camp, this strange agency becomes apparent.

The dualities inherent in appearances on Everest continue with the mountain’s own ecoGothic monster: the elusive Yeti, or Abominable Snowman (Shipton, 1951; Moag, 2019). Emerging as a potential ally to rewilding causes, Everest’s iconic monster has also been made use of to further ventures in explorative mountaineering, which have collapsed now into commercialisation. The Yeti has been harnessed as an exercise in mythological enchantment through Sherpa oral storytelling traditions and sightings amongst the Bhutanese, Tibetans, and Nepalese, and also as a galvanic force for further Everest expeditions and Western capitalist enterprises. As Graham Hoyland (2018) points out, the hunt for the Yeti ensured that ‘climbers get funding for their next trip, the journalists sell more copy and the TV commissioners sell more advertising’ in pursuit of the missing-link monster (2018: p. 284).¹⁵ In a tangled web that includes famous figures of Himalayan climbing, including George Mallory, Eric Shipton and Edmund Hillary, the story of the Yeti illustrates how cryptozoology can be coerced into creationist as well as capitalist agendas, while also speaking to issues of extinction and climate change. Mountaineering icon Reinhold Messner (2000) has conducted his own Yeti research, concluding that the persistence of the monster myth reflects both a recognition and mourning of a loss of wilderness, ‘There is much more behind our thirst for monsters than curiosity or escapism. There is the fear that the earth is losing the last regions where myths can flourish’ (p. 164). Hoyland (2018) also looks to a notion of the Yeti as an undiscovered species to examine recent ‘de-extinction’ cloning experiments and the anxiety surrounding the sixth mass extinction event (p. 267). The Yeti, then, is a multipurpose myth made by humanity, and while quite possibly being a real bear (Worrall, 2017), it also exemplifies that weird blend of

¹⁵ See Howard-Bury (1922), Hillary & Doig (1962), and Shipton (1985).

ecophobia and ecophilia that characterises the ecoGothic. The monster hovers on the border between: on the one hand, inciting destructive behaviour, and on the other, as Parker (2020) contends of ecoGothic monsters more generally, having the potential to ‘remythologise’ (p. 145) our natural settings.

Conclusion: Moving Mountains

This article has argued that Everest is a location where a lived ecoGothic has made its home. To live the ecoGothic we may bring our cultural awareness of Gothic mountains to our encounter with the horror of climate change on the mountain. We can ‘live’ the ecoGothic in an area where collected data and study shows that anthropogenic climate change is present, measured, and under a microscope; we can bear witness to it and feel its effects, whether in the form of breathing thicker air, encountering the human remains of a tragedy, or struggling to contend with polluted water supplies. Yet there is an ambiguity in our experience of the ecoGothic through representation—much of what we know comes through mediated accounts, constructed as spectacle, where we might read of the events but lack the power, capital, or means of inciting change, resulting in the frustration so familiar to anyone concerned about environmental matters.

EcoGothic Everest is already rapidly becoming a topos to raise climate awareness, as the ongoing project work of the *National Geographic and Rolex Perpetual Planet Everest Expedition* demonstrates.¹⁶ But, ecoGothic Everest is also a lazy beast, its existence relies on stagnation and a maintenance of the status quo, which begs the question: can we collectively vanquish it? If humanity is capable of moving mountains to make the challenging or the unlikely occur, then, to de-ecogothicise Everest it might be time to move our metaphors. Should Everest remain a metaphor, it needs to grow out of an ecological imagination where climate disaster becomes the challenge to confront, over and above ‘summitting’ goals or personal catharsis. It could even involve reconceptualising the mountain as a site of ‘new weird geography’ allowing for an interdisciplinary perspective that seeks to ‘live with the problems

¹⁶ Evidence from the installation of weather stations and ice core analysis, which took place because of this expedition, has highlighted some disturbing environmental impacts on Everest. For an overview see [National Geographic Perpetual Planet Expeditions](#).

socio-ecological change and difference inaugurate’ and thus ‘reorient towards socially just worlds’ (Turnbull, Platt & Searle, 2022: pp. 1220-21). This would probably require a dramatic shift in ideological and aesthetic tastes. It would involve reconfiguring many cultural values and patterns of behaviour. Can we reimagine the mountain as more than a blank slate waiting for our inscriptions, and not as a monstrosity to be tamed or a wilderness to battle through, not as a playground or a subordinate to our individual wishes, but as an irreversibly altered yet valuable place worth respecting? I cannot answer that. I can only reiterate that at present, excesses and climate breakdown on Everest consolidate the mountain as a site of the lived ecoGothic.

BIOGRAPHY

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[growing?at_campaign=64&at_custom1=%5Bpost+type%5D&at_custom2=facebook](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220407-how-tall-will-mount-everest-get-before-it-stops-growing?at_campaign=64&at_custom1=%5Bpost+type%5D&at_custom2=facebook)

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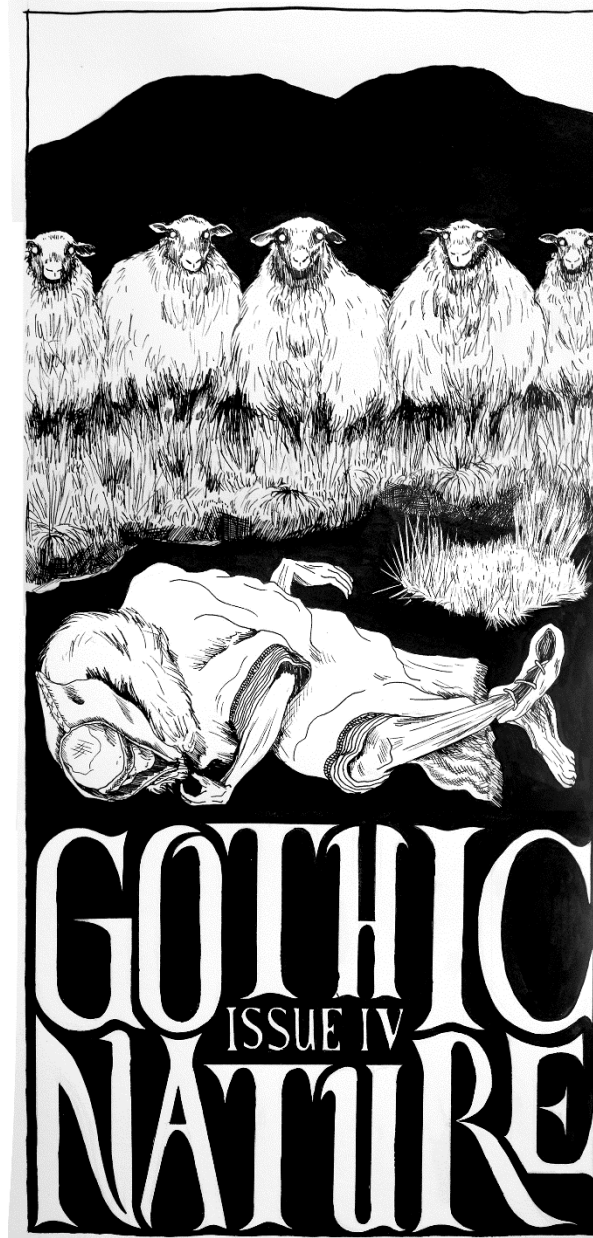
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Defrosting the Gothic: Arctic Poetry in a Melting Sublime

Catherine Greenwood

ABSTRACT

This article traces Gothicised conceptions of the north as a sublime geographical space and argues that as the climate crisis effects material changes on the formerly frozen-solid Arctic, the *unheimlich* literary topography of the north must also change, from a site of obscure terror to one of exposed horror. I integrate into my paper Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory and Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias, and I suggest adding a revised category to the lexicon of Arctic Sublime. I focus on analysis of poetry by British and Canadian poets whose work engages with the Arctic, including contemporary poetry I classify as ecoGothic within the context of global heating.

The green leaf looks back, and sees
a man walking out in this shuddering light
to the sound of air under the ice,
out onto the lake, among sun-cups,
snow penitents: a drowned man, waked
in this weathering ground.
(Robin Robertson, 'Signs on a White Field')

(Arctic) Sublime

The Arctic has traditionally been represented as a sublimely terrifying geographical space in Gothic literature, and the vast and impenetrable north is a thrillingly familiar destination—recall Victor Frankenstein hunting, and being haunted by, his monster, the duo travelling northward through the 'desolate and appalling landscape' of the Orkneys to 'the wilds of Tartary and Russia' (Shelley, 2008: p.164; p. 203). Taunted by invitations the creature carves into tree bark and inscribes on stones, Frankenstein traces its snowy footsteps into 'the eternal frosts': 'Follow me,' entices the monster, 'I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive' (Shelley, p. 206; p. 204).

Creature and creator, pursued and pursuer, the pair are sighted sledging across the icepack by Captain Robert Walton, whose ship is ‘surrounded by mountains of ice which admit of no escape and threaten to ... crush [his] vessel’ and whose crew is dropping from hypothermia (Shelley, p. 212). After Victor Frankenstein is brought onboard and himself succumbs, the monster appears at his creator’s deathbed and advises an aghast Walton that he will travel on an ‘ice raft’ to the ‘most northern extremity of the globe’ to burn himself to ashes on a ‘funeral pile’; the thing then disappears forever into the icy wastes (Shelley, pp. 222-3).

The narrative frame of Walton’s failed expedition was added to Frankenstein’s ur-text in part as Mary Shelley’s response to a manifesto in the 1816 *Quarterly Review* promoting John Franklin’s planned 1818 four-ship quest to discover the North Pole and Northwest Passage, with Shelley both capitalising upon and critiquing Britain’s ‘Arctic Fever’ (Craciun, 2016: pp. 83-5). These voyages captured the imaginations of the British people, whose ‘imagined Arctic was a place of terror’ but also beautiful in a ‘sublime way’ (Loomis, 1977: p. 110). However, as Chauncy Loomis (1977) puts it, when Franklin—along with his prophetically named ships Terror and Erebus and their crews—failed to return from his 1845 expedition, the dream of conquest turned to nightmare when ‘it became clear that the Arctic had swallowed him, obliterated him’ (p. 107); after a six-year search, subsequent revelations about the grisly facts of the crews’ deaths, including well-substantiated evidence of cannibalism, ‘soured the romance’ and ‘subverted the image of the Arctic Sublime’ (p.110).

This conceptual spoiling in the public imagination was presaged by Gothic literature’s ‘significant revision of the eighteenth-century sublime,’ whose ‘bold, but not prophetic’ pictorial descriptions had ‘confirm[ed] rather than challenge[d] the convictions of orthodox faith’ (Morris, 1985: p. 300; p. 299). Vijay Mishra (1994) observes a similar turn in Walton’s own descriptions of the Arctic cold, where awe turns to terror as his ship is engulfed by ice, and identifies this shift as the juncture in which ‘Arctic’ becomes yet another sublime to be added to a growing list (p. 214); Mishra argues that appending historical descriptors such as ‘Romantic’ or ‘post-Kantian’ to the word sublime fails to recognise that by its ‘very nature ... it cannot be contained’ (p. 40). As David Morris (1985) has also acknowledged, the ‘uncomfortable fact’ is that there is no definitive ‘essence of the sublime’ (p. 300), nor is there space here to chart its historical development or attempt a fulsome definition. The term, originating from Longinus’s Greek *hypsos*—typically translated as “height,” “elevation,” and

“loftiness” (Doran, 2015: p. 23)—denotes both geographical and physical topoi as well as aesthetic or literary effects, and the emotions these produce in the viewer or reader.

Robert Doran (2015) credits English writer John Dennis with first identifying this ‘nexus between sublimity and terror’ in journal entries documenting Dennis’s 1688 trip through the Alps¹⁷ (p. 124):

‘One Stumble, and both Life and Carcass had been at once destroy’d. The sense of all this produc’d different motions in me, viz. a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, I was infinitely pleas’d, I trembled’ (Dennis cited in Doran, p. 125).

Doran observes that Edmund Burke’s 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* similarly promotes an aesthetic of tranquility intermingled with terror, and that Burke’s appropriation of the phrase ‘delightful horror’ is ‘obviously redolent’ of Dennis’ original formulation (p.149). In addition to Burke’s providing Gothic novelists with a ‘storehouse of approved and guaranteed terrors,’ Morris credits his *Philosophical Enquiry* with consolidating disparate accounts of the sublime into a system in which terror is the dominating principle (p. 300). In setting forth categories of sublimity such as Terror, Vastness and Obscurity, Burke proposes that

‘[t]o make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes’ (p. 44).

Barbara Freeman (1987) notes that Immanuel Kant’s own influential construct of the sublime, in his 1790 *Critique of Judgement*, is similarly ‘bound up in a system of encasements, injunctions, and imperatives’ that ‘function is to protect the sublime’ from its own ‘monstrous potential’ (p. 22): for instance, sublimity is ‘produced by *colossal* but not *monstrous* representations of nature’ (Kant, par. 26, p. 91, cited in Freeman, p. 22). Freeman convincingly reads Mary Shelley’s novel as staging the impossibility of Kant’s effort to compartmentalise ‘the positive aspect of the sublime from its negative,

¹⁷ Doran usefully distinguishes the ‘sublime proper’ as experienced by Dennis from the conjectural ‘aesthetic sublime’ theorised by Burke and Kant (p. 269).

destructive side'; Freeman's interpretation is bolstered with the telling observation that '[e]ach time a sublime landscape is depicted it is linked to the Monster's appearance' (p. 23; p. 24).

Against Kant's insistence on a morally uplifting sublime, and against Burke's privileging of obscure terror, enter *Frankenstein*. As Mishra sees it, '[i]n writing about the Monster, Mary Shelley also writes herself out of the positive Romantic sublime' (p. 213). To clarify the preceding critical debate regarding the literary effects produced by terror versus the horrid—the former an aesthetic famously championed by Mrs. Radcliffe—perhaps Devendra P. Varma's (1957) blunt explanation puts it best:

'[t]he difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse' (p. 130).

Significantly, it is when Walton's vessel is imperiled by the negative sublime (in the form of immense, crushing structures of ice) that he encounters the monster, which has boarded his ship uninvited—a 'gigantic,' 'loathsome,' 'appalling,' 'distorted' form whose 'vast hand' exhibits a 'colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy' (Shelley, p. 218). Walton's stumbling upon this animated corpse is a moment of decidedly *undelightful*, *unobscured* horror. Mary Shelley's writing herself out of the 'positive Romantic sublime' serves as a harbinger for the argument to follow—that, as the climate crisis effects material changes on the formerly frozen-solid Arctic, the *unheimlich* literary topography of the north must also change, from a site of obscure terror to one of exposed horror.

North

The Arctic wilderness has always been a good place to hide out in, to get lost in, or to get eaten in—a place to disappear. The fascination with the search for a passage through the Arctic maze of Canada's northern archipelago was shared by Canadians, and the Franklin disaster is an enduring leitmotif in literary imagery of the north (Atwood, 1995: p.11). In her 1991 lecture series *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood (1995)

examines a classic CanLit theme, a fascination with ‘being lost in the frozen north—and going crazy there’ (p. 3). She concludes *Strange Things* with some ‘bad news’:

‘[...] the North is not endless. It is not vast and strong, and capable of devouring and digesting all the human dirt thrown its way. The holes in the ozone layer are getting bigger very year; [...] erosion, pollution, and ruthless exploitation are taking their toll.

The edifice of Northern imagery [...] was erected on a reality; if that reality ceases to exist, the imagery, too, will cease to have any resonance or meaning [...]’ (pp.115-116).

While Atwood’s remarks could not have anticipated the extent of environmental change to be wrought by global heating, her concern about the ozone layer now seems prophetic. Regarding what she terms a ‘sublime’ (proper) and ‘timeless poetics of the Arctic space,’ Kirsten Hastrup (2013) echoes Atwood’s warning, stating: ‘It is the ice which holds together the environment, or—indeed—splits it up, and which provides the leitmotif of poetry, story and science;’ the timelessness of these poetics will give way when ‘environmental histories insert themselves’ (p. 58; p. 64).

Frankenstein’s frosts are no longer eternal or everlasting. In the plainly stated opinion of poet Jean McNeil (2011), the marine Arctic has ‘passed its point of no return’ with sea ice levels rapidly diminishing due to global heating (p. 62). In Siberia, overwintering ‘zombie fires’ with a propensity to ‘come back from the dead’ spontaneously combust on permafrost peatbogs (BBC Newsround, n.d.); sinkholes appear in the melting ground, with these portals to hell exposing Ice Age cadavers—the remains of long extinct creatures such as woolly mammoths, rhinos, cave lions and canids of the Pleistocene epoch. These exhumations have resulted in a black market in mammoth tusks, accompanied by environmental degradation of riverbank ice-ivory extraction sites.

Gold

The north is becoming a place from which monsters emerge, rather than retreat into, a vast and deep ‘boneyard’ of what Robert MacFarlane (2019) terms ‘Anthropocene unburials’:

‘These Anthropocene unburials, as I have come to think of them, are proliferating around the world. Forces, objects and substances thought safely confined to the underworld are declaring themselves above ground with powerful consequences. It is easy to aestheticise such events, curating them into a *Wunderkammer* of weirdness. But they are not curios—they are horror shows. Nor are they portents of what is to come—they are the uncanny signs of a crisis that is already here [...]’ (para. 3).

One of these recent unburials is a perfectly preserved one-month old woolly mammoth calf found in the melting permafrost of a Klondike gold mine near Eureka Creek in Canada’s Yukon territory on the hereditary lands of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, uncovered in the summer of 2022 when a digger operator shifting muck hit the frozen body. The site and timing of this strike, considered North America’s most significant paleological find, was auspicious—a ‘little after noon on June 21, National Indigenous People’s Day’—and extremely lucky: ‘a miracle of sorts preserved into the present, a scientific gold mine and simply a beautiful thing,’ in the words of one paleontologist interviewed by the CBC (Proulx, 2022: para.3; para.7).

Ice-mummy as oracle, the contents of her young tummy (undigested grasses) reveal the last moments of her life 40,000 years ago before she was fatally trapped in a bog, her accidental exhumation heralded by a powerful storm that blew in when geologists arrived to claim the body. As the paleontologist reported:

‘And the amazing thing is, within an hour of them being there to do the work, the sky opened up, it turned black, lightning started striking and rain started pouring in’ (Proulx, 2022: ‘She would have been lost in the storm,’ para. 3).

As though magical forces were at play, this scientist employed familiar Gothic imagery to conjure the drama of the momentous discovery and convey the sublime scale of northern weather.¹⁸ Contemporaneous accounts in other newspapers and journals relate the storm’s force

¹⁸ As Barbara Freeman observes, ‘[i]n Longinus, as well as Kant, the lightning flash is one of the most privileged examples of the sublime’ (p. 24).

with similarly heightened language, describing how the valuable find might easily have been washed away in the deluge to languish in mud for another eternity. The calf was given the tribal name *Nun cho ga*, or Big Baby,¹⁹ and ceremonially blessed by Indigenous elders before being placed in her current tomb, cold storage.

David Jaclin (2018) describes how such fossilised ‘gold’ is an artifact of the placer mining process, with de-extinction scientists prospecting washed-out Arctic mine sites for ‘nuggets of ancient DNA,’ their Frankensteinian aim to resurrect a chimera of the extinct mammoth (p. 302-4). Like a modern form of grave-robbing,²⁰ the activities of these resurrectionists take place in Klondike gold fields, which ‘since their discovery in 1897 [...] have produced approximately 20 million ounces of gold’ (Jaclin, 2018: p. 301). This location, near Dawson City and just 150 miles south of the Arctic Circle, is also the setting for one of ‘the most famous poems in Canadian literature, Robert Service’s ‘The Cremation of Sam McGee’ (1907) (Sugars, 2012: p. i).

Service’s large corpus of ‘Kiplingesque verse’ both exploits and builds upon an extant body of ‘mystic-North imagery’: as Atwood (1995) puts it, Service’s poems described ‘the uncanny lure of the North and the awful things it could do to you’ (p.17). Service’s *oeuvre* of sourdough Gothic balladry arises from his own involvement in the Yukon gold rush, and, though Service was a Scottish immigrant, the American Sam McGee serves as an avatar of the poet’s own motives and frigid miseries:

‘Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.

¹⁹ The calf’s size and subsequent containment renders it sublime in the idealised (but ultimately unstable) Kantian formulation: ‘Sublime states of mind must be produced by *colossal* but not *monstrous* representations of nature’ (par. 26, p. 91, cited in Freeman, p. 22).

²⁰ Surgical training in eighteenthcentury Britain required medical students to dissect at least three cadavers and procuring a sufficient supply of recently deceased corpses for the anatomy schools resulted in what Tim Marshall (1995) calls the ‘dead body business,’ an unsavoury but necessary trade reliant upon body-snatching grave-robbes, or ‘resurrectionists’ (pp. 20-21). As Marshall reads it, the ‘fictional doctor’ in the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, himself ‘dabbl[ing] among the unhallowed damp[s] of the grave’ in search of illicit materials, stands for all anatomy professors prior to the 1832 Anatomy Act, which legalised medical dissection of ‘unclaimed bodies from the workhouse’ and thus ‘delivered a reliable supply of corpses to the slab’ (p. 7; pp. 22-3). Shelley’s novel was also informed by an 1803 experiment with ‘galvanic electricity’ in which live wires were applied to the body of a recently hanged criminal in an attempt at ‘reanimating a corpse’ (Marshall, p. 6)—hence my comparison to the equally audacious aims of de-extinction science, and resurrection via DNA extracted from unburied animal cadavers.

He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that "he'd sooner live in hell" (ll. 10-12).

Before Sam succumbs to the 'cursèd cold' he extracts a promise from the poem's unnamed narrator to cremate his remains, for he dreads the fate of being consigned to an 'icy grave.' Burdened with a grinning corpse, the narrator trudges behind the dog sled across the 'homeless snows' in search of combustibles. Finally, as if coming across detritus from the final overland trek of Franklin's men, he happens upon some firewood:

'Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge, and a derelict there lay;
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice it was called the "Alice May."
'Here,' said I, with a sudden cry, "is my cre-ma-tor-eum" (ll. 41-2).

This ruin abandoned in the *unheimlich* snows is haunted by the folly of previous wrecked expeditions and bears traces of Walton's ice-beset ship (and mimics Victor Frankenstein's deathbed request that Walton complete his failed mission to destroy his monstrous creation). Gleefully repurposing what Atwood calls the 'edifice of northern imagery' (p. 116), Service puts a match to the material of maritime Gothic, lighting a Frankensteinian 'funeral pile' to fuel his own narrative's fulcrum as it tilts from horror into parody. A canonic example of Canadian Northern Gothic, 'The Cremation of Sam McGee' also demonstrates what Cynthia Sugars (2012) describes as a 'yearning for settler emplacement and sustainable haunting,' in which the ghosts are 'manufactured' and the landscape itself bears witness to 'dreadful events [...]: "The Arctic trails have their secret tales / that would make your blood run cold"' (p. 412).

The cartographic conjunction of Big Baby and Sam McGee in the Klondike gold fields—displacement and emplacement, the real and the written, bog and frost, the thawed and the cooked—is the trailhead to a passage through an Arctic maze: a consideration of how the poetic gold field of a sublime Arctic imaginary might become overmined, muddied, or liquified.

Arctic (Ice)

‘What do we mean by “the North”?’ asks Atwood, and answers:

‘Until you get to the North Pole, “North” being a direction, is relative. “The North” is thought of as a place, but it’s a place with shifting boundaries. It’s also a state of mind’ (p. 8).

And what do we mean by ‘the Arctic’? According to WorldAtlas.com, the Arctic Circle encompasses everything north of an ‘imaginary line’ located at 66°, 30’N latitude, and much within this boundary is ‘covered with ice.’ From a vantage point above that line, Nancy Campbell’s (2011) poem ‘Ulerussivoq / The Debate’ redirects the question: ‘Where does the Arctic end? Asked how far south / the region reaches, scholars disagree’ (p. 32). These experts variously argue that treeline, temperature, or permafrost marks the ambit, but the speaker questions the utility of such demarcations when the axis of the ‘roving’ Geographic pole is in constant gravitational flux, and ‘drift ice obscures the Arctic’s origin’ (p. 32).

The imaginary Arctic is also subject to such slippage, but ice is a ubiquitous element in literary constructs of an Arctic Sublime. As a polar landscape, the Arctic is distinguished from the Antarctic by its geological composition; put simply, the South Pole is an immense ice-sheet on top of rock, forming a single huge continent, while the North Pole is ice-cap on top of ocean, surrounded by areas of open sea and varied land masses. In regarding the two polar regions as disparate literary settings, Katherine Bowers (2017) nevertheless identifies a fundamental aesthetic commonality between south and north:

‘[...] the key scholarly distinction made between the two is that Antarctic Gothic focuses on the antihuman as a source of fear, while Arctic Gothic dwells on the human. Yet [in polar Gothic] texts, ice creates a negative space, which gives rise to supernatural beings that reflect the self’ (p. 72).

This ‘negative sublime’ is the uncharted Gothic water ventured into by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798 with his poem ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere in Seven Parts.’ As his Mariner proclaims, ‘We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent Sea’ (II. 100. 3-4). Devoid of anything but mast-high structures of floating ice—and that one unfortunate albatross (the

psychic reflection Bowers references)—the towering cryosphere is baldly narrated, as if the volume and scale of it when first encountered overwhelms the Mariner’s powers of description: ‘the ice was here, the ice was there, / the ice was all around’ (I. 60. 1-2).

Fortunately, ice imagery was a portable commodity. Coleridge’s ‘Rime’ was putatively set in a vaguely located southern polar sea, but his ‘sources were descriptions of the Arctic rather than the Antarctic’ (Lowes, 1927: p. 151, cited in Loomis, 1977: p. 98). Loomis (1977) situates the origins of an Arctic Sublime in imagery inherited from accounts of early explorations such as Martin Frobisher’s 1557 Arctic expedition, and notes that Coleridge was influenced by Samuel Purchas’s 1625 collection of northern travel stories featuring descriptions of marvelous sea ice formations—likened, for instance, to ‘white Swannes’ (p. 96). Loomis traces a transference of interest from Alpine to Arctic sublime in travel narratives as taking place in concert with the ‘great period of Arctic exploration’ that kicked off in the nineteenth-century; until ‘Rime,’ he argues, eighteenth-century writers relied on ‘lifeless,’ ‘stock’ and ‘conventional’ Arctic tropes that exhibited a ‘rather strained sublimity’ (pp. 97-8).

About to embark on his journey north, *Frankenstein’s* Robert Walton writes his sister not to worry, for though he is ‘going to unexplored regions’ he ‘shall kill no albatross’ (Shelley, 2008: p. 21). Walton’s overconfident allusion to the ‘Ancient Mariner’ is Mary Shelley’s ‘famous’ response to Coleridge’s ‘negative sublime,’ a deliberate foil referenced to amplify the ‘Romantic hubris’ of Walton (Bowers, 2017: p.13)—and, by extension, to obliquely comment on the entire enterprise of British polar exploration. The reference is also a nod from Shelley that she is sailing in Coleridge’s wake, the first Gothic visionary of a ‘land of frost and snow.’ Her own sources of Arctic imagery came from Coleridge’s poem, ‘a library book about Siberia’ and her lover Percy Shelley’s own ‘paeans to the Alps’ (Spufford, 1996: p. 60).

In considering actual Arctic landscapes encountered first-hand, Hastrup (2013) emphasises the primacy of ice in an enduring Arctic poetics that evokes both beauty and terror to depict ‘the timeless and sublime character of the ice-clad world’ (p. 52):

‘Emplacement within the Arctic topography is literally towered over by geographical structures of such magnitude that there can be no escaping from

them, only a sensation of temporary emergence from topography [...]. Poets recognise this' (p. 56).

In a geopolitical sense, Arctic emplacement comprises the northern parts of Canada, Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden that encroach within the Arctic circle, and the entireties of Alaska, Greenland and Iceland (Kelman, 2017: p. 1). Unlike Antarctica, which is host to only temporary residents, there are permanent settler and indigenous populations in the Arctic, and its human inhabitation predates British and Canadian exploration and extraction expeditions. Apposite sources of literary 'fear' similar (but not identical) to those identified by Bowers in regard to south and north polar Gothic ('antihuman' and 'human') are coeval in early Canadian Northern Gothic—Cynthia Sugars observes that one strand portrays the Arctic wilderness as 'inhabited by savage creatures (animal and human)'; the other expresses it as *terra nullius* 'devoid of ghosts,' hence, as Sugars has argued, the literary impetus for an emplacement of invented spectres (2012: p. 410).²¹

Footsteps (Ice)

Frankenstein's Robert Walton subscribes to the *terra nullius* or *tabula rasa* vision of the north, and assumes that the Arctic's 'icy climes'—a 'region of beauty and delight'—will be unpopulated; before setting sail from Russia, he voices his own desire for polar emplacement:

'I shall satiate any ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man'
(Shelley, 2008: p.16).

Such ardent curiosity fuelled the commodification of sublime imagery for a nineteenth-century reading public, who, like Walton, entertained a number of speculations about the polar north—as Loomis (1977) puts it, 'What was there? an open polar sea beyond a rim of ice? a continent supporting an unknown civilization? a huge hole with a maelstrom whirling into it?' (p. 100).

²¹ As Adriana Craciun (2016) notes, in Britain similar ' [...] contradictions and ideologically corrupt visions of an empty and uninhabited Victorian Arctic are [...] well established' (p. 9).

It was a bay of berg-laden water and looming cliffs christened without irony *Meta Incognito*. A blank white slate where one could scratch ‘I was here.’ And it was a Gothic heterotopia—a ‘simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space’ (Foucault, 1967: p. 24)—somewhere up above the imaginary line. A fascination with the uncanny North and the stuff it is composed of informed the early nineteenth-century zeitgeist, as Catherine Lanone (2010) explains:

‘[...] at a time when England was heading for the soot and smoke of the Industrial Revolution, transparent, pristine ice became a source of fascination, an obsession prompted both by science and aesthetics. From crystals to glaciers to the blank maps of the poles, the mystery of metamorphic ice beckoned, a transparent oxymoron, neither liquid nor solid, an enticing alchemy casting its spell, the enigma of purity and creation’ (p. 202).

The enigma of ice remains, even as its mysteries are now being decoded as data—polar ice is oracular, as Jean McNeil (2011) puts it, and a preserver of ‘the atmospheric past through the chemical residues it traps’ (p. 4).

McNeil shares in Walton’s ardent curiosity, acknowledging that polar travelers enact ‘a pre-scripted story, of exploration and quest. In part it’s an old instinct to venture over the edge of the known world’ (p. 5). In recent years, Arctic and Antarctic fellowships and residencies have enabled writers and artists to travel to these polar icescapes and experience emplacement amid the metaphoric icescapes²²; McNeil’s 2011 book *Night Orders: Poems from Antarctica and the Arctic* is a result of such opportunities. *Night Orders* documents her maritime experience of the polar regions, with a 2006 shipboard voyage to Antarctica and an Arctic sailing to the west coast of Greenland in 2009, and is not, as she alerts us, a ‘conventional poetry collection,’ but a chronological account rendered in sketches, diary entries and poem sequences, with paratexts taken from ship-log and marine lingo (pp. 2-7).

In the Antarctic McNeil discovers a 1950’s *Glossary of Ice Terms* in the base camp library, and like Coleridge’s sources of imagery for his South Pole sublime, it is a largely

²² A.B. Jackson notes a correlation between such creative residencies and the renewed ‘surge of interest in polar history within the mass-market publishing industry’ that commenced in the late 20th century (2015, pp. 6-7).

comprised of loan-words from Arctic languages, nouns such as the Greenlandic *nunatuk* or the Russian *stambuka* or *sastrugi* to describe particular ice structures (p. 4-6). McNeil's collection includes a series of prose poems inspired by this linguistic ice-ography, data collected from both up-close observation and scientific vocabulary affirming her thesis that 'the discovery of a new crop of words can provoke and inform a completely new artistic work' (p. 5).

From a section interspersed with found texts from a volume of British Admiralty sailing directions, this prose poem excerpt identifies a poetic and human impulse to rely on figurative language to capture such phenomena:

'There is no way out of the fjord; its mouth is blocked by a tongue of ice. The ice lean and monumental the mind can only understand it through comparison: cathedrals, tors, airliners. Mid-August and the sun only black whalehunter hours in the town warming to its own demise. The sea ice is gone' (p. 74, 'Isfjord').

The town 'warming to its own demise' is both seaport and the floating sun-whittled city of ice, structures both real and verbal melting as the metaphor ice must also warm to its own demise. Ice is 'technically [...] immortal'; enjoying a sort of afterlife as it is 'transformed, through melt, into water, into vapour' (p. 4). Francis Spufford (2004) identifies a similar metamorphic property in ice composed of imagery:

'People have seen cities in ice for centuries. The curious thing is that the style of the architecture changes faithfully with changing tastes. Towers and spires were perennial, while seventeenth-century sailors in the Arctic started glimpsing Baroque fretwork, and Victorians added in Egyptian obelisks and Stone Age dolmens. Captain Scott's men saw a complete model of St Paul's Cathedral float by in the Antarctic—just like a 'visit London' poster on the Edwardian tube' (p. 281).

Robin Robertson's (2010) poem 'Signs on a White Field' is a virtuoso catalogue of visual and sonic ice-imagery deploying such similes updated for the 21st century. On first reading this free verse lyric seems more post-romantic perambulation than Arctic ecoGothic, as the speaker circumnavigates a frozen lake in an unspecified Arctic icescape, a flaneur of the

frosts, exercising his onomatopoeic muscle as if tracking Stephen Dedalus' stride in *Ulysses* (from which Robertson's poem almost certainly takes its title).²³ Here, he likens huge blocks of ice heaved up by the liquid entity below to 'luggage on a carousel'—suggesting a terminus, perhaps, a point of arrival at his own personal epiphany, or a transition point (2010: p. 4).

The poem opens on an image of solar heat—'the burnt horizon'—and the sun's climacteric is the force triggering contraction in the lake's 'hidden tons of water,' its 'groans and rumbles / like someone shifting heavy tables far below' (p. 4). The ensuing auditory imagery gives the poem its tension and drama, and an unnerving subterranean subtext, that the furniture of our earthly abode is moving beneath us. The speaker 'hears the lake all night as a distant war,' and its 'boom' and 'detonating crack' recalls the 'fearful' sea ice in Coleridge's *Rime*, which was not 'silent' in perpetuity but 'cracke'd and growl'd, and roar'd and howl'd— / like noises of a swoond' (l. 60. 3-4). In the morning Robertson's speaker walks onto the ice 'among sun-cups, / snow penitents,' to clear a 'porthole in the crust' and gaze down (p. 5): he is not alone in this wilderness, for a presence observes him from below a pane of ice—*silá*, as Kirsten Hastrup might call it, or the vengeful 'Polar Spirit' Katherine Bowers identifies in Coleridge's 'Rime' (p.73), perhaps; or simply his own psyche reflected, narcissus-like, another sort of penitent.

Robertson uses terminology with ready-made figurative resonance: snow penitents are peaked formations created by melt, clusters of stalagmites that resemble white-hooded Spanish monks.²⁴ The effect of weather on snow is described by Nancy Campbell, a contemporary poet and non-fiction writer who spent time in Arctic residencies. During her own seven-year sojourn in the north, she learns that Antarctic explorers' footsteps had a lingering effect:

'the snow that they stepped on, compressed by the weight of the body, would remain fixed in place as the lighter, unmarked snow around them blew away. These pillars of ice were visible from far away long after the explorer had passed on' (2018: p. 153).

²³ For a sidebar discussion of onomatopoeia and intertextuality in *Ulysses*, see Murray McArthur's article, "'Signs on a White Field": Semiotics and Forgery in the "Proteus" Chapter of *Ulysses*,' *ELH*, 53(3), pp. 633-652.

²⁴ National Geographic (2013) offers this evocative description: '*Nieve penitente*, or penitent snow, are collections of spires that resemble robed monks—or penitents. They are flattened columns of snow wider at the base than at the tip and can range in height from 3 to 20 feet (1 to 6 meters).'

Here, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's footsteps stand proud of Robertson's poem, a scaffolding at first concealed under 'White Field's' fresh fall of updated imagery. The penance-driven trajectory of the Mariner's narrative—'the man hath penance done / and penance more will do' (V. 413-4) —charts a path for Robertson's speaker; the Mariner like someone 'seven days drown'd' (VII. 586) receives a spiritual resuscitation, while Robertson's 'drowned man' is 'waked,' or woken to an unstated revelation (p. 5). Following Coleridge's use of auditory and visual imagery to conjure—as 'Rime' did—what Bowers calls 'the alien quality of polar space' (p. 74), Robertson amplifies sound effects and stacks on the ice slabs to create the overwhelming sensory experience of an uncanny landscape, and there are subtle markers of allusion along the way: in 'Rime' the Ocean's 'great bright eye most silently / Up to to the moon is cast' (VI. 422) and in 'White Field' the lake's 'living green' regards the speaker (p. 5); where the Mariner hears the 'sweet jargoning' of 'all little birds' (V. 350-1), Robertson's speaker listens to a 'racket of jackdaws, the serrated call / of a falcon' (p. 4).

And should we doubt we are on a ship, albeit an allegorical one, 'White Field' features 'a deck' and that 'porthole' in the snow crust—along with a jump scare in 'the detonating crack' of 'a dropped plank' (p. 4-5).

Cairns

The changeable nature of Arctic Sea posed immense challenges for explorers trying to chart or follow unfixable cartographies due to the mutable nature of the ice itself; as Catherine Lanone (2010) notes, 'a passage which is open will be closed the next moment, it cannot be charted or explored like land' (p. 208). The Arctic maze as a sublime Gothic space exhibits a characteristic common to all heterotopias, 'a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them permeable' (Foucault, 1967: p. 26). Foucault offers examples related to social, religious, or civic spaces, but the principle may be extended to the geography of the high Arctic, especially regarding the heterotopic element of 'curious exclusions'; consider how the icescape, long inhabited by indigenous people, so persistently resisted the British Admiralty's quest to find a Northwest Passage connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. In 1818 (the year of *Frankenstein's* first publication) the Scottish officer John Ross commanded the first of the Admiralty's explorations to locate this then-mythical route, somewhere in the archipelago

above North America's northern coastline. Sailing into Lancaster Sound, Ross approached what would eventually prove to be the eastern gate to the Passage; however, he was '[...] deceived by refraction, [thinking] he saw a mountain range closing the horizon,' and sailed back to England (Lanone, 2010: p. 203).

Was this a *Fata Morgana* conjured by *sila* to keep Ross out, an act of sorcery by sea and ice? This superior mirage lives on in the name Ross assigned it on his maps, the Croker Mountain Range. Hastrup (2013) writes that Ross was similarly rebuffed when attempting ingress to Davis Strait, but in this instance 'it was simply packed ice that blocked his passage; it argued against his progress, which was then dropped' (p. 53).

John Ross eventually returned to the Arctic, and after he successfully reached the Magnetic Pole in 1831, the ice again conspired against him—this time denying him exit—and his ship was hopelessly frozen stuck. The ensuing desperate search for rescue may have inspired the handwritten poem Ross buried under a cairn on Leopold Island in the winter of 1832 (Behrisch, 2003: p. 73). Cairns in the Scottish Highlands served as 'grave markers, wayfinding marks, or both'—and in the Arctic the British expeditions used them as such, but also as 'nodes in a postal system' (Craciun, 2016: p. 73-5). Ross's poem was never discovered, but fortunately he mailed a copy to Sir John Barrow twenty years later, and 'Far as the eye can reach' is now preserved in the British Library. Ross's reason for secretly burying the poem is 'not surprising,' Erica Behrisch (2003) suggests, '[g]iven the clear discursive break' with the 'straightforward and objective rhetoric' of his 'official' expedition papers (p. 84). The Admiralty expected 'neutrality' in the scientific record and 'the explorer existed only as a data recorder':

'In order to record, they had to survive. Perhaps because this personal engagement with the Arctic landscape had no place in Admiralty reports, it became a central theme of the poetry written by nineteenth-century Arctic explorers. Scientific exploration and artistic production combined on expeditions to show two sides of Arctic adventure: the objective and the subjective, the official and the personal' (pp.76-7).

Behrisch's astute reading of Ross's poem demonstrates how it resists the authoritative 'language of science' by using 'intentionally vague' description and acknowledging the poet's 'inability to understand the inner workings of the Arctic world' (p. 82).

Instead, 'Far as the eye can reach' records a negative sublime and the emotions of desolation, sorrow, and exhaustion it inspires in a crew confronted with 'one vast Icy Solitude profound' (l. 2). The immense landscape—'desolate and bare' of vegetation and unrelieved by any 'soothing vapours' (ll. 4-6)—and the bleakness it inspires is compressed, like a tightly packed snowball, into a single compact stanza; the 10-line poem is composed of five rhymed couplets, a variation on the *dizain*, a French stanza form sometimes adopted by John Keats.²⁵ These controlled and decorous couplets function as anti-ode, or anti-pastoral. The first six lines are an impressionistic rendering of the utter solitude and profound silence surrounding the men, in which the voice—no speaking 'I' to set it apart—both observes and experiences this frigid stasis with them. There is a volta or sonnet-like turn in the last four lines, a despairing apostrophic exclamation that reaches to comprehend or explain how 'these Regions' 'had all at once stood still' (ll. 7-10).

Here, the white field is icepack, and the men are beset by 'a field of lifeless sorrow' underpinned by a frozen sea; the 'proud waves' are a symbol of the same fatal romantic hubris that Mary Shelley critiqued, as the ocean's own agency is forcefully stilled by a supernatural power and the wind's 'fatal blow' (ll. 7-10). That the crew must seek rest on this morgue-like, inhospitable surface hints at the horrors of polar subsistence—as glossed by Behrisch:

'Their placement on "the snowclad ground" keeps the crew physically separated from the natural world—they lie atop it, separated from the earth by a layer of snow—but the "silent stillness" of their collective sleep makes their .relationship to the landscape much more ambiguous' (p. 81).

The Arctic-as-mortuary implication is rendered more poignant with a biographical critique of the poem: some crew members died on this expedition, and Ross and his men were blocked in the Barrow Strait 'by an unbroken field of ice' and 'waited four weeks for the ice to melt' before

²⁵ For more on this particular form, see Robert Lee Brewer's (2016) article 'Dizain: Poetic Forms.' Available from <https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-poetry/dizain-poetic-form> [Accessed November 7, 2022]

turning around in defeat (Wikipedia, 2022). Although Ross interacted with Inuit people, in ‘Far as the eye can reach’ the depicted resistance of the landscape to human and other life forms works to reinforce the notion that the Arctic is an empty, uninhabited zone.

Nancy Campbell’s 2014 poem ‘Kinguleruttui / The Survivors’ evokes the same impermeable Arctic surface, voiced from the point of view of early Greenlandic settlers. Like Ross, Campbell uses form, but here it is pantoum-as-reportage, a refrain of horrors on repeat as the chorus unsparingly supplies the reader with grisly testimony of what it was to live (and die) in the Arctic:

‘there was no earth to hold them. Where could we hide the dead
when our sons were buried alive on the barren rock?
They were left to die, smothered in stones to keep them still;
the winter was their warder. Snow blew over the bones [...]’ (p. 11).

The alliterative verse approximates an apt poetic inheritance for these migrants, 10th century Icelanders, and Campbell’s poem is saturated in the gore and ruthlessness of wars between kin often recounted in saga and edda. In five stanzas, ‘The Survivors’ is the capsule narrative of ill-fated venture, a good luck tale that ends in madness and horror. The settlers scarcely believe their fortune at finding a ‘safe’ island to settle on, but things soon turn: ‘driven by the darkness / men kill their kin’ and there’s ‘no earth to hold’ the rotting corpses, requiring burial under ‘rocks to hinder beasts’; nor is there ‘earth to cultivate’ and the firstborn baby is ‘buried alive on the highest rock,’ a sacrificial infanticide whose cries haunt the community in the sound made by the wind (p. 11). The repetition of auditory and kinetic imagery carried forward as phrases in the pantoum is an effective use of form, each stanza haunted by its predecessor. Winter functions as a ‘warder’ or jailor to the bones of the dead and to the people ‘crying to be free’: ‘The ice on those cairns was as good as a key in a lock’ (p.11).

Again, that inhospitable earth. In Ross, the explorers have ‘entered’ the Arctic Archipelago but are excluded from its innermost regions, and the ice is a barrier beneath and around them. In Campbell, the settlers ‘land’ on the frozen rocky ground of Greenland, but it rejects both their attempts to cultivate it and the bodies of their dead. In these two poems, the impermeability of the Arctic land and sea surfaces reifies the illusory nature of heterotopic sites that enforce exclusions, in which ‘we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we

enter, excluded' (Foucault, 1967: p. 26). In the 'real' and reimagined historical past, emplacement was a chilly business.

(Im)Permafrost

Let us circle back to Robin Robertson's poem, its final lines an epigraph piled like a cairn at the head of this essay. If ice in 'The Survivors' is a warder's key, frozen in a rocky lock, in 'Signs on a White Field' heat is the portal to the Arctic icescape—'The sun's hinge on the burnt horizon / has woken the sealed lake' (p. 4). A seal has been broken on an icy subterranean imprisonment, and some *thing* released in sonic form:

'a huge release of sound, a boom
that rolls under the ice for miles,
some fluked leviathan let loose
from centuries of sleep' (p. 5).

The poem opens with this waking, and closes (open-endedly) with another, as the 'drowned' speaker is 'waked' in the 'weathering ground' (p. 5). To be waked is to be awoken, revived—*wake*—but to be waked is also to be 'mourned.' There's no random act of albatross cruelty to flag 'White Field' as ecoGothic in intent, but in its contemporary context, a world of rising sea levels and mega-floods, the meaning of the speaker's drowned state opens a door to such interpretation. Weathering ground is a symbolic field here, and 'weathering' is also a scientific term referring to breakdown in the mineral composition of soil and rock.²⁶ A passive or static process for the earth, but 'weathering' also implies something agentic, that the drowned man is being weathered by the world.

Canadian poet Larissa Andrusyshyn's 2010 poetry collection *Mammoth* features another species of leviathan, released from the unsealed ground of Siberia's melting permafrost. The unearthing of the titular 'Mammoth' predates the recent discovery of the Yukon's Big Baby, and the unnamed ice-mummy in Andrusyshyn's book is based on an ice-

²⁶ Zolkos, Tank, & Kokelj (2018) argue that the 'thaw-driven ground collapse (thermokarst)' of Arctic permafrost is hastening carbon-related weathering processes and consequently producing 'significant, previously undocumented CO₂' (n.p.).

age cadaver pulled from an ancient Siberian peat bog. Along with the release of ‘carbon dioxide’ and ‘anthrax’ and other disturbing unburials, this mammoth relic represents just a small portion of what Heather Altfeld (2019) terms ‘the sheer volume of animalia surfacing as the permafrost melts’ (p. 229). In Part I of Andrusyshyn’s poem ‘Extinctions,’ the mammoth is found ‘frozen solid in Siberian permafrost’ by a ‘nine-year old nomadic reindeer herder / named Jarkov’:

‘After twenty thousand years
of stasis, from one ice-age
to another, they heave it out like a chunk of sidewalk.
The mammoth is airlifted
by helicopter, the block with tusks
dangles below like a locket’ (p. 10).

The workman-like concrete imagery of the carcass being extracted from the Arctic permafrost like a ‘chunk of sidewalk’ is reminiscent of the poetic impulse to see human-built structures in ice identified by Francis Spufford. Here, the image-field is mud, once frozen ground dismantled by man and melt both. That chunk of concrete is also Atwood’s edifice of icy northern imagery being taken apart, like a movie set on a sound stage. The simile comparing the transported mammoth body to a locket is an apt, evocative visual—one can imagine the chains suspending a lump of jewellery mid-air—yet is subtly suggestive of *memento mori*, and how lockets function as repositories for photos of dead relatives (a sepia-toned image of the ancestral Arctic, perhaps, or a hint of the personal loss threaded through the poem sequence).

Elsewhere, a detached tone and clinical diction sparing of figurative adornment is suited to the speculative conceit running through the collection, that the mammoth is both genome-yielding specimen and reanimating scientist. As Kerry Clare (2010) observes, this ‘is poetry unleashing the magic implicit in algebra, taxonomy, molecular biology, zoology’ (n.p.). An unacknowledged figure shadows what Andrew DuBois (2012) terms ‘autopsy logic’ (p. 617), as if Frankenstein has been taken out of the deep-freeze and thawed and is now working with constituent biological elements of ‘adenine, guanine, cytosine, thymine’ rather than an assemblage of stitched-together grave meats. The mammoth’s task is to clone the endling Ivan Andrusyshyn, the poet’s late father, and ‘the only known specimen’ of his kind, whose ghostly

image haunts the poems ('The Mammoth Sequences the Ivan Andrusyshyn Gene,' p. 59).²⁷ 'We are very close' [to achieving this resurrection], states the Mammoth, the subtext of relationship overlaid on its promised feat—the contiguity of poet and mammoth, scientist and creature, death and resurrection (p. 59).

This conflation evokes Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (1996) thesis, that 'the monster is the harbinger of category crisis' and a 'rebuke to boundary and enclosure' (pp. 6-7):

'the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again' (p. 4).

Robertson's figurative 'leviathan' and Andrusyshyn's sci-fi 'mammoth' signify by rupturing the icy façade of the Arctic sublime; they are what Robert MacFarlane (2019) would call 'unruly, obscene surfacings' that confound the boundaries demarcating an underland (para. 7).

Andrusyshyn's technique is genre-blurring and *Mammoth* might be labelled sci-fi or slipstream were it prose fiction. Permafrost does something similar, embodying a sort of geological category crisis: 'that peculiar combination of water pretending to be land within the land itself' (Wiebe, 2003: p.106, cited in Lanone, 2010: p. 208). True Siberian permafrost is 'perennially cryotic ground' that has been 'frozen for at least two years'—a 'mortal substratum of ice' (Altfeld, 2019: pp. 218-9). Now these mortal and weathering 'mud-glaciers'—to borrow Andrusyshyn's term—are spawning ice-age corpses as often as melting bergs calve ice, both with accelerating frequency. The Siberian permafrost, suggests Altfeld, is 'one of the last frontiers': 'a silo of sorts, a granary of diamonds and ore and oil and bone' (218-9). The Yukon's mudscape similarly 'encases sought-after ore and fossils,' Jaclin (2018) writes:

²⁷ In 'Leaving Ukraine, 1929' we learn that Ivan's mother immigrated to Canada to escape famine in Ukraine (p. 60).

‘More than just a commodity-extraction medium, mud encapsulates dreams: dreams of gold, dreams of knowledge contained within tons of decaying organic material, and dreams for bones full of potency that avantgarde microbiology labs can use to resurrect animal lives and pierce a little further into the secrets of life.’ (p. 305).

An icy Arctic sublime is no longer a language suited to these final frontiers of exploration and extraction. To reprise Hastrup’s observation, it is the ice that holds together a timeless leitmotif of Arctic poetry. ‘What do we stand to lose, in a world without ice?’ asks McNeil (2011): ‘For one, there is a lexicon at stake’ (p. 5). A sublime lexicon is a fluid one, subject to revision, and to follow the Romantic engagement with a sublimity capturing elevated ‘transactions between nature and the human soul,’ Francis Spufford (1996) lists (with a raised eyebrow) an ensuing ‘wealth of different sublimes’:

‘[a natural], a negative, a positive, a mathematical, an ethical, a psychological, a religious, a rhetorical, an aesthetic, and a dynamic sublime’ [...] all of which agreed [...] in putting forward for consideration something distinctly pleasurable, but definitely un-beautiful’ (pp. 18-19).

Spufford spots an ‘unbeautiful’ element in Edmund Burke’s nascent thinking around his theory of the Sublime. In 1746 Dublin, the river Liffey ‘was in spate, loaded with the mud of the counties upstream,’ and this brown flood provoked in young Burke the germinal idea; as he wrote to his friend Shackleton, ‘It gives me pleasure to see nature in these great though terrible scenes’ (Spufford, 1996: pp. 16-17).

Steve Mentz (2013), in proposing a ‘Brown’ ecology that ventures into muddier places than the green or blue humanities might, suggests that with its blending of ‘liquid and solid,’ ‘[t]hinking brown pushes us into hybrid spaces that span living and nonliving matter, aesthetic values and biological drives’ (pp. 193-4). His attendant reading of John Bunyan’s ‘Slough of Despond,’ a literary ur-swamp, cites a character’s explication of the allegorical mudscape: ‘This Miry slow, is such a place as cannot be mended’ (p. 200). Nor can the Siberian permafrost’s ‘magical substratum’—which ‘in places is up to seven hundred to eight hundred

meters thick; [...] undisturbed, for millions of years’—nor can this ground be mended: ‘[o]nce melted,’ warns Altfeld (2019), ‘this ice cannot be recreated. Ever’ (p. 233).

In the terrible scenes to come, the Arctic sublime’s silent snows, vast solitudes, and argots of ice will give way to a glossary of mud and flood, a semiotics of sludge. A brown and muddy Gothic sub/slime.

BIOGRAPHY

Scottish-Canadian poet **Catherine Greenwood** is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing Poetry/Gothic Studies at the University of Sheffield, where she is working on a thesis titled *Gothicising a Poetics of Displacement: Immigrants/Effects*. In Canada, Catherine’s poetry has received recognitions such as a National Magazine Gold Award and a *Kiryama Prize* Notable Book Citation, and her work has also been published in the UK and USA. An ecoGothic poem called the ‘The Grolar Bear’s Ballad’ was a finalist for the CBC Literary Prize and appears in the anthology *Poetics for the More-than-Human World*. Her practice-based PhD research includes poetry inspired by permafrost unburials and one of these pieces, ‘Lenskaya Horse,’ was selected for inclusion in the *Ginkgo Prize Ecopoetry Anthology*. Other poems from a manuscript-in-progress titled *Siberian Spring* appear in *Route 57*, *Reliquiae*, and *Canadian Literature’s* special issue on *Poetics and Extraction*.

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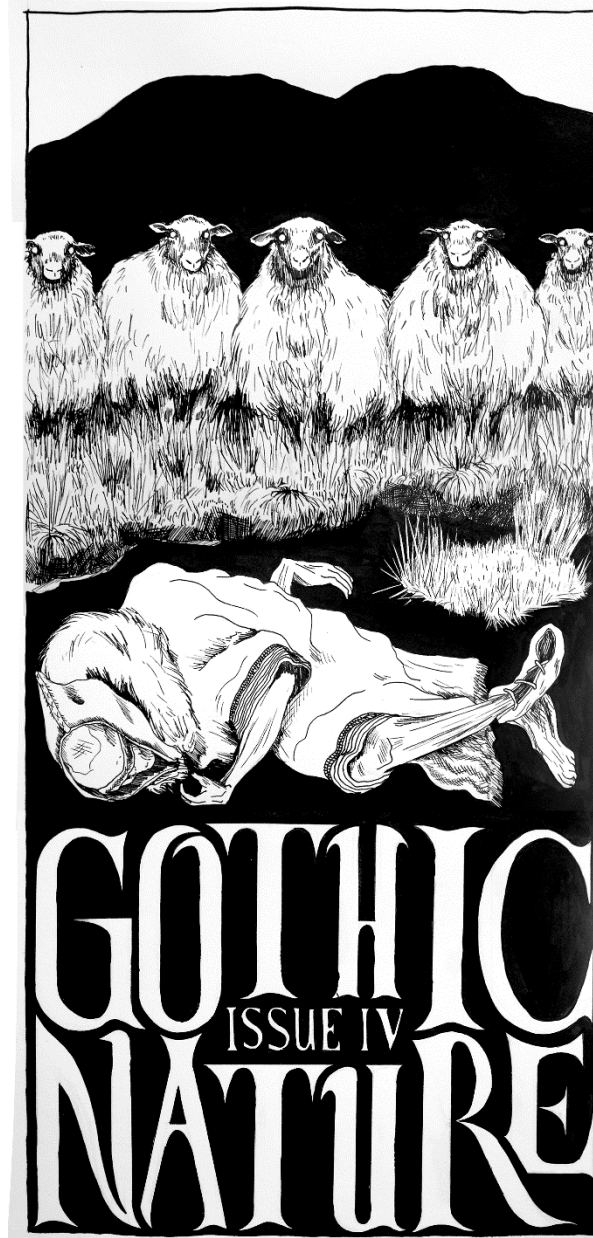
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**Machen, Meat Eating and the First World War:
Arthur Machen's Vegetarian Epiphany**

Andrew Smith

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Machen's views on meat eating were developed during the First World War. It argues that Machen saw humanity as confronting a spiritual crisis in which representative forms of animal embodiment make visible the animal (the meat) that humans have become. Machen's belief that meat eating represented a form of physical, rather than spiritual, nourishment was re-appraised during a period when models of spirituality were significantly under pressure. Machen's views on spirituality, vegetarianism, and animals provide an ecologically inflected evaluation of the consequences of the war. Machen's changing attitudes towards propaganda and media censorship are also explored as these influence his views on meat eating and the possibility of reaffirming a threatened spiritual identity.

To consider war as an ecological disaster seems like a self-evident environmental consideration. The destruction of the landscape and the generation of a near uninhabitable no-man's-land represents a clear, fundamental, moment of ecological crisis. It may also seem as though the consequences of such human activity sit beyond the critical subtleties and nuances of ecoGothic criticism, but there is a way of addressing this issue which does not fall back on evaluating the starkly obvious. Indeed, there is an important body of critical work which has addressed this topic. Ryan Hediger in *Animals and War* (2012) argues that 'the history of nonhuman animals in human war reveals a great deal about the nature of human relationships with other animals and about the nature of war' (p. 2). This is because the systems of domination between human and nonhuman are seemingly challenged in war due to the

historical reliance that humans have had on animals during various conflicts (Hediger notes how at different historical moments, horses, dogs, pigeons and porpoises have all played a role, albeit an enforced one, in supporting the activity of war). The cultural representation of meat's production, and consumption, also invites us to question how animals were regarded during a time of war. Nick Fiddes (1991) has noted how meat consumption 'tangibly represents human control of the natural world' (p. 2), which echoes the attempt to master the environment through the machinery of war: a mastery which, for Fiddes, is also a feature of a certain type of agricultural practice. The experience of war is, however, also one in which, as Vicki Tromanhauser (2019) has noted, the wounded soldier's damaged flesh evokes 'the matter of our own *meatness*' (p. 17, italics in original). The horror of war is that humans become animal-like at such moments and it is these elisions between humans and animals that are explored by Arthur Machen—author, journalist, actor, and mystic of the 1890s and early twentieth century. The war writings of Machen, which are a mixture of journalistic propaganda and fictional precautionary warnings, provide an illuminating way in which we might think about war and environmentalism, and the starting point for these considerations can be located in Machen's interest in food. Food, as we shall see, provides Machen with a way of thinking about forms of domination (relating to animals and environments) which are employed in his broader consideration of the domination of nature during the war.

The relationship between accounts of nature, animals, and meat eating are triangulated in Machen's writings as a way of asserting the importance of a spiritual dimension challenged by a war which, for Machen, unsettles natural and spiritual relations. Machen represents animals as challenging what it means to be human during a time of war in which it appears as though humanity has lost spiritual direction by embracing the carnality of war. How to reclaim a spiritual identity is the issue that Machen confronts and he achieves this reclamation by arguing for a new way of thinking about animal and human relations.

For Machen the war represents a moment of metaphysical crisis and to some degree this type of disruption is refracted through Machen's associations with the weird, which was a chief characteristic of his writings of the 1890s such as *The Great God Pan* (1894) and *The Three Imposters* (1895). Jonathan Newell (2020) has noted that in *The Great God Pan*, Helen Vaughan is 'a hybrid of human and non-human: her body destabilises taxonomic boundaries, blurring the borders of "humanity" and throwing into crisis the scheme by which we make

sense of the world' (p. 72). This is similar to how Machen conceives of animal and human relations in some of his war writings (most notably in *The Terror* [1917]). Roger Luckhurst (2017) argues that the weird moves beyond the repetition which characterises the uncanny (and its associations with the Gothic) by, paradoxically, entertaining a dread of the future combined with a comparative (that is, less Gothic) optimism that the weird's 'radical disarticulation and reformulations of traditional binaries' (p. 1053) might lead to future change. This also bears some similarity with what we witness in Machen's war writings, although there is a didactic edge to Machen which addresses immediate, rather than future, concerns. There will be some brief reference made here to Timothy Morton's view of the weird and how it relates to ecology, although the principal focus is on the cultural significance of meat eating and what it means, for Machen, to be human, rather than the literary form of the weird, as this helps to demonstrate the links between animals and humans at the time. As we shall see, in Machen the turmoil of war radically reconfigures the relationship between animals and humans, even while his longstanding, and highly abstract (Machen was no vegetarian), critique of meat eating is employed at this time to emphasise just how far by his estimation humanity had fallen. These issues are closely tied to Machen's reflection on propaganda, which prompts him in *The Terror* (1917) to revisit the patriotic impulse that led him to write 'The Bowmen' (1914). It is a reflection that raises questions about the metaphysical status of the nut cutlet—a status seemingly embraced in 'The Bowmen' but mocked in an article from 1917, for quite specific anti-propagandist reasons.

Machen's 'The Bowmen,' first published in the *Evening News* in September 1914, purports to be an eye-witness account of the British Army's retreat during their ill-fated campaign against the Germans near Mons. The tale is famous for originating the myth of the Angel of Mons, who appears surrounded by ghostly archers who lay to waste the German forces, so enabling the British to retreat. Critics have noted, but rarely explored, the moment where the soldier makes his desperate appeal for help to St. George. Seemingly facing imminent death, suddenly:

'...he remembered—he cannot think why or wherefore—a queer vegetarian restaurant in London where he had once or twice eaten eccentric dishes of cutlets made of lentils and nuts that pretended to be steak. On all the plates in this restaurant there was printed a figure of St. George in blue, with a motto,

Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius—May St. George be a present help to the English [...] as he fired at his man in the grey advancing mass—300 yards away—he uttered the pious vegetarian motto.’ (Machen, 2001b: p. 224, italics in original)

At this point St. George and his ‘Agin-court Bowmen’ appear and attack the German forces (p. 226). This vegetarian epiphany during a moment of deathly attack feels incongruous and strategically unpromising. Nevertheless it represents a way of reflecting on the war which Machen develops in the short story ‘The Great Return’ (1915) and his novella *The Terror* (1917). The reference to St. George is telling. Elsa Richardson (2021) has examined the proliferation of vegetarian restaurants in Britain in the 1880s and 1890s. Many of these were founded by political progressives and provided affordable food mainly to office workers in big urban cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. She also notes the existence of St. George’s House Café in St. Martin’s Lane in London, which catered for ‘a higher class of customer’ and appealed to celebrities such as George Bernard Shaw and the actress Fanny Brough (pp. 134-5). Such a high-profile establishment is likely to have been known by Machen when he was resident in London and its evocation in ‘The Bowman’ indicates just how self-aware Machen was of the reality of the vegetarian context.²⁸

The reason as to why the soldier reaches out for a vegetarian vision illuminates how Machen saw the war as a battle between physicality and spirituality (or, bodies and souls) which is lost within the very bloody carnality of the war itself. This position is developed, and indeed revised, in his fiction which reflects upon war. Before examining ‘The Great Return’ (1915) and *The Terror* (1917) more closely, however, it is necessary to chart how Machen’s earlier views on meat eating relate both to his long-running critique of Protestantism and to an interest in how animals and humans interact. For Machen, how the human subject can live in the world is intimately associated with the nature of the world that they perceive. His short novel *A Fragment of Life* (1904) and two journal articles ‘Sancho Panza at Geneva’ and ‘Consolatus’ and ‘Church-member,’ from 1907, help to establish how and why Machen sought to offset a spiritual vision against a material world, with the latter associated with meat eating.

²⁸Mark Valentine also makes this link in ‘Invoking the Angels—Machen’s Original Vegetarian Restaurant’: <http://wormwoodiana.blogspot.com/2015/02/invoking-angels-machens-original.html>

A Fragment of Life focuses on the lives of the recently married Edward and Mary Darnell who reside in a lower middle-class suburban home. Their lives are constrained by financial hardship and a growing sense of disappointment with the narrowness of their lives. The novella makes visible the machine-like world of work which frames Edward and Mary's mundane reality. It also makes visible the spaces existing beyond it, which invite them to consider an alternative way of living in the world, requiring them to engage with the world's mystical, and spiritual, hidden realities.

Edward struggles with the conventional 'nonsense' that 'assured him that the true world was the visible and tangible world' (Machen, 2011a: p. 205), which is challenged by 'a faint glimmering light [...] risen within him that showed the profit of self-negation' (p. 205). This world becomes visible to him in dreams which mix desire with memories of an earlier version of his self, one that existed before the conventions of the adult world had suppressed his spiritual impulses. In these moments he becomes transformed:

'So I awoke from a dream of a London suburb, of daily labour, of weary, useless little things; and as my eyes were opened I saw that I was in an ancient wood, where a clear well rose into grey film and vapour beneath a misty, glimmering heat. And a form came towards me from the hidden places of the wood, and my love and I were united by the well.' (p. 222)

The novella is clear about what needs to be cast off, the narrow world of work and the routines of a lower-middle class life, in order to enable both Edward and Mary to discover this spiritual world. Revealingly, food also plays an important role in this.

The domestic world of the Darnells is given some focus through what they eat. The world of work only pays for 'a certain quantum of bread, beef, and house-room' (p.205). Edward reflects on a period when he had been profligate in buying 'cutlets [...] braised beef [...] fillet steak' (p. 159), whereas in his married life he settles for 'chops, a bit of steak, or cold meat' (p. 160). Meat consumption is not simply part of the conventional world that the Darnells seek to renounce; it stands in opposition to a spiritual life. Edward shares one of his spiritual visions with an enraptured Mary, after which:

‘...as they looked out into the clear light they could scarcely believe that the one had spoken and the other had listened a few hours before to histories very far removed from the usual current of their thoughts and of their lives. They glanced shyly at one another, and spoke of common things [...] “And I think, if I were you”, said Darnell, as he went out, “I should step over to the stores and complain of their meat. That last piece of beef was very far from being up to the mark—full of sinew”.’ (p. 185)

Meat is not just part of the ‘common things’ which constitute their conventional life, it is also, as this scene establishes, a topic which banishes a spiritual vision because in *A Fragment of Life* spiritual nourishment is what is denied in a focus on physical nourishment. Machen returned to this issue in his non-fiction, where he addresses what he sees as the limitation of a grey Protestantism which is prosaically immune to the poetry of a quasi-Catholic view of the world (and *A Fragment of Life* includes a poem at the end, celebrating that ‘Ever the Song is borne on high/That chants the holy Magistry’ [p. 221]).

In ‘Sancho Panza at Geneva,’ published in *The Academy* in June 1907, Machen critiques what he sees as a puritan strand within Protestantism, which is a consequence of feeding the body rather than the spirit because ‘Protestants live on roast beef and plenty of it’ (p. 559). This carnality means that it cannot constitute a true faith, leading Machen to conclude that ‘Protestantism is a revolt against Christianity’ (p. 560). Feeding the body in this way turns the Protestant into a subhuman figure, because Machen claims that Protestantism ‘is a recurrence [...] to the state of the beast-man before it had received the quickening’ (p. 560). Meat eating leads to atavism and places the subject on a pre-human and non-spiritual path. This is different to the type of reconnections which are advocated in *A Fragment of Life*, which centre on the disappearance of bodily needs. Machen returned to these issues in ‘Consolatus’ and ‘Church-member,’ published in *The Academy* in December 1907, in which he claims that ‘The modern Puritan accepts the good things of life with an apologetic grumble which he calls “grace,” conscious in a dim way that he has no real right to enjoy his roast beef’ (p. 267). At this point Machen appears to advocate vegetarianism as an antidote to all this unspiritual consumption of meat—‘there is a sect apart which gives no obedience to the command, kill and eat’ (p. 268). These issues are returned to by Machen in his war time writings, which have a noticeably robust focus on how to spiritually dwell in a world that seems threatened by violence. The question

he re-examines is how it is possible to maintain a spiritual identity in a conflict which constitutes a spectacle of brutal carnality.

It is important to acknowledge that these issues about spirituality and meat eating can also be found more broadly within the culture of vegetarianism as it developed from the 1840s onwards. Vegetarianism created alliances between socialists who saw the issue as socially progressive and certain members of the church who saw the abjuring of meat as a return to the purity of an Eden before the fall (when Adam and Eve subsisted on fruit and vegetables). Such a ‘meeting of communitarian socialists and religious reformers laid the groundwork for the foundation of the Vegetarian Society, enshrining the meat-free regimen as a kind of Edenic ideal or alimentary route to God’ (Richardson, 2022: p. 138). The Vegetarian Society was established in 1847 under the auspices of the Bible Christian Church (founded by the Rev William Cowherd in 1809). While it would be difficult to see Machen as drawn to the issue by socialism (he was a supporter of Franco during the Spanish Civil War) the spiritual element clearly shapes his position. Later figures such as Henry Salt, a leading campaigner for animal rights, established the Humanitarian League in 1891, which promoted a range of social reforms, attracting vegetarians, literary figures, and occultists. Salt was supported in his aims by Henry Carpenter, whose *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure* (1889) argued that civilisation had become soft through its consumption of animals (and their by-products, such as fur) and that ‘[t]he only way to halt this rapid decline’ was ‘to rediscover nature and develop a relationship with the animal world’ based on co-operation rather than ‘exploitation or consumption’ (Richardson, 2019: p. 127). This constitutes a view of human and animal relations which is glossed in Machen’s ‘The Great Return,’ which also addresses the unspiritual consumption of meat that we have witnessed in the earlier essays.

‘The Great Return’ focuses on some strange occurrences in the real-world Welsh town of Llantrisant (in inland South Wales, although in the story it is identified as coastal). The war provides a context to the tale with references made to bombardments and fears about Germans supporting spies at a time when ‘We had invaded Thibet’ (Machen, 2011c: p. 232), an intrusion which, for Machen, encapsulates the violence done to spirituality at this time. The narrator asks a parishioner about the services which are held in the local chapel and she tells him that the refrains are, for her, the ancient ““Blessed be His Name for Paradise in the meat and in the drink.” “Thanksgiving for the old offering.” “Thanksgiving for the appearance of the old altar.”

“Praise for the joy of the ancient garden.” “Praise for the return of those that have been long absent.” And all that sort of thing. It is nothing but madness’ (p. 240). This prompts the narrator to address the specific praising of food and drink:

‘And I thought, if there be paradise in meat and in drink, so much the more is there paradise in the scent of the green leaves at evening and in the appearance of the sea and in the redness of the sky; and there came to me a certain vision of a real world about us all the while, of a language that was only secret because we would not take the trouble to listen to it and discern it.’ (p. 241)

The landscape around the town represents a different type of spiritual engagement than that found in the church. The implication is that at a time of national crisis the formal religious ceremonies cease to work; their claims are ‘nothing but madness,’ whereas nature represents the resurrection of an older spiritual power: ‘The sun went down to the mountain red with fire like a burnt offering, the sky turned violet, the sea was purple,’ as the narrator records ‘the wonder that had returned to the land after long ages’ (p. 250). This is a form of nature which is both spiritual and touched by the war, reflected in the ‘burnt offering’ and the vivid, unnatural, colouration of nature. The idea that nature can be looked at differently at this point is extended to animals, when the narrator critiques the idea that one can only know the world through the senses, so that ‘The ordinary man [...] says that he sees a cow, that he sees a stone wall, and that the cow and the stone wall are “there”,’ whereas ‘metaphysicians are by no means so easily satisfied as to the reality of the stone wall and the cow’ (p. 250). This leads him to contemplate that ‘a real existence, this much is certain [...] is not in the least like our conception of it,’ meaning that ‘If we could “see” the real cow she would appear utterly incredible’ (p. 250). In the context of Machen’s wider engagement with hidden spiritual realities, this turns the cow into a spiritual being, and therefore not one that should be considered as ‘the meat’ that the discredited preacher associates with ‘Paradise.’ Machen addresses this issue in *War and the Christian Faith* (1918) where he argues that although ‘It will seem a violent paradox,’ nevertheless, ‘I do believe that the chief aim of prayer is to raise us to the condition of the beasts; to raise us, not to reduce us, to their state’ (p. 29). This is because he sees that humans, not animals, were driven out of paradise and therefore animals still live in a state of grace that informs how they dwell in the world. Animals are true to their nature ‘because they are wholly immersed in their proper businesses; they are fish altogether in the water’ (p. 34), whereas ‘We

are not sure of our real business' because we are distracted by work and so estranged from our 'only one real business' (p. 35), which is reaching God through prayer.

Animals in 'The Great Return' are thus associated with the divine because at this time of national crisis, nature is revitalised, peaceful and bountiful, which is reflected in a moment when:

'a farmer, was roused from sleep one night by a queer yelping and barking in his yard. He looked out of the window and saw his sheep-dog playing with a big fox; they were chasing each other by turns, rolling over and over one another, "cutting such capers as I did never see the like," as the astonished farmer put it. And some of the people said that during this season of wonder the corn shot up, and the grass thickened, and the fruit was multiplied on the trees in a very marvellous manner.' (Machen, 2011: p. 262)

In 'The Great Return' the cow is not meat; animals play in harmony and dwell in the world in a superior way than humans. Indeed animals appear to be freighted with the type of natural spirituality that has been banished from those churches which see animals as food.

To see the animals (at least cows) as food is to assert the type of subject-object dichotomy that is intimately associated with the mastery of nature. It is revealing that a farmer bears witness to the antics of the dog and the fox as his sense of astonishment is rooted within a farming mindset which regarded nature as something that needed to be subdued and controlled by the demands of agricultural need (hence a view in which 'play' is notably absent from the working life of a sheep-dog). It is also telling that in the above passage the benign animals cavort in a scene associated with fruit and corn, rather than meat. The possibilities of a non-animal harvest thus shape how the animals are tied by kinship rather than hostility—an idea that reflected a vegetarian notion of a 'Greater Kinship' which was 'a concept derived from an interpretation of evolutionary theory that emphasized the connectedness of all organic creatures' (Richardson, 2019: p. 127), a core belief of those associated with Salt's Humanitarian League. The tale indicates that for the cow to be seen differently it requires a metaphysical re-evaluation. This chimes with Fiddes' (1991) view that the industrial processes which came to drive changes in agricultural practice generated not just an economic transition, but also a

philosophical one because these mechanical developments indicated that nature was there to be controlled. For Fiddes 'control over nature, and over animals' reproduction, lives, and deaths, denotes the emergence of civilisation metaphysically as well as physically' (p. 59). Agricultural life and the machines of war are conceptually brought into alliance in Machen's *The Terror* as we witness the animals rebelling against both. The understanding of the causes of that rebellion effects the metaphysical shift that Machen saw as necessary in order to rethink the cow as an animal which has a presence that transcends its position within the agricultural economy.

Animals in 'The Great Return' are playful and benign; the same, however, cannot be said for the animals in *The Terror*, which purposefully attack the military complex suggesting they have come to see humans as unspiritual entities, or as little more than meat. Animals challenge humans for dominance in a world associated with the carnality of war.

The Terror begins with an account of the war up until 1917 and addresses what it sees as two years of inaction by British forces, which had only recently come to an end. The focus is on a media blackout on any references to problems encountered by British forces during this period. This is an allusion to the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) which was passed in August 1914, granting the government wide ranging powers, including the right to censor. *The Terror* thus purports to be an exposé of what the government had tried to conceal. The narrator discusses the presence of a 'secret circular' consisting of suppressed eye-witness accounts of unusual activity and aggression by animals towards the military. It includes an account of a Royal Flying Corps plane that had been brought down by 'a flight of pigeons' which had broken the propeller 'and the machine had fallen like lead to the earth' (Machen, 2011d: p. 275), with the pilot killed. Pigeons had been used during the war to relay messages from the trenches and their attack should be seen as a form of revenge for animal co-option in the war at this time. There is also a report of an explosion at a munitions works with the dead hastily interred before their relatives could see them because the faces of the dead, according to an eye-witness 'were all as if they had been bitten to pieces' (p. 278). The investigation of these strange circumstances takes the narrator to west Wales.

Whereas in 'The Great Return' nature has a positive aspect to it which produces the type of spirituality sadly lacking in the Church, in *The Terror*, the landscape is desolate and

mysterious: 'a wild and divided and scattered region, a land of outland hills and secret and hidden valleys' (p. 281), populated by towns which are little more than 'clusters of poorish, meanly-built houses, ill-kept and down at heel' (p. 280). These are, in environmental terms, dwellings associated with alienation. Nature becomes a hostile place in which to dwell because it is devoid of the spiritual dimension that characterises Machen's earlier writings. The narrator recounts the death of the Williams family (mother, father and three children), who live in a cottage 'on the edge of a dark wood' which sits on 'a lonely and unfrequented by-road that winds for many miles on high and lonely land' (p. 283). They are found with 'Their skulls [...] battered in as if by some heavy iron instrument; their faces were beaten to a pulp' (p. 283). It turns out that they have been killed by horses. Hediger notes of the First World War that 'Horses loom like a ghost presence through this conflict' (p. 10), because although eight million horses were killed in the war their loss was often left out of discussions of the fighting. For the narrator the news censorship of these stories of animal unrest means that such accounts 'must somehow be connected with the war' (p. 291), and the novella invites the reader to make these links. War and a now hostile nature are aligned and the narrator's investigation is in part a contemplation of why these links have appeared and how they relate to the war. For Fiddes, issues about the consumption of meat are closely tied to the ambition to control nature. However, in the tale, the issue of meat consumption is turned on the humans as they become victims of the animals and in their human death become constituted as a type of meat that can be disposed of. Before the narrator also reaches this conclusion he, at first, thinks that the Germans must be responsible but the evidence, ultimately, takes him in a different direction.

He investigates an incident in 1915 when horses attacked an army camp at night by stomping on tents and killing two soldiers. This was followed by attacks made by swarming bees. The playful sheep-dog of 'The Great Return' is now transformed in stories about 'sheep dogs, mild and trusted beasts, turning savage as wolves and injuring the farm boys in a horrible manner' (p. 295). There is some discussion of secret Z Rays being used to make the animals aggressive, or even German forces living underground who are orchestrating these attacks.

The occupants of a farm house are found dead and evidence is discovered inside that they appear to have been under siege and died of thirst, despite having easy access to a well in a nearby wood. The body of Mr Griffiths, the head of the family, is found outside of the house with a deep gash in his side. A visitor to the house, who has died with them, leaves behind an

account of what happened. Everything was normal until one night they saw what appeared to be a tree with points of light in it which rose above the house and settled around it 'like a burning cloud' (p. 342). Mrs Griffiths took the environmentally informed view 'that ancient devils were let loose and had come out of the trees and out of the old hills because of the wickedness that was on the earth' (p. 342). Mr Griffiths was killed after being gored by one of his animals, and it is noted of the others that they 'were closely besieged by their own cattle and horses and sheep' (p. 353), until they ran out of water. Here we can see the rebellious tendency of animals associated with meat attacking those who seek to subdue them.

It transpires that these lights, which seem to form into a tree-like cloud, are in fact moths which attack anyone outside, effectively choking them to death by entering the mouth, and a number of other people who have been killed in this way are subsequently discovered. The final scenes of *The Terror* indicate that all of this activity took place between 1915-16, and that since then the animals have returned to their more usual patterns of behaviour. The reasons for this outbreak of malevolence are explored.

The narrator notes that some of his friends:

'...are inclined to think that there was a certain contagion of hate. They hold that the fury of the whole world at war, the great passion of death that seems driving all humanity to destruction, infected at last these lower creatures, and in place of their native instinct of submission, gave them rage and wrath and ravening.' (p. 356)

The animals have become conscious of their superior physical strength, as one Dr Lewis (who summarises many of the issues) tells the narrator:

““The mildest old cow, remember, is stronger than any man. What can one man or half a dozen men do against half a hundred of these beasts no longer restrained by that mysterious inhibition, which has made for ages the strong the humble slaves of the weak?”” (p. 352)

It is the limits of this ‘mysterious inhibition’ that the narrator wants to explore. Animals associated with agriculture have become seemingly wild, or unprepared to act as ‘humble slaves.’ Fiddes’ analysis of agriculture’s generation of a version of nature as othered and to be dominated is relevant here. This is also an idea that Timothy Morton (2018) has explored in relation to the weird, seeing ‘weirdness’ as the antidote to this strategy of demarcation between the human and the non-human. At the heart of this lies a paradox which Morton states as:

‘What is most uncanny about human being is its attempt to rid the world of the uncanny. Or, and this is putting it in its most ecological register: human being disturbs Earth and its lifeforms in its desperate and disturbing attempt to rid itself of disturbance.’ (p. 64)

The human subject disturbed by the idea of belonging to a world in which they are threatened by an ‘othered’ nature, is forced to manufacture the types of divisions (between humans and animals, for example) which generates an alienation that ultimately reproduces the feeling of being under siege that the act of division was intended to eradicate. In *The Terror*, the narrator’s concern is that the relationship between animals and humans appears as a response to the crisis generated by the war. Within this weird moment there is also epiphany. The narrator concludes:

‘I believe that the subjects revolted because the king abdicated. Man has dominated the beasts throughout the ages, the spiritual has reigned over the rational through the peculiar quality and grace of spirituality that men possess, that makes a man to be that which he is.’ (p. 356)

This conclusion is more complex than it initially appears. The elevation of the spiritual over the rational identifies the type of instrumental thinking about the world which generates the crisis that rationality was meant to solve. This is similar to Morton’s position on the uncanny human, who uses rationality to generate demarcations only to find that divide and rule creates an internal division. These ideas are relevant to a way of thinking about the war as an act of self-destruction. For Machen the war was a physical, political, and national conflict which had generated new imperatives which meant that people were in danger of losing sight of spiritual values. As Tromanhauser states in their analysis of nurses’ accounts of surgical wards in the First World War, ‘Flesh menacingly gums up the metaphysics of human subject formation and

jams the machinery of our making and world-building' (p. 20). Also, as Fiddes notes, with meat eating 'Bloodshed is central to meat's value' (p. 65), because 'We eat not only the animal's flesh; with it we drain their lifeblood and so seize their strength' (p. 68). The metaphysics of what it means to be human becomes reversed in *The Terror* as predatory humanity becomes subject to predation. The novella establishes a critical view of human and animal relations which reflects Hediger's conclusion that a contemplation of the treatment of animals in war time 'offers a route to unwork further the human/animal distinction and hierarchy' (p. 17). The novella also challenges the idea that animals can be seen through an agricultural lens which would see them merely as meat. The narrator claims:

'... the beasts also have within them something which corresponds to the spiritual quality in men—we are content to call it instinct. They perceived that the throne was vacant—not even friendship was possible between them and the self-deposed monarch. If he were not king he was a sham, an imposter, a thing to be destroyed.' (p. 357)

The animals see that humanity has lost sight of spirituality because humans have made themselves animal-like and so consequently have lost authority. In *War and the Christian Faith* (1918), Machen goes on to argue that animals 'being in paradise, cannot so much as conceive the desire for an order and life which do not belong to them' (p. 36), and this spiritual vision might seem different to what we witness in *The Terror* as animals attempt to take over from humans. However, Machen's idea of 'instinct' as a form of spirituality indicates that animal behaviour is directed by a force which seeks to protect the world. In this way the novella can be read as a trenchant indictment of how war has corrupted an already fallen (and so post-vegetarian) humanity, to a degree that animals are prepared to conceive of a world which is devoid of humans, because in deposing of humans animals seek to restore a spirituality that they perceive humanity to have lost. Animal violence is a righteous one in which they attack specific formations of organised activity associated with agriculture and the military. Why animals have given up the fight is not clear, but the idea that they pose a continuing threat is apparent, with the last line noting, in a tacit evocation of the eco-horror, that 'They have risen once—they may rise again' (p. 357).

The Terror not only establishes a different formation of nature than that found in ‘The Great Return,’ it also refutes myths about the war, including a popular one at the time about the presence of secret Russian troops in Britain, and also ‘The Angel of Mons’ myth that Machen had created in 1914. These myths are debunked ‘as vain rumours and fantastic tales’ (p. 274), which were only granted a bogus credibility because they had appeared in newspapers. Machen, as a journalist, was acutely conscious, as *The Terror* demonstrates, of forms of censorship which might conceal the truth even while ‘fantastic tales’ such as ‘The Bowmen’ are permitted publication because they work as propaganda. What constitutes ‘reality’ at this time is clearly politically loaded and while many commentators saw ‘The Bowmen’ as proof that God was on their side, they did not dwell on the soldier’s reference to nut cutlets. The representation of food and its relationship to Protestants and animals is associated by Machen to a truly spiritual path. St. George with his archers from Agincourt is manifestly a false, propaganda inspired vision and that this is a fake spiritual vision has implications for how we read those nut cutlets.

Machen’s support for a vegetarian vision accords with his idea of feeding the spirit rather than the body. Meat eating does obvious violence to animals and is repeatedly referenced as an illegitimate form of nourishment centring on strictly bodily needs. However, the soldier’s vision in ‘The Bowmen’ is ultimately a sham spiritual vision because it is associated with the war and not pure spirit. This in turn is reflected in *The Terror* in the view of the human subject, noted above, that ‘If he were not king he was a sham, an imposter, a thing to be destroyed’ (p. 357). This is a view not far removed from how Machen viewed vegetarians, like his soldier, who eats ‘cutlets made of lentils and nuts that pretended to be steak’ (Machen, 2001b: p. 224). In an item titled ‘Let Us Keep the Tavern’ published on 22nd August 1917 in the *Evening News*, Machen lampoons this type of vegetarian:

‘He is ridiculous with his “Nut Cutlets,” shameless with his “Fruitarian Roast Turkey.” His whole bill of fare is like a tale told by an idiot to an idiot [...] we have the vicious make-shift, the corrupted rather than the substituted word.’
(n.p.)

The tone of the article is light-hearted but the idea of corruption rather than substitution points towards the idea of truth-telling which is so important in *The Terror*. This type of vegetarianism

is a bogus one because it seeks to emulate something which it is not. It is as false as the vision of St. George. In this context it represents a type of false thinking which denies, as Machen also puts it in his article, 'the attractive power of vegetables' (n.p.). The question this begs is whether Machen had always intended the vegetarian vision of his besieged soldier to be questionable, or whether he came to this view in 1917 as a way of critiquing what had become a popular propaganda myth? The balance of evidence would suggest the latter. *The Terror* indicates that to see animals as potential meat compromises any possible spiritual vision, so that envisioning vegetables or nuts as meat-like is to come too close to maintaining this unspiritual view.

For Machen, it is necessary to find a way of living in the world which is spiritually authentic. *A Fragment of Life* charts this anxious journey as Edward and Mary engage with the positive disorientation that Morton identifies as a key aspect of the weird. Food is a factor in Machen's spiritual vision. The consumption of meat elevates the corporeal over the spiritual and leads to feelings of estrangement. Animals are freighted with a spiritual identity that they share with humans, but this common bond is undone both by the war and in agriculture. These war time writings reflect upon how to live spiritually in a world at a time of international crisis, when spiritual considerations seem to be in abeyance. The lack of authenticity is what, for Machen, positions his soldier in 'The Bowmen' as a sham vegetarian, trapped in a propaganda narrative about a bogus spiritual intervention. How to get back to the truth, and work beyond the censor, is addressed in *The Terror*, and is embraced as the point at which the limitations of the human becomes manifested in a devastated landscape, populated by vengeful animals. Machen's contribution to thinking about animals and the war is an important one. His First World War writings indicate that national turmoil can be registered as a spiritual turmoil which implicates food, animals, and the landscape as critically speaking back to what is truly threatened on the Western Front: what it means to be human.

BIOGRAPHY

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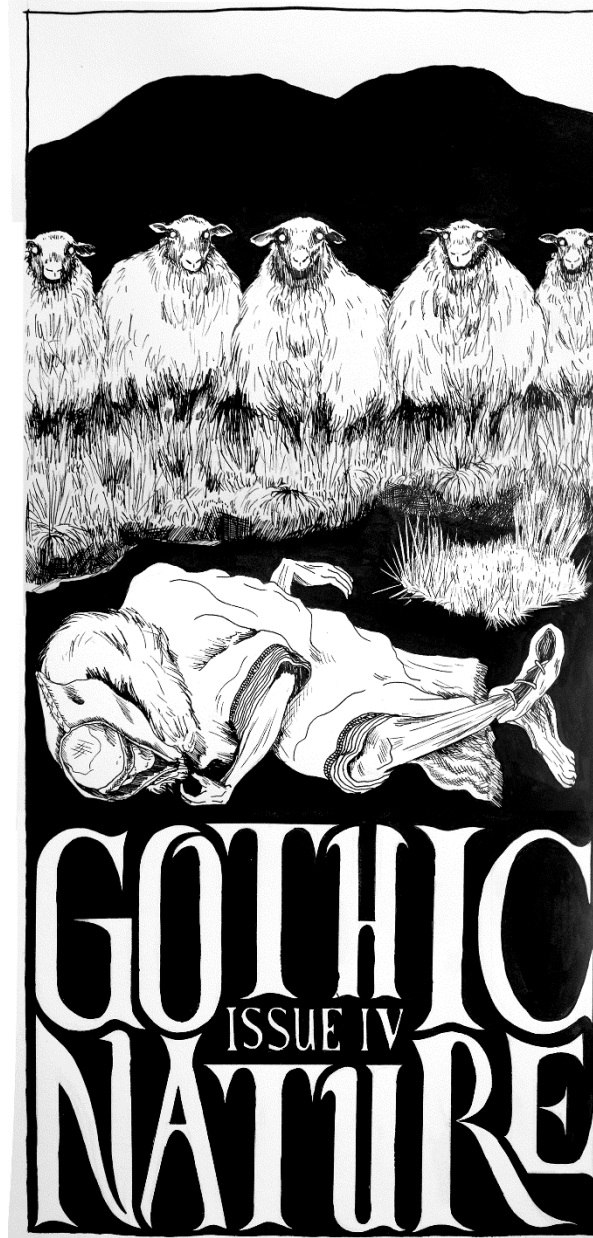
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**Taking Bloody Revenge for the Environment:
Monstrous Ecofeminism and the Eco-Vampire in *Dark Fang***

Brianna Anderson

ABSTRACT

Popular comics about environmental issues often focus on plucky heroines who engage in small-scale eco-activism. Miles Gunter and Kelsey Shannon's ecohorror comic series *Dark Fang* (2017) offers a biting and gruesome counterpoint to these feel-good, girl-power narratives by depicting the transformative potential of ecofeminist revenge. The comic centres on Valla, a vampire who embarks on a solo mission to halt climate change and environmental destruction. She engages in monstrous ecoterrorism by killing wealthy, white, male oil executives and politicians who exploit nature and Valla for their own gain. This essay examines how Gunter and Kelsey use the campy figure of the eco-vampire to offer a scathing critique of the intertwined capitalist and patriarchal power structures that contribute to the subjugation of nature and women. I argue that *Dark Fang* promotes ecofeminism as an alternative to these harmful views by repeatedly extending agency to nonhuman entities. Additionally, Gunter and Shannon use the multimodal comics form to emphasise the trans-corporeal enmeshment of humans, organisms, and even monsters. By blending ecofeminism with horror, *Dark Fang* indulges violent fantasies about avenging nature and punishing male perpetrators for their environmental sins. This essay demonstrates how feminist ecohorror and the comics medium can challenge capitalist ideologies and help envision new, more transformative ways of relating to and defending the environment.

In the last ten years, comics and graphic novels about nature and environmental issues have surged in popularity. Across genres and publishers, these contemporary green comics tend to centre on one figure: the young, empowered, usually attractive, and always passionate eco-

heroine.²⁹ These female protagonists typically engage in positive, small-scale environmental advocacy. They often call attention to environmental injustices, rally their communities to solve human-made problems that harm nature, or rescue cute animals. For instance, the girl protagonist of K. O'Neill's *Aquicorn Cove* (2018) defends coral reefs and fantastical 'aquicorn' creatures from overfishing and plastic pollution, while the young heroine of Claudia Dávila's *Luz Sees the Light* (2011) helps her neighbours create a community garden. The prominence of female eco-activists in recent comics reflects the real-life emergence of vocal female advocates like Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, Anishinaabe water activist Autumn Peltier, and Mari 'Little Miss Flint' Copeny. In the face of the escalating global climate crisis and other environmental issues, these real and fictional heroines offer the tantalising promise that empowered girls and women will band together to save the world through direct action, protests, and speeches.

However, several recent horror comics counter these feel-good, girl-power narratives by portraying female protagonists who take part in darker, frightening, and decidedly violent forms of environmental activism. Miles Gunter and illustrator Kelsey Shannon's five-issue comic *Dark Fang* (2017) is one of the most gruesome texts to emerge from this trend. The series centres on Valla, a young fisherwoman who gets attacked and transformed by a male vampire. After this violation, Valla retreats to the ocean, where she eats fish and resides peacefully alongside marine creatures for over a century until an oil spill destroys her underwater refuge. Fleeing the toxic waste, the now-vampire returns to the surface and finds a twenty-first-century Earth ravaged by industrialisation and teetering on the verge of environmental collapse. Realising that human-made climate change will soon wipe out her marine animal food supply, Valla attempts to singlehandedly destroy the fossil fuel industry and halt the impending mass extinction by slaying oil executives in a spectacularly gory murder spree.

Published in 2017, *Dark Fang* debuted at the tail end of the late 2000s and 2010s vampire boom. Many of these texts, such as Stephenie Meyer's bestselling *Twilight* series (2005-2008) and *The Vampire Diaries* television show (2009-2017), feature attractive

²⁹ My digital humanities project the [Environmental Comics Database](#) surveys 62 contemporary environmental comics. I found that 30 out of 62 texts (48%) centred on a female protagonist. Additionally, 13 out of 62 comics (21%) featured mixed-gender casts, where female and male characters had equal roles as protagonists. Thus, 69% of the surveyed comics prominently featured female protagonists. By contrast, only 15 out of 62 (24%) texts featured solo male protagonists.

‘vegetarian’ vampires who abstain from killing humans for food, subsisting instead on animal blood. Combining environmental concerns with erotic allure, these narratives make social consciousness and (faux) vegetarianism fun and sexy but rarely touch on real environmental issues. As Sarah McFarland Taylor (2019) speculates, ‘much of the *green* vampire’s appeal may lie in being the monster transformed—the energy-sucking, life-destroying, consumerist, blood-lusting vampire reformed, if not *redeemed*’ (p. 139). *Dark Fang* subverts this trend by retaining the environmental consciousness and the sex appeal, while also depicting a decidedly *unredeemed* vampire who paradoxically preys on humans to help the environment. Instead of viewing her vampirism as an obstacle or a weakness to overcome, Valla uses her monstrosity to engage in horrific, murderous forms of ecofeminist activism.

By depicting the frightening consequences of human activities on nature and women, as well as the harsh punishments that male perpetrators suffer because of these actions, *Dark Fang* functions as a work of ecohorror. Texts in this subgenre, Elizabeth Parker (2022) notes, fundamentally centre on the ‘idea of *Nature’s revenge* [...] With ecohorror, you’re always going to have humans at the centre in some way: humans being attacked and being *punished*’ (Dang: p. 116). Significantly, in *Dark Fang*, the woman who delivers this horrific revenge repeatedly transgresses the boundaries between civilisation and nature, human and the Other, and the living and the dead. Like Dracula, Valla’s ability to shapeshift into animals, bloodlust, and immortality all mark her as a liminal being who invokes abject horror through her disruption of boundaries. Due to their in-betweenness, monstrous women like Valla, Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody (2020) argue, ‘are receptacles of taboos, and so while they often inspire horror, they also indicate forbidden desires. Monsters are slippery and dangerous because of their ability to transcend boundaries, often acting as unwelcome reminders of how very fragile these boundaries are’ (p. 3). Notably, Valla transforms into a monster after a man inflicts violence on her, and the comic also persistently depicts men as the primary destroyers of the environment. By destabilising boundaries through her forced monstrosity and critiquing patriarchal power structures, Valla highlights the dangers of exploiting the environment and women and underscores the unsettling ‘eco-Gothic-isation’ of nature caused by this mistreatment.

As a transgressive yet sympathetic monster, Valla also reflects larger anxieties about climate change and the inadequacy of current responses to environmental issues. She plays the

role of the ‘eco-vampire,’ an emerging horror archetype that Simon Bacon (2020) defines as ‘an environmental warrior’ who serves ‘as a double or doppelgänger of humankind, simultaneously representing a dark mirror image of humanity’s own vampiric characteristics as well as actively trying to destroy or neutralize the forces of consumerist/technological progress’ (p. 8). In the face of mounting anger and fears about the planet’s future, eco-vampires like Valla spurn conventional—and largely ineffective—forms of environmental activism like protests and recycling campaigns, instead playing out violent and taboo fantasies of female resistance and radical ecoterrorism. Furthermore, by drawing parallels between the abuse of nature and the female protagonist, the comic promotes an ecofeminist perspective. Texts that model this approach, Peter C. Kunze (2014) writes, ‘analyze and evaluate the ongoing exploitation of women and nonhuman entities. In the process, ecofeminism operates to underscore the hegemony of a destructive authority that is both patriarchal and capitalistic’ (p. 31). Examining *Dark Fang* through ecocritical lenses, I argue that the horror comic uses the female eco-vampire to offer scathing critiques of capitalism, consumerism, and the gendered power structures that contribute to devastating environmental issues. Additionally, by providing counternarratives to conventional portrayals of girl activists in green comics, the text raises troubling questions about the limitations of agency and individual activism in the Anthropocene.



Figure 1. The male vampire transforms Valla in Miles Gunter and Kelsey Shannon’s *Dark Fang*, issue 1 (n.p.) (2017).

The comic's first issue portrays Valla's transformation into a monstrous woman and immediately establishes her close relationship with the environment. A flashback scene shows Valla as a young human living in a forgotten fishing village by the sea, where she declares herself the 'best' fisherwoman (Gunter and Shannon, 2017: n. p.). One night, Valla walks home alone carrying a simple fishing rod and four fish, a modest catch which suggests that she only harvests enough fish for her survival, despite her self-professed talents at fishing. As she strolls along the beach, she encounters an unnamed male vampire who snares her in a green and blue cloak that visually echoes the ocean's waves. The comic illustrates the male vampire as feral-looking and monstrous, with unruly green hair that resembles shrubbery and teal-coloured skin that mirrors the blue colour of the water. The visual parallels between the vampire's rugged appearance and the landscape imply that the monster has an innate connection with the environment, blurring the boundary between human and nature.

Unlike the conservative Valla, the vampire does not only hunt small amounts of prey for sustenance. Instead, in an erotically charged panel, he first consumes Valla's blood, grasping the terrified woman in his unnaturally long hands and penetrating her throat with sharp, animal-like fangs (*Figure 1*). In an unmistakable echo of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the vampire takes the newly transformed Valla back to his castle, where he forces her to serve him and his three vampire brides. Scrubbing blood and entrails from the castle floor, Valla narrates, 'I was their slave. Destined to clean up after their blood feasts for all eternity. Feeding on rats and the scraps of their kills' (n. p.). The male vampire's gluttonous behaviour and multifaceted exploitation of Valla—as food, as slave labour, and, as the erotic attack scene suggests, as a sexual object—serves as an implicit critique of human consumerism and greed. Generically, the vampire narrative, as Bacon (2020) observes:

'centers on the clash between the old world and the new. On the larger historical scale, the vampire represents a past that is more connected to its roots and the environment [...] On a more contemporary and smaller temporal scale, the vampire points out the ways in which humanity is unwilling to change its selfish, consumerist "traditions" in favor of discovering new ways of living that conserve and share resources' (pp. 191-92).

While the male vampire visually evokes the natural, he also demonstrates the dangers and wastefulness of unchecked consumption, metaphorically engaging in what Carolyn Merchant (1989) terms the ‘rape of nature’ just as he rapes Valla (171). These historical scenes evoke the feudal past, indicating that present-day environmental crises continue a long tradition of gendered violence. Fittingly, Valla soon punishes the vampire for abusing her, stabbing him with her wooden mop—a symbol of enslavement for Valla and female ‘domestication’ in general. She also decapitates his brides with a sword, though she consults with (and kills) their talking heads in the next issue. The vampire brides are Valla’s only female victims in the entire series. These monstrous women are decidedly un-ecofeminist, aligning themselves closely with the consumerist male vampire, and Valla punishes them for this sisterly betrayal.

The comic’s environmentalist message grows more pronounced as Valla leaves the vampire’s castle and returns to the ocean. Now immortal and physically stronger, she rejects the human world and takes refuge under the water. In a two-page sequence, Valla recounts, ‘I befriended the ocean. It clothed me. And fed me. I even made a friend. She was like me. Always feeding. Never stopping. She was the **first** best friend I ever had’ [emphasis in original] (n. p.). The accompanying illustrations show Valla wearing a dress made from living jellyfish, eating a fish, and bonding with her ‘friend,’ a great white shark. By describing herself as ‘befriending’ both the ocean and the shark, Valla indicates that she views herself as developing an equitable and mutually beneficial relationship with the sea instead of simply extracting its resources. Additionally, by showing the jellyfish voluntarily clothing the vampire and drawing parallels between Valla and her ‘best friend’ shark, the comic promotes ecofeminist views of nature by calling attention to the agency of nonhuman entities. As Alice Curry (2013) writes, ecofeminism ‘sees the natural others not as an incorporated or assimilated self but as an entity with its own subjective agency and intrinsic value. In according such ‘difference’ to the natural world, ecofeminists encourage the human subject to extend the traditionally underplayed values of empathy, solidarity and mutuality towards nonhuman others’ (p. 12). In other words, though Valla does drink the blood of fish, her monstrous ability to form close, empathetic relationships with marine life distinguishes her from the purely consumerist male vampire. These scenes invite readers to envision new, more equitable—albeit fantastical and unrealistic—ways of coexisting with the environment.



Figure 2. An oil spill consumes the panels in issue 1 of Miles Gunter and Kelsey Shannon's *Dark Fang* (2017).

Eventually, however, an oil spill disrupts Valla's underwater paradise. As Valla and her shark companion playfully battle a squid, a loud 'KRAABOOOMM' echoes under the water (n. p.). The sound comes from an exploding oil platform, a familiar scenario that mirrors the widely publicised BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The real-life environmental disaster killed untold numbers of marine creatures, including up to 170,000 sea turtles and trillions of larval fish and invertebrates, most of which died out of sight of the media (Mustain et al., 2020: p. 45). *Dark Fang* confronts readers with a shocking snapshot of this violence by portraying black, poisonous clouds of oil that envelop Valla, fish, sea turtles, and other fleeing marine creatures, with the oil soon filling the panels. Valla narrates, 'All at once, a darkness enveloped the waters. But this was not the darkness I knew. It did not **belong** in the ocean. It consumed everything in its path, including me. Only my immortal powers enabled me to break free of its grasp' (*Figure 2* [emphasis in original]) (n. p.). When Valla escapes from the oil, all sea creatures have vanished, presumably killed by the toxins. Only her glowing jellyfish dress remains unharmed, which Valla attributes to the creatures' consumption of small amounts of her immortal blood. Nearby, she finds her shark friend lying motionless on the ocean floor, gravely wounded by the oil. Gazing into the shark's tear-filled eye, Valla realises,

‘She could no longer be true to her nature. There was only one thing I could do for my friend’ (Figure 3) (n. p.). The next panel shows a vivid red plume of blood curling up through the dark water as Valla kills the shark, ending the animal’s suffering.

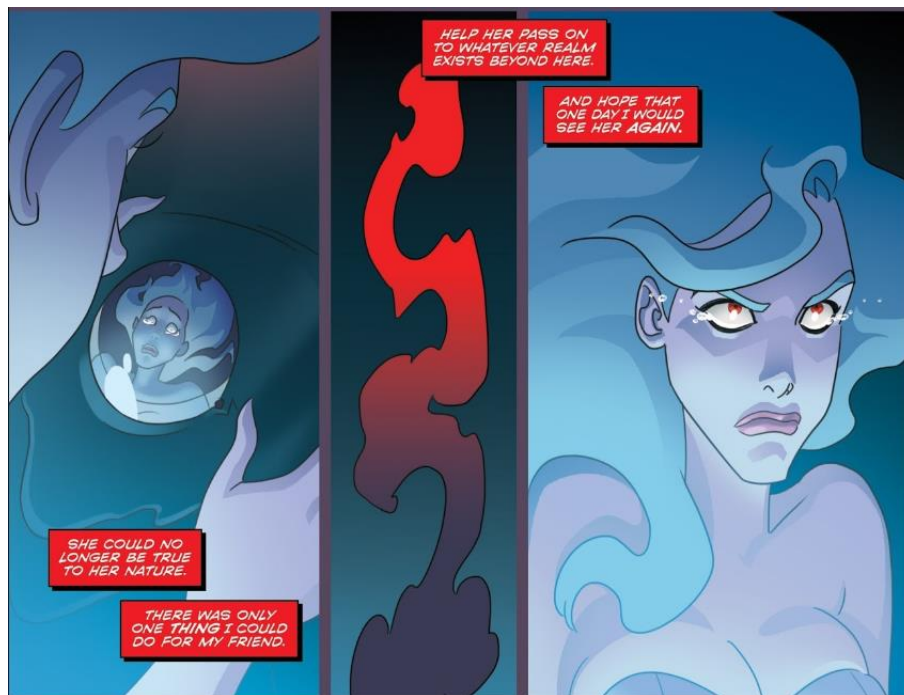


Figure 3. Valla puts her dying shark companion out of its misery in Miles Gunter and Kelsey Shannon’s *Dark Fang* (2017).

The intermingling of blood, oil, organic life, and water in this scene highlights the strange interconnections between humans, environments, and substances. Stacy Alaimo (2016) terms this enmeshment ‘trans-corporeality,’ or ‘the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world’ (p. 112). Most obviously, Valla’s blood links her with the jellyfish dress, as they have fed upon her, thus allowing them to remain alive despite the toxic oil spill. In return, the jellyfish clothe her body and provide her with a source of light under the sea, sharing a symbiotic relationship with no apparent power hierarchies. Moreover, the images of Valla and the shark covered in oil offer readers a vision of ‘a more potent marine trans-corporeality that [submerges] the human within global networks of consumption, waste, and pollution, capturing the strange agencies of the ordinary stuff of our lives’ (Alaimo, 2016: p. 113). By depicting the deadly intermeshing of oil with organic life in the ocean, the comic asks readers to consider the unpredictable and often out-of-sight consequences of the fossil fuel industries and global capitalism. After exiting human production networks, oil and synthetic

materials like plastics continue to exert ‘strange agencies’ on the world, permeating ecosystems and the bodies of individual creatures like sharks. Significantly, the comic also repeatedly draws parallels between blood and oil, using the vampire narrative to offer a scathing critique of human dependency on fossil fuels. The plumes of blood that rise from the shark in this scene and in the earlier illustrations of Valla eating the fish closely resemble the clouds of black oil that engulf the marine creatures and the vampire during the spill. By visually equating blood and oil, the comic underscores the grim ecological consequences of fossil fuel catastrophes like the Deepwater Horizon spill, which continues to negatively impact the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem. As an immortal eco-vampire, Valla witnesses this environmental degradation and provides readers with an emotionally impactful, immediate underwater perspective not typically seen in media portrayals of oil spills. Furthermore, the parallels between blood and oil also implicitly equate the monstrosity of humans and vampires. Like a blood-dependent vampire who must extract food from weaker prey, the Western world’s addiction to and dependence on capitalism and fossil fuels has rendered humanity destructive and life-destroying. While Valla remains somewhat sympathetic despite her blood consumption—after all, she did not choose to become a vampire—the comic does not provide a similarly favorable view of the oil executives who control the industry.

Along with highlighting fossil fuels’ horrific toll on marine life, the comic also underscores how oil spills and other environmental disasters disproportionately impact vulnerable human communities. After Valla returns to the surface, she travels back to her home fishing village, which has degraded into a collection of abandoned, ramshackle houses and rotting boats. On the beach, she encounters an old fisherman, who informs her,

‘Everybody moved after the spill [...] From the platform. They said they cleaned it up. But the water—they *killed* it. All the fish turned *black*. Washed up on the beach in piles. Like little mountains [...] *Oh*, they said they was *sorry*. Gave everyone a check so they could leave. Then waited till everyone forgot and started using the platform again’ [emphasis in original] (Gunter and Shannon, 2017: n. p.).

As the man speaks, Valla gazes down at the once-pristine beach, now littered with plastics. No birds or fish appear in this scene, corroborating the fisherman’s claims that the corporation has

‘killed’ the water as synthetic materials—oil and plastics—supplant organic life. In addition to destroying the ecosystem, the oil spill has also harmed the working-class residents of the village, depriving them of their livelihood and forcing them to leave their homes. By spotlighting the ways that environmental issues exacerbate socioeconomic inequities, the comic models what Noel Sturgeon (2009) terms ‘global feminist environment justice’ through ‘using an intersectional approach [...] and revealing the connections between social inequalities and environmental problems to uncover the systems of power that continue to generate the complex problems we face’ (p. 6). The oil company and the larger capitalist structures that demand fossil fuels victimise both the impoverished fishermen and the fish they rely on for survival, draining the life from the ocean and the village far more efficiently than the vampires portrayed in the comic. Significantly, the corporation only gives the villagers enough restitution to ensure they can leave, without providing the financial resources they would need to prevent the oil company from resuming production and help restore the ecosystem. In *Dark Fang*, the true horror stems from the long-lasting devastation that monstrous corporations inflict on vulnerable human and nonhuman entities, not Valla’s vampirism.

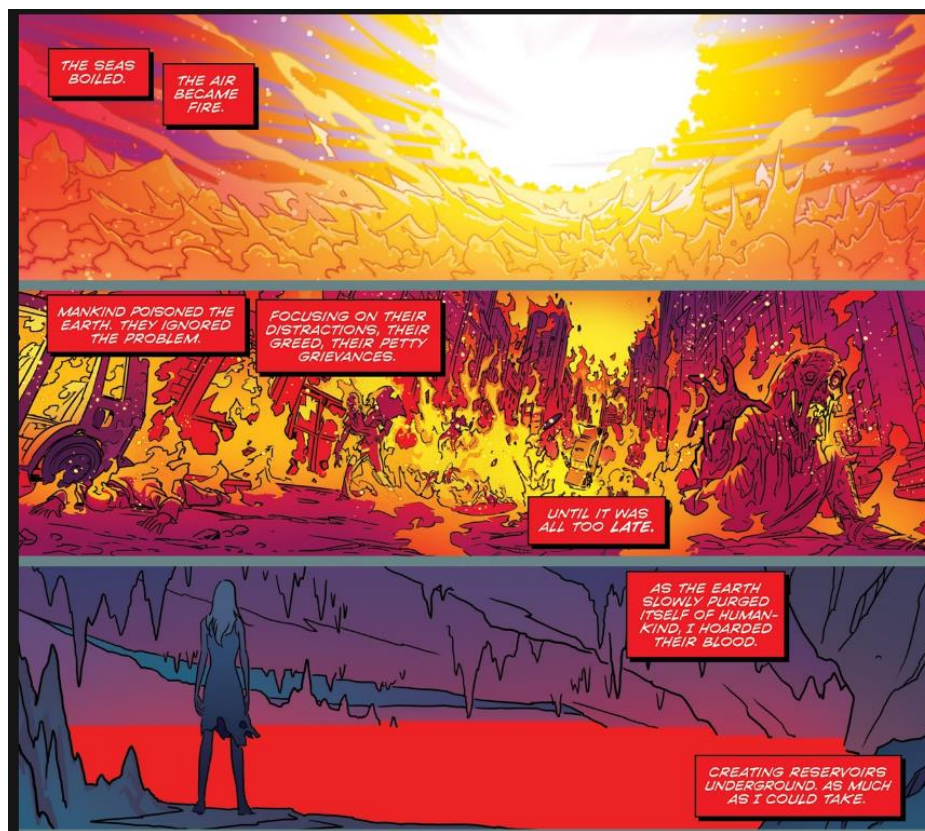


Figure 4. Valla’s vision of an apocalyptic future caused by human-made climate change in Miles Gunter and Kelsey Shannon’s *Dark Fang*.

The comic confronts readers with the nightmarish consequences of unchecked environmental exploitation by depicting a harrowing apocalyptic vision. The third issue begins with Valla dreaming of a future Earth ravaged by climate change and mass extinction. In the opening panels, the hot sun boils away the water in the ocean, and flames consume an urban landscape, engulfing humans and vehicles. Soon, only Valla remains, a vampiric echo of the lone humans in H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). Alongside these disturbing images, Valla narrates,

‘Mankind poisoned the Earth. They ignored the problem. Focusing on their distractions, their greed. Their petty grievances. Until it was all too *late*. As the Earth slowly purged itself of humankind, I hoarded their blood. Creating reservoirs underground. As much as I could take [...] and when that was gone I hunted down the last remnants of organic life’ [emphasis in original] (*Figure 4*) (n. p.).

Her nightmare concludes with an emaciated Valla attempting and failing to commit suicide after she has exhausted every source of blood on Earth. Due to her immortality and her supernatural ability to have visions, the vampire perceives climate change as a far-reaching crisis that will continue to unfold far into the future. Timothy Morton (2013) describes such phenomena as ‘hyperobjects,’ or ‘things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans’ (p. 1). He argues that the vast dimensions of hyperobjects mean that they elude easy human comprehension, noting, ‘They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to’ (p. 1). By blending images of momentary human suffering with fantasies of boiling oceans and an utterly lifeless planet, *Dark Fang* emphasises the vast temporal distance between fleeting human actions and the long-lasting consequences of climate change and fossil fuels, which will continue to negatively impact the Earth far beyond the lifespan of any individual human. As an immortal vampire, Valla operates outside conventional human timescales and fantasises that she will eventually experience an apocalyptic future where all life has perished unless she takes drastic action.

Ironically, the planet's impending ruin also drives the dream Valla to engage in the same greedy consumerist behaviours that led to the crisis in the first place and for which she

repeatedly criticises humankind. A panel depicts Valla standing at the edge of a vast underground reservoir filled with human blood, which she has ‘hoarded’ as her prey goes extinct. Most obviously, this image evokes the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, a collection of deep underground caverns along the Texas and Louisiana Gulf Coasts that currently store over 700 million barrels of crude oil (‘SPR’). It also calls to mind the doomsday ‘preppers’ who hoard resources in anticipation of the apocalypse. When she exhausts her blood reserve, Valla hunts the last remaining animals, survival triumphing over her present-day environmental ideals. Both humanity and Valla share a vampiric compulsion to hoard and consume resources, even though this behaviour could eventually lead to the destruction of the Earth. In this way, as Bacon (2020) notes, the ‘vampire is thus not only a representative of the all-consuming abyss of nature but a vital means of considering the relationship between humanity and the planet. The figure of the vampire, in all its manifestations, symbolises how out of balance we are with our environment’ (p. 191). Valla’s grim fate in the vision symbolises contemporary fears that humanity will consume itself—and the planet—to death. However, this inevitable annihilation takes place on a vast temporal scale that may make the issue seem avoidable or nonurgent for humans who lack Valla’s foresight and immortality.

Instead of accepting her dystopian fantasy as an unchangeable future, Valla uses her monstrous powers to fight back against the fossil fuel industry. After her conversation with the fisherman, she transforms into a great white shark and swims out to the oil platform that has destroyed her two homes. As she circles the platform, she narrates, ‘The darkness [...] It sleeps inside the Earth. Old as time. But man disturbs it. Captures it. Consumes it. It is *defenseless* against man. No more’ [emphasis in original] (n. p.). The sequence ends with Valla tearing apart the oil platform with her shark teeth, causing another explosion that destroys the machinery for good. (Oddly, the comic does not depict more oil spilling into the ocean due to this detonation, instead glossing over the potentially negative environmental impact of Valla’s actions.) By demolishing the platform, Valla engages in a fantastical form of ‘ecotage,’ or ecosabotage, a radical environmentalist tactic that involves ‘acts that damage property in order to halt environmental destruction’ (Sumner and Weidman, 2013: p. 874). Her description of the ‘darkness’ as an agentic entity highlights the thoroughly ecoGothic nature of fossil fuels, which are formed from the remains of long-dead marine organisms. Though the oil has killed the vampire’s marine companions, she portrays the oil as a victim of ‘man’—not, significantly, of humans in general.

Furthermore, she implicitly draws parallels between the exploitation of oil and her mistreatment by the male vampire, with both the oil and Valla captured and consumed by male abusers. As a result, her ecotage attacks the capitalist systems that have harmed the ocean and the patriarchal structures that exploit herself and nature. The vampire's capacity to shapeshift into the form of her murdered companion further underscores how her hybrid monstrosity has enabled her to develop a close, ecofeminist relationship with the environment. Bacon (2020) contends, '[v]ampires that are intimately connected to the ecosystem around them can take on the form of the various fauna of that environment. One could argue that, in being representative of that system, the vampire is actually constituted of those animals and creatures so that it not so much transforms into them but allows aspects of them to come to the fore' (p. 48). Valla's capacity to straddle the boundaries between human and nature allows her to develop an intimate relationship with nonhuman entities and even to take on their characteristics, empowering her to engage in monstrous and unconventional forms of environmental activism. Her transgression of these boundaries demonstrates the dangers of exploiting women and the environment, which will, ecohorror texts threaten, return to seek vengeance in frightening and strange new forms.

After destroying the oil rig, Valla uses her vampiric powers to murder wealthy white male executives and politicians who have profited from the fossil fuel industry. Here, the narrative shifts from a story about the damage that fossil fuels inflict on vulnerable populations to a bloody, and at times darkly hilarious, ecohorror revenge narrative. In the second issue, Valla seeks to avenge her marine companions by hunting down A. J. Mastersen, the CEO of Axco Oil, the company responsible for the oil spill. At Mastersen's luxurious mansion—a building that sharply contrasts with the rotting village shacks that Valla encounters earlier in the issue—she discovers the man and Darla, his female companion, swimming naked in a pool full of purple gelatin. The comic immediately establishes that Mastersen's exploitative behaviors extend beyond his mistreatment of the environment. Darla comments, 'I can't believe you turned your *swimming pool* into *jello*! How are you going to clean it all out?' Grasping Darla's waist with a vulgar expression reminiscent of the male vampire's earlier embrace of Valla, Mastersen responds, 'That's what Mexicans are for, baby' (n. p.). Tellingly, Darla looks uncomfortable with his grip on her body, suggesting that Mastersen treats both the 'Mexicans' and women as objects he exerts mastery and power over. Moreover, the absurdly large jello pool highlights the CEO's wasteful consumerism as he spends untold amounts of money on

disposable gelatin instead of aiding the villagers and the ocean ecosystem that his corporation has damaged. Interrupting this odd pool party, Valla hypnotises the man and forces him to give her a list of his business partners, including high-ranking members of the United States government who have granted his company drilling rights in the ocean. Finally, Valla drowns Mastersen in the jello, vowing to give other members of the fossil fuel industry ‘fates far worse than this gelatinous embrace’ (n. p.). This death is an ironic punishment for the CEO, who dies choking on liquid made from the collagen of dead animals just as the sea creatures drowned in the crude oil during the spill.

Similarly over-the-top murders occur when Valla expands her vengeful mission to the American government. Dressed in a sexy white power suit, the vampire disrupts the birthday party of Senator Austin, another wealthy white man who has presumably profited from his fossil fuel dealings with Mastersen. She discovers that the senator has captured two endangered white lions, which, he informs her, he ‘was going to kill [...] with a rocket launcher while drinking a bottle of champagne from the year I was born’ (n. p.). Once again using her hypnotic powers to paralyse her male victim, Valla declares that she will use the senator’s private plane to return the lions to the man’s vast property, where his fortune will support their preservation. By seizing Austin’s wealth for the benefit of the environment, Valla promotes forcibly confiscating the elite’s wealth as a viable—and perhaps necessary—strategy for conservation. The scene concludes with a close-up image of Valla’s bright red lips as she wishes the man ‘Happy birthday’ and feeds him to the lions. The final illustration depicts the two big cats entirely drenched in the senator’s blood, their white fur stained a vivid red (n. p.). Instead of slaying the lions for meaningless entertainment, Austin becomes their meal in a very literal case of ‘eating the rich.’

Furthermore, this scene of revenge subverts conventional expectations of the *femme fatale* trope. Initially, Valla’s bright red lipstick, nail polish, and form-fitting suit make her seem like a seductress who will use her body to beguile Austin. Likewise, the senator assumes that the vampire is a prostitute, telling her, ‘Darlin’, you are one hell of a birthday present [...] Who do I have to thank? Wait... Don’t tell me. Not yet. Maybe when we’re *done*...’ [emphasis in original] (n. p.). Instead of seducing Austin, Valla uses her vampiric hypnotic powers to control and kill him. Indeed, throughout the comic, she never uses her sexuality as a weapon against the men, relying instead on her vampirism to conquer and murder them. Barbara Creed (2007)

contends that ‘the female vampire is monstrous—and also attractive—precisely because she does threaten to undermine the formal and highly symbolic relations of men and women essential to the continuation of patriarchal society’ (p. 84). As a boundary-crossing monstrous woman, Valla refuses to participate in conventional male-female power dynamics, instead using her hybrid vampire nature to enact revenge. Significantly, the comic never mentions female oil executives, and Valla lets women like Darla—whose culpability is murky at best—escape the carnage unscathed. This sparing of female victims may promote ideals of sisterhood typically absent from *femme fatale* narratives, but it also glosses over the complicity of real-life women like Vicki Hollub in the oil industry.

Following the senator’s murder, the president of the United States delivers a live television address about Valla’s killing spree. He informs watching American citizens,

‘For the past few months we have seen unprecedented terrorist attacks upon American soil [...] I know that right now many of you are *afraid*. You’ve stopped filling up your cars and your trucks with gas for fear that you will be a victim of the next attack. I am here to tell you *not* to be *afraid*! Unless you work in the oil and gas industry, you are *not* at risk’ [emphasis in original] (n. p.).

Unable to conceive of Valla’s murder spree as an act of radical environmentalism, the president instead dismisses the death as organised ‘terrorist attacks’ that seek to ‘undermine our way of life’ (n. p.). In a moment reminiscent of George Bush’s post-9/11 message that Americans should go shopping, this fictional president urges the American people to continue consuming gas, prioritising the economic health of the fossil fuel corporations over the safety of his country and the environment. However, Valla disproves the president’s claim that only fossil fuel industry employees are in danger when she interrupts the live broadcast and violently decapitates him. A grid of fifteen small panels shows a geyser of blood erupting from the stump of the man’s neck as shocked—and, in two cases, delighted—viewers watch from surrounding panels (*Figure 5*) (n. p.). By meting out these extremely bloody, almost hilariously unrealistic deaths, Valla engages in a technique that Ted Atkinson (2013) terms ‘eco-camping,’ or the ‘use

of camp in the service of ecocriticism and ecocriticism\$’ (p. 221).³⁰ In other words, these scenes confront readers with the ways that capitalism and power structures shape men’s treatment of the environment. Still, the campy, ludicrous murders stop short of being genuinely frightening or grotesque. Instead, the comic continually confronts the audience with the horrors of consumerism, environmental degradation, and political corruption, with the white male victims consistently appearing more monstrous than the righteously murderous Valla.



Figure 5. Valla decapitates the president during a live television broadcast in Miles Gunter and Kelsey Shannon’s *Dark Fang*.

This eco-camp aesthetic somewhat fades from the series’ final two issues, though the ecofeminist message remains prominent. Issue 4 abruptly takes a religious turn as the United States government hires the half-angel Samael to kill Valla as retribution for her eco-terrorism.

³⁰ Coined by Patricia Yaeger (2010), ‘ecocriticism\$’ is ‘a prosthetic term that insists on the imbroglio of markets and nature’ (p. 529). In other words, ecocriticism\$ examines the transformation of landscapes and oceans into capital.

He takes Valla hostage in her own castle—which the vampire has ironically covered with solar panels despite her aversion to the sun—and tortures her with rays of sunlight. During this interrogation, Valla explains her motives for fighting the oil industry, saying, ‘Mankind... has poisoned... itself to such a... degree... that it began to poison... me... My fangs... have turned dark from... whatever taints their blood. The Earth... must be... protected... from their... abuse’ (n. p.). A close-up image shows Valla’s blackening fang, a tangible reminder that she has consumed tainted human blood. Valla’s inability to find ‘clean’ blood reflects humanity’s thirst for increasingly scarce natural resources like oil and meat untainted by antibiotics, plastics, and other contaminants. Her dark fang also reemphasises the strange trans-corporeality of intermeshed human bodies, nonhuman entities, and toxic substances. Furthermore, Valla’s selfish desire to protect the planet for her survival, not out of a simple passion for the environment, conforms with dominant tropes in eco-vampire narratives. Because these figures’ environmental concerns are generally motivated by self-preservation, as Joanna Mansbridge (2019) observes, they ‘illuminat[e] an uncomfortable truth of the Anthropocene, especially for the brand of environmentalism that sees the earth as something to “save”: any large-scale changes we make are designed mainly to ensure *humans*’ survival, not the earth’s or any of its billions of nonhuman inhabitants’ (p. 217). While Valla promotes ecofeminist concerns for nature, she ultimately seeks to protect herself first and foremost, reminding readers of the inherent anthropocentrism of even the most radical environmental movements.

Samael mocks Valla’s ambitions as short-sighted and too individualistic to make a genuine difference. He remarks,

‘You have murdered figureheads who will only be replaced and sown chaos that will only lead to better-fortified infrastructure. The actions you have taken are nothing more than a momentary bump in an extremely well-paved road. Oil and gas—what you call pollutants? They are all a part of nature. All God’s creations. Put here for man to use’ (n. p.).

The comic presents Samael as a ridiculous figure who wears only skimpy underwear for most of the torture scene and who promotes misguided, human exceptionalist beliefs about humanity’s right to consume oil and gas, despite the toll that these substances inflict on the environment. However, the man does offer a valid critique of Valla’s bloody environmentalism.

While fantasies of slaying oil executives and politicians may feel emotionally cathartic for the vampire and climate change-conscious readers, humanity’s addiction to fossil fuels mean that the deaths of a few elite individuals will likely not result in drastic reform.



Figure 6. Valla attempts to disseminate her environmentalist message to the masses in Miles Gunter and Kelsey Shannon’s *Dark Fang*.

In the final issue, Valla responds to this criticism by attempting to partake in one last act of environmentalism. The series concludes with the vampire killing Samael with the aid of her jellyfish dress. The American government launches a nuclear missile at her castle, a final act of cruelty from the white men who have consistently sought to oppress her throughout the comic. Trapped, Valla tries to use her cell phone to access the chat room she has been using to hypnotise men into donating their money to her environmentalist endeavors. She reflects, ‘All this time, the answer was right in front of me. If I can influence their minds to give me money [...] I can make them love their Earth the way they *should*. I will fall, but they will continue my efforts. Every day they will commit themselves to *burning* the poison out of the world’ [emphasis in original] (Figure 6) (n. p.). Instead of continuing to battle the fossil fuel industry individually, the vampire realises that she can generate change through the mass mobilisation

of her online audience. Here, she pivots from vengeance and violence to the more positive emotion of ‘love,’ encouraging her followers to engage in an ecoGothic ecophilia and work to eliminate the ‘poison’ that has damaged both herself and the environment. However, Valla’s phone battery dies before she can send her message, preventing the large-scale social change she desires. This technology snafu serves as another ironic critique of human-made systems powered by fossil fuels, which harm Valla and the environment again and again. The comic ends somewhat ambiguously with the missile blowing up the castle, apparently killing Valla. In the final panels, the vampire walks across a lunar-like landscape that may be heaven or the moon as voiceover text from a news broadcast announces the successful elimination of a ‘radical environmental terrorist cell [...] responsible for the assassinations of numerous members of the US Congress as well as high-ranking executives for a number of petrochemical corporations’ (n. p.). Ultimately, Valla fails to achieve the environmental reform that she desires, ending the comic on a final note of despair and disappointment as the government and the fossil fuel industry apparently triumph.

Unfortunately, Image Comics canceled *Dark Fang* after Issue 5, even though the creators had planned at least three additional issues (Newsrama, 2018).³¹ However, the comic effectively uses the ecohorror genre and the eco-vampire trope to promote ecofeminist views of nature. The series fosters care and concern for the environment by repeatedly extending agency to nonhuman entities, such as the loyal jellyfish dress that tries to save Valla and the shark. Moreover, the emphasis on the trans-corporeal enmeshment of humans with the environment and materials, as well as Valla’s monstrous hybridity, challenges conventional views of humans as separate from and superior to nature. The comic also educates readers about environmental injustice by drawing attention to the ways that climate change and other ecological catastrophes disproportionately impact vulnerable people, organisms, and even monsters. Most significantly, though, *Dark Fang* responds to the frightening inadequacy of traditional forms of environmental activism in the Anthropocene. As climate change continues to escalate unabated and disasters like the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill wreak havoc across vast spatial and temporal scales, it has become increasingly evident that individual, small-scale forms of environmental advocacy like recycling and utilising reusable shopping bags will never effectively address these cumulative and systemic issues. In the face of this grim reality, *Dark*

³¹ The five issues are collected in a graphic novel titled *Dark Fang, Vol. 1: Earth Calling*, but no additional volumes were released due to the cancellation.

Fang indulges monstrous fantasies about avenging nature and inflicting violence on the capitalist and patriarchal power structures that harm the environment and women. Though the comic's ending ultimately gestures at the need for collective action instead of individual acts of eco-terrorism, the text also points to the need for more radical stories that portray women as empowered environmental warriors who express the anger and fear for the future experienced by many contemporary young people. As humanity struggles to come to grips with its consumerist vampirism, monstrous women like Valla can work against capitalist ideologies and help envision new, more transformative ways of relating to and defending the environment.

BIOGRAPHY

Brianna Anderson is a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida and her M.A. in English from the University of Kentucky. Her research interests include children's literature, comics studies, digital humanities, ecofeminism, and narrative theory. She is the creator of the digital humanities project [The Environmental Comics Database](#). Her work has appeared in *Children's Literature in Education*, *The Lion and The Unicorn*, *Studies in Comics*, and other journals.

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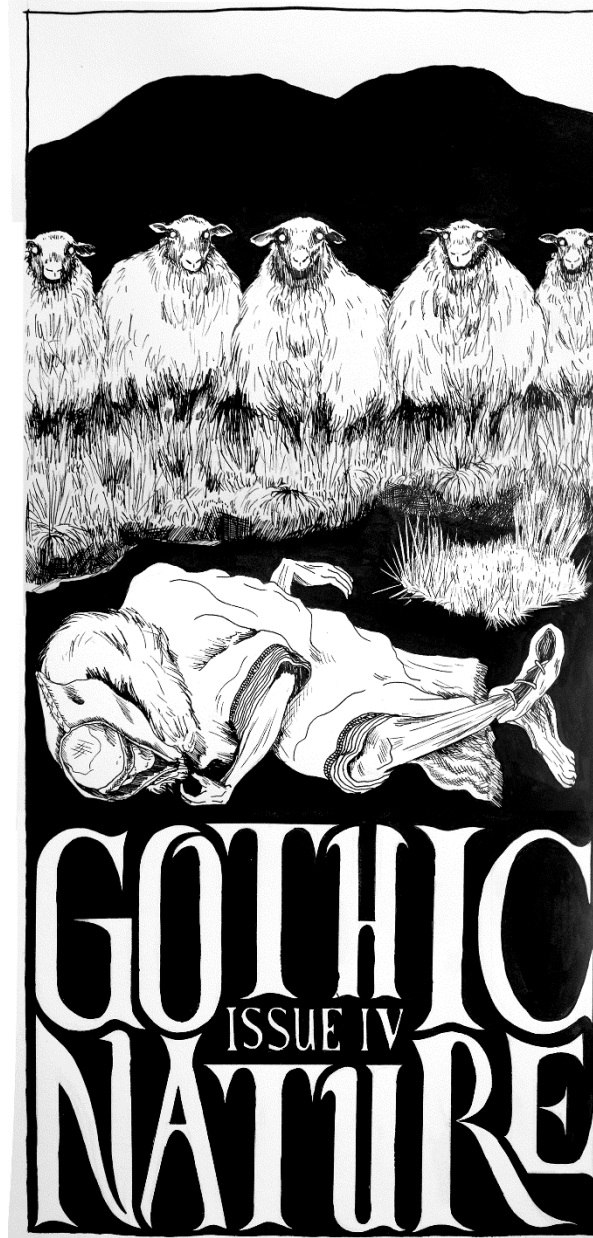
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**‘This is Not Your World’:
Extinction and Utopia in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind***

Gregory Marks

ABSTRACT

Hayao Miyazaki’s post-apocalyptic animated film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) has long been regarded as a world of ecofiction and its plot read as an eco-fable depicting the emergence of a harmonious balance between humanity and its non-human environment. In contrast to this optimistic reading of the film are the far darker themes of the manga series that Miyazaki worked on in the decade following the film’s release. The *Nausicaä* manga (1982-1994) continues the story of the film and expands its themes from a simple environmentalist message into the complex matters of mutation, manipulation, and extinction. This article argues for a reading of the *Nausicaä* manga as a work of ecological Gothic, that builds its scenes of horror out of the failure of the utopian elements of the film, systematically undermining the film’s optimistic conclusion and developing a far more sombre picture of humanity’s future. This subversion of the film’s message extends to the conceptual basis of the human-nature divide itself, as both the human and natural worlds of the story are shown to be products of interference in the distant past, making humanity inhuman and nature unnatural. But, I argue, it is by way of this negativity that the manga supplants the film’s fable with a properly utopian narrative, which is realised through a Gothic confrontation with the ancient powers that hold *Nausicaä*’s world in thrall.

For nearly forty years, Hayao Miyazaki’s post-apocalyptic animated film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) has stood as a preeminent work of ecofiction. Set a thousand years after the destruction of civilisation by industrialised warfare, on an earth now covered by a toxic mushroom jungle, the film follows Princess *Nausicaä* as she attempts to bring an end to a war which threatens both her agrarian community and the future of humanity itself. The critical reception of *Nausicaä* has tended to read it as an eco-fable, depicting what Donna

Haraway (2016) describes as the earthly salvation of ‘peace between humans and other-than-humans’ (p. 151). Indeed, Haraway’s reading of the film appears within a short piece of speculative fiction by which she attempts to imagine a path out of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene into a hypothetical ‘Cthulucene’ in which the earth may be experienced as a ‘living-with and dying-with each other’ for all creatures alike (p. 2). For Haraway, the purpose of this kind of fable-making is not to project how the world might turn out in some far-flung future, nor to give a roadmap for the social change and assorted technofixes required for the survival of the climate crisis, but is an exercise in worldbuilding that frees its practitioners from the present and allows them to picture a world other than this one.

In a similar vein to Haraway’s use of *Nausicaä* to imagine beyond the constraints of contemporary theoretical thought, Shoko Yoneyama (2021) has suggested that the work be read as a foray into ‘critical animism’ as an alternative to anthropocentric, secular, and Eurocentric worldviews. Yoneyama takes an especial interest in *Nausicaä* among Studio Ghibli’s other films as an attempt to provide ‘a “perfect story” to help us respond more fundamentally to the “perfect storm” created by the Anthropocene’ (p. 262). Likewise, Pamela Gossin (2015) identifies in the film a central intellectual and moral message concerning the necessity of ecological ethics and empathy within the framework of ecophilosophy. Whereas for Yoneyama the message of Miyazaki’s film depends upon the wider context of animism and environmentalism in Japanese culture and politics, for Gossin the film’s ecophilosophical approach inheres within Studio Ghibli’s animated style. For Gossin, the aesthetic of Studio Ghibli’s films is one that emphasises the living ‘anima’ or soul of all things, from everyday objects to animals and landscapes, which are rendered by the animator’s hand in a vibrant motion that speaks to Miyazaki’s extension of ‘admiration and honor beyond the realm of human life and nonhuman life to the equal miracle of being itself’ (p. 227). Whether in its stated philosophy or in the implicit message of Miyazaki’s style, the film *Nausicaä* functions according to these readings as a fable or parable that teaches its viewers a new way of understanding themselves and their world.

What these readings of the *Nausicaä* film as an eco-fable tend to pass over, however, are the far darker themes of the manga series upon which the film is based, in which the film’s dreams of natural harmony swiftly give way to the nightmares of mutation, manipulation, and extinction. As I will argue, the *Nausicaä* manga (1982-1994), continued by Miyazaki in the

decade following the film's release, systematically undoes the utopianism of its cinematic adaptation. While the film ends with Nausicaä's messianic rebirth as the mediator between humanity and nature, the manga continues on to disturb the very notions of an independent 'humanity' and an undisturbed 'nature.' Nausicaä discovers not only that the 'natural' world of the mushroom jungle is itself an anthropogenic creation meant to purify the earth, but that the pure earth would be uninhabitable for she and her fellow 'humans'—because they too were altered to live in a toxic environment. As the monsters of the antediluvian world emerge from their crypts to destroy the earth once more, Nausicaä battles to save a world without a future. As a tale of extinction rather than salvation, I argue that *Nausicaä* functions less as an eco-fable than as a work of ecological Gothic. Specifically, this paper aims to show that the moments of horror in *Nausicaä* are built upon the utopian expectations of ecological fiction, and the abject ruin of those expectations in a world in which the very conceptions of humanity and nature are no longer tenable.

The application of the Gothic to the works of a Japanese artist necessarily brings with it questions of categorisation and the appropriateness of Western generic descriptors for the discussion of non-Western art. Such an endeavour runs the risk of occluding the unique cultural sources of Miyazaki's work. Indeed, as Patrick Brantlinger (1988) has argued, the Gothic is already a cross-cultural style, but one inflected by the anxieties of Europe's imperialist powers, as it translates racial prejudice into fictions of biological monstrosity and deploys occult imagery to communicate the fears of a perceived civilisation in decline. In this respect, the Gothic is a genre founded in the Western colonial project, for which many of its core images and stock characters serve as ideological support. But the cross-cultural pollination of the Gothic goes both ways. As Vijay Mishra (1994) has noted, Gothic conceptions of nature and the sublime were influenced by the European reception of Indian ascetic philosophies (p. 36-7; 249): philosophies, such as Buddhism, which are prominent in the later parts of the *Nausicaä* manga and likewise inform Miyazaki's treatment of the natural world as a realm of both suffering and sacredness, inhabited by creatures who are all equal as ensouled beings caught in a hostile material world. Such a conception of nature has a long history in Japanese literature, from the early-modern *kaidan*—Japanese ghost stories—that originated as Buddhist morality tales before developing self-standing narratives of a natural world populated by spirits and demons (Keene 1976: p. 379), to the twentieth-century pastoral tales of Haruo Satō, whose melancholy style marks the widening disjunction between humanity and nature in modernity

(Rimer 1993: 13-4). Within this context, the appellation of the Gothic does not serve to identify *Nausicaä* with a genre defined solely by European reference points, but rather to name a fictive style that is common to both European and Japanese modernity, in their shared preoccupations with monstrosity, industry, and the destruction of nature.

For the purposes of this paper, the ecological Gothic, or ‘ecoGothic,’ is broadly defined by the confluence of Gothic forms with ecological content, in whatever shape those forms and contents happen to take in a given work or in the critical reception of a work. As Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) suggest, the ecoGothic identifies the ecological themes already present in Gothic fiction due to ways that ‘nature becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological’ (p. 3). For Smith and Hughes, it is the Gothic theme of ambiguity that lends the genre an ecological valence, as its recurrent scenes of the perversion of nature, bodily horror, the sublimity of the landscape, and the terrifying zones of the forest, cave, and desert are all pushed toward the complex conceptualisation of nature that ecological thought demands. The ecoGothic therefore brings to the fore the ways that traditional Gothic criticism and formulations of the Gothic genre may be pre-eminently suitable for presenting ecological themes. From Anne Williams’ (1995) reading of the Gothic as a dramatisation of feminised nature in the masculine house of culture to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1986) account of the Gothic as a drama of insides, outsides, and their dividing barriers, the core structures of the Gothic genre may well be applied not only to the environmental barriers that fill the spaces of Gothic narratives but also to the conceptual division between nature and culture itself. The ecological aspects of Gothic writing will be of significance to the argument that follows, as *Nausicaä* crosses the boundaries between nature and culture, descends into the crypt, confronts the patriarchs of culture, and sees the fecundity of nature transformed from a blessing into a horror.

The problematisation of *Nausicaä* as a work of eco-fiction entails the re-thinking of its importance as a narrative of ecological change. In the context of Miyazaki’s body of work, the publication of *Nausicaä* spans from the first years of Studio Ghibli to the creation of *Princess Mononoke*, a period that would see the clarification, politically and philosophically, of Miyazaki’s ecological vision. The transformation of *Nausicaä* from an eco-fable into a work of ecological Gothic is not only a matter of interpretation, but a way of addressing Miyazaki’s development as an artist and recognising the changes in his worldview over the first decade of

his artistic maturity. To say that Miyazaki ‘goes Gothic’ at some point between the beginning and the end of his work on *Nausicaä* is to say that this narrative, and the philosophical and political questions that it seeks to address, during the many years of its production reached an impasse that demanded the introduction of a more complex, uncertain, and negative framework to bring the work’s story to a satisfactory conclusion.

The clarification of *Nausicaä*’s ecological message does not entail a simple rejection of the aforementioned interpretation of the film as an eco-fable, but will allow us to better see what made that fable so appealing initially, and what function a more complex reading of *Nausicaä* may continue to serve for the practice of imagining new and more just worlds. It is important to note that Haraway’s engagement with *Nausicaä* appears within her own foray into science-fiction writing: the ‘Camille Stories’ that form the final chapter of *Staying with the Trouble*, which chart a genealogy of the future that imagines a resolution of the climate crisis in practices of re-wilding, bio-modification, and interspecies kin-making. The purpose of this ‘multispecies storytelling’ is the ‘recuperation in complex histories’ of a world that is ‘as full of dying as living, as full of endings [...] as beginnings’—which is to say, the practice of speculative fabulation is for Haraway a means of narrativising the possible repair of the earth during and after the mass extinctions of the Anthropocene (Haraway, 2016: p. 10). As Fredric Jameson (1981) has remarked about narrativity in general, the work of imagination seeks a resolution to the social conflicts in which it is embedded, and is thereby ‘a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm’ (p. 64). In these terms, the ideological function of fiction is to resolve in narrative what cannot be immediately changed in fact. This is also the stated purpose of Haraway’s eco-fables—her own and those she finds in Miyazaki’s work—which do not offer a program for the practical end of the Anthropocene but seek in fictive narratives the recuperation of a dying world. This desire to imagine another world is shared by Haraway and Miyazaki, but between the eco-fable and the ecoGothic lies the question of narrative resolution, and the need to find a satisfactory conclusion to the social and ecological contradictions that made the narrative necessary as a symbolic act. To bring *Nausicaä* to a fitting end, the eco-fable’s direct resolution of the ecological rift between humanity and nature is undone, and in its place must take shape another, more complex, and more ambiguous answer to the problems that the eco-fable could not dispel.

I will begin by delineating some of the differences between the film and the manga, before moving on to examine the decidedly Gothic character of the latter text, and the complex interplay of utopia and anti-utopia found within it. What emerges from the manga's unravelling of the binary opposition between humanity and nature is a more complex conception of both categories, which can neither be defined based on essential properties nor be easily resolved into a unity of opposites. The ungrounded nature and the inhuman humanity of *Nausicaä's* ecoGothic narrative are causes for horror, as they unsettle the expectations of harmony and salvation established by the film's ecological fable. But they are also signs of a more nuanced conception of the world, for which the simple dualism of the eco-fable is inadequate. While the film concludes with an impossible utopia, in which the warring factions of humanity and nature are reunited in a messianic event, the manga proceeds by way of darkness and despair to reveal the properly utopian potential which lay dormant in its fable: the possibility that utopia will be realised not by salvation, but by negation, such that the stultifying grip of the past may be released and a new future may come into being.

Promises of Salvation

What is it that makes the film version of *Nausicaä* so appealing as an eco-fable? In its barest form, the plot of the *Nausicaä* film hinges upon the relation of three elements: the monstrous forest, the survivors of humanity, and the girl who crosses the threshold between them. Without getting too distracted in the minutiae of the film's plot, we may detect this dynamic in both the wordless opening scene, in which Nausicaä navigates the forest not as an intruder but as a kindred spirit, and in the dramatic climax of the movie, when Nausicaä is reborn as the prophesied 'Blue-Clad One' who will save humanity from itself (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 1.204).

The opening sequence establishes the stakes of the narrative in its simplest form. We witness the tranquillity of an undisturbed nature, we marvel at its enormity, and we watch as Nausicaä glides through the vast forest. The forest is presented as an enormous and alien space, inhabited by infinitely varied species of giant insect which haphazardly combine the features of our world's insects into monstrous new forms. Nausicaä is dwarfed by the massive trunks of the mushroom trees, while the canopy hangs overhead more like a second sky. Below, the branches grow together to encase multiple storeys of chambers carved out by gargantuan beetles. With no clear top to the forest and no visible bottom, the opening imagery of the film

evokes the aesthetic of the sublime, as it defies the understanding in both its variety and its size. As Eve Sedgwick (1986) writes of the Gothic spaces of Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons*, so may we say of *Nausicaä*'s mushroom forest that 'it is impossible to construct in imagination the shell that would delimit this inside from a surrounding outside [...] The incoherent, indefinite, apparently infinite space depicted cannot, however, be perceived as inside either' (p. 26). Against this backdrop, Nausicaä is visibly miniscule, reinforcing the terror of the forest's sublime expanse, but she is also set apart as the sole human element venturing upon a world that is not for her, and which only accepts her on the good graces of the alien life that, for now, passes her by unnoticed.

If the opening of *Nausicaä* has been read within the terms of the eco-fable a positive, idyllic vision of nature, its aesthetic of the sublime lends some credence to a more ambiguous reading. The sharp opposition between the natural and human elements in *Nausicaä*'s opening scene recalls Robert Pogue Harrison's (1992) study of the forest as the shadow of civilisation, which serves in myth and symbolism to denote a radical alterity beyond the bounds of human reason. Within Western thought from antiquity through to Giambattista Vico and Martin Heidegger, Harrison identifies in the zone of the forest the primordial non-human space against which humanity as such is defined. As the natural space that surrounds and encloses the earliest human settlements, the forest is at once the negative space between the zones of human habitation and the substantial darkness out of which the human zones are carved like patches of light within the chiaroscuro of the natural landscape. In Miyazaki's film, too, Nausicaä appears like one of these flecks of light, set against the forest in a contrast that only reinforces her alienness to the world of the forest. More unsettling still, her submersion within the forest brings with it the potential of sinking back into it, losing distinction, and merging with a non-human nature. As Harrison remarks, 'what has changed recently is our anxiety about the loss of an edge of exteriority' that comes with the erasure of distinctions between the human and the natural, either by the subsumption of the landscape within human technical designs or by the apocalyptic return of nature to consume a fallen humanity (p. 247). The forest of *Nausicaä* is majestic, but with majesty comes a sublime power that can destroy as easily as it can nurture.

To return to the sequence of events that set off the opening of the film, the primordial oneness of the forest is not to last undisturbed—the sound of gunfire and the rumbling of insects announces the core conflict of the film: the division between nature and humanity, between

natural oneness and an ever-dividing, conflict-stricken humankind. This theme of disturbance recurs throughout the film, as the human characters transgress the boundaries of the forest and incite the wrath of the insects, either accidentally or with the purpose of aggravating the swarms against rival human factions. The oneness of nature is shattered by human interference, which by its own nature is a force of division, producing enemies where once there was a harmonious unity.

It is this rift which Nausicaä ultimately heals, when she makes peace between the warring human factions and the swarms of insects about to lay waste to human lands. Although an interloper in the forest, Nausicaä figures as a middle term between humanity and nature, by which the two worlds are made whole once again. This moment of reunion between the human factions and the creatures of the forest is depicted in the film as a messianic event, in which Nausicaä undergoes a kind of rebirth, her dress dyed blue by the blood of the mystical Ohm beetles in whose tendrils she is held aloft as the saviour of humanity and forest alike. The film ends with what might be called a message of ‘ecophilia,’ a disposition which Elizabeth Parker (2020) has identified as the crux of the return to enchantment of nature. ‘Through *ecophilia*,’ Parker argues, ‘we must choose to view Nature as sacred;’ that is, the act of re-enchantment must be made willingly and with a potentially religious fervour, like a sacrament that transforms nature into an object of devotion (p. 43). Certainly, Nausicaä’s final action in the film is to affirm the sacredness of the forest and the need for peace with its existence, thereby mending the schism between humanity and nature marked at the beginning of the film and assuming both into a fulfilled whole.

It is little wonder, then, that the film has been lauded for its utopian imagination. In the manga, however, no such resolution is to be found. This is not because the events of the film do not transpire in more or less the same fashion—in fact, the plot of the movie is told in the first two hundred pages of the book’s thousand. Yet as the story continues, the book expands upon the core elements of the film, and adds a second, hidden level to its seemingly binary conflict. The story ceases to be about humanity, nature, and the hands which reunite them, and instead transforms into a far more complex tale about the failure of that utopian moment of reunion to take place.

Problematising Nature

The most telling difference between the film and manga is in the role of the forest, and therefore the role which Nausicaä plays as the mediating figure between nature and culture. It is revealed early in the movie that the plants of the forest are not toxic in themselves, but when nurtured with purified water cease to emit their toxic fumes. Later, in the depths of the forest, it is revealed that the trees are themselves working to purify the earth, as they extract aeons of pollution from the ground and crystallise into fresh, fertile soil. ‘The forest itself was created to cleanse the world,’ reasons Nausicaä (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 1.132). This is seemingly another utopian moment, when the means of humanity’s extinction are revealed as a source of its future salvation—but, as if by sleight of hand, we find the central terms of the film growing unstable.

Revealed as a purifying force, as a tool left by antediluvian generations, the toxic jungle ceases to be a natural environment at all. Manufactured by human hands before the destruction of their civilisation, the forest no longer stands in simple opposition to the human world, but instead folds into it, becoming one more remnant of the hubris that destroyed the world. What at first appears as a world without humanity, or a nature undisturbed by human hands, is revealed as the foremost product of ecological disturbance. In other words, the ‘nature’ of the toxic forest was always already disturbed, and its relation to humanity was never truly one of simple opposition, but one of complex and intertwined ruptures in the relation between humanity and the earth. The sublime imagery of the forest expanded by artificial means and the statements of various characters that ‘It is the insects who are saving this planet’ or ‘Humans became obsolete long, long ago’ indicate the extent to which nature is collapsed into the widened political story of the manga, which admits no clear distinction between nature and humanity (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.170; 2.195).

This problematisation of the central terms of the film by the manga has been identified by Nathaniel Heggens Bryant (2015) as an intensification of the ecological message of the film, cut short by the religiosity of its conclusion. As Bryant writes, ‘we should look to the extended manga series, rather than the original anime, to find Miyazaki’s most trenchant ecological and moral critiques. [...] In order to undo this religiosity, he continues Nausicaä’s journey in the manga, allowing for greater character development and a much richer and nuanced ecological critique’ (p. 124). Part of this expanded ecological critique involves unsettling Nausicaä’s own

role as a messianic figure, as her pacifism is tested by her participation in a war with a kingdom on the other side of the toxic jungle, her empathy is stretched to the point that she adopts a biologically-produced and sentient superweapon as her child, and as the consequences of her actions are revealed to potentially include the final extinction of the human species. Although Nausicaä does triumph as a heroic character by the manga's end, she is no longer the unambiguously pure heroine of the film, fit for an ecological fable, but has become a figure of humanity's existential uncertainty and in the face of a disharmonious ecology.

The ambiguity of the natural world and of ecological politics that develops over the course of the *Nausicaä* manga cannot be understood without some reference to Miyazaki's changing political commitments over the course of the work's production. As Susan Napier (2018) has documented, leftist politics were a prominent element of Miyazaki's art and worldview from the beginning of his career, from the agrarian communist society of *Future Boy Conan* to the struggle between miners and bosses in *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (p. 28-9). These concerns would recur in *Nausicaä*, but in the decade between the release of the *Nausicaä* film and the completion of the manga, Miyazaki's political beliefs would not waver so much as they would be transformed by the apparent defeat of communism at the end of the Cold War and by the growing predominance of environmental concerns. The dissolution of Yugoslavia during the production of *Porco Rosso* effected Miyazaki especially strongly, and although he would remark in an interview that he had 'swept away [his] belief in socialism' by this time, the sense of political pessimism would become all the more potent in both that film and in 1997's *Princess Mononoke* (Napier, 2018: p. 149). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes on the one hand and the growing urgency of environmental disaster on the other, Miyazaki's political commitment to the workerist socialism of his youth gave way, and in its place began to develop a still radical, but no longer anthropocentric vision of the world. Without recourse to the ideal of a harmonious human community, the question of the relation between humans and nature became the political central question of Miyazaki's work, and the need for a sufficiently complex account of green political action all the more dire.

The deep green of the manga has even been read as expressing a suspicion of the ecological perspective itself. For Shigemi Inaga (1999), the manga is marked by a series of abject images, from the bloodstain, to the creeping fungus, to the ritual of sacrifice, which

speak less to the utopian hope for reparation between nature and humanity than they cry out at the violence of modernity and the catastrophe that awaits all human attempt to meddle with nature. Reflecting on the calamitous situation of environmentalism in Japan at the time of *Nausicaä*'s writing, Inaga remarks that the *daikaisho*, the massive biological weapon that devours the surface of the earth in a late story arc, 'is also the calamity that the Japanese seem destined to prepare by themselves' by their wanton destruction of a once sacred environment (p. 124). For Inaga, this position is not so much ecological in a positive sense as it is a speculation on the failures of environmentalist thought to come to terms with nature in itself, and the ruin of all attempts to exert control over nature, no matter how justified or well-intentioned that control may be.³² The moral of *Nausicaä* is therefore less a message about learning to live with nature as it is about recognising the mutual ruin of both a humanity and a nature vitally entwined with one another yet at existential odds. As Gwendolyn Morgan (2015) suggests, Miyazaki's work teaches that 'with mutual dependence comes mutual destruction,' and that this mutual dependence is not always one that is fostered willingly nor sought out by either party (p. 179). Miyazaki's problematisation of the notion of an undisturbed nature does not necessarily mean a release from the conflict between humanity and nature; on the contrary, it intensifies that conflict, making it a central component of nature itself, which in its unnatural, monstrous state drags humanity into an ever-widening extinction event.

Obeisance before Extinction

But there is another turn of the screw, and another rupture in the human-nature binary. Just as the primordial oneness of the forest is revealed as an artificial landscape serving the purpose of long-dead masters, its opposite term—humanity—is similarly undermined. As the story continues, it is revealed that the human population of *Nausicaä*'s world is, in fact, *not strictly human at all*. *Nausicaä* discovers that, many centuries before her time, the last of the old civilisations modified their peoples so that they could live within the new, toxic environment:

³² As much as it makes a simple environmentalist message untenable, this disturbance of the idea of nature does not necessarily preclude all ecological readings of the text. Indeed, in keeping with the manga's disturbed view of nature, we may refer to the present understanding of ecosystems *as systems of disturbance*: 'Humanists, not used to thinking with disturbance, connect the term with damage. But disturbance, as used by ecologists, is not always bad—and not always human. Human disturbance is not unique in its ability to stir up ecological relations. Furthermore, as a beginning, disturbance is always in the middle of things: the term does not refer us to a harmonious state before disturbance. Disturbances follow disturbances. Thus all landscapes are disturbed; disturbance is ordinary. [...] Whether a disturbance is bearable or unbearable is a question worked out through what follows it: the reformation of assemblages' (Tsing, 2015: p. 160).

‘Human beings transformed the human body to suit a polluted world’ (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.481). What this means for the denizens of the post-apocalypse is that not only were they never human—a term which, like nature, now becomes ungrounded—but that their bodies were adapted for the unliveable environment, and in the process made unsuitable for the pure world beyond the forest. Nausicaä realises that ‘we cannot live without the poison’ and although ‘the world is beginning to be reborn’ by means of the forest’s purifying process, ‘our bodies cannot tolerate that purity’ (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.439; 2.481). The forest’s gradual purification of the earth is not a miracle cure, but the final nail in humanity’s coffin. When the lands beyond the forest are described as ‘a place that can only be visited in spirit’ yet ‘somehow represents hope’ (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.438) we might recall Kafka’s infamous declaration: that there is ‘an infinite amount of hope—but not for us’ (Benjamin, 1968: p. 116).

It is in this dual decomposition of both human and non-human nature that the *Nausicaä* manga moves from the uncomplicated eco-fable of the film to another style, which, I argue, is better identified as a style of ecoGothic. The Gothic is readily visible in the imagery of the manga’s later volumes, which deploy a sort of body horror centred on an ‘abhuman’ subjectivity. As Kelly Hurley (1996) defines the term, ‘the abhuman subject is a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other’ (p. 3-4). The abhuman encompasses virtually all of the characters of the manga, from the artificial warriors and antediluvian monstrosities used to wage a renewed apocalyptic war, up to Nausicaä and her companions themselves, who must come to terms with the fact of their own inhumanity. Indeed, the abject style of *Nausicaä* becomes increasingly overt over the course of the series, as the imagery of slime and mutation begins to supplement the already established aesthetics of the fungal and insectoid. In an attempt to wipe out both the mushroom forest and their human rivals, a faction of religious zealots releases the ‘*daikaisho*,’ a massive slime-mould that devours and liquefies all living matter in its path, insect and human alike. As it consumes, this wave of slime grows ever larger, releasing toxic gases to destroy all life, turning the mushroom forest and the surrounding habitable lands into deserts. The function of slime in Gothic fiction is for Hurley that of ‘the revenge of matter,’ as ‘sliminess is a reminder of the utter Thing-ness of matter’ that falls just short of qualifying as ‘life’ (p. 36). In *Nausicaä* this overpowering horror of slime builds upon the already present fears of the abhuman, as the inhumanity present throughout Nausicaä’s world is made visible in its barest form as an artificially produced eruption of mindless, malevolent mould.

The confusion of boundaries that is concomitant with the aesthetics of abjection places Hurley's notion of the abhuman in correspondence with formulations of the posthuman, which are likewise characterised by the undermining of distinctions between human and other-than-human. As N. Katherine Hayles (1999) describes the term, the advent of the posthuman brings with it a loss of the ability to 'identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will,' such that 'there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals' (p. 3-4). Where the posthuman differs from the abhuman, however, is in its positive conception of a new being after the collapse of the human, rather than a purely negative dissolution of the human into its abjected other. For instance, for Rosi Braidotti (2013) this shift toward the posthuman means, among other things, a 'becoming-earth' and a 'post-anthropocentric shift towards a planetary, geo-centred perspective' (81). In *Nausicaä* this perspective is rendered quite literally in the imagery of an earth without people, after the extinction of the human species by either the purifying growth of the mushroom forest or else by the annihilating spread of the daikaisho mould. Not only does Miyazaki's tale describe the mutated creatures that may emerge in humanity's abhuman future, it also contemplates a properly *post*-human world, in which the perspective of the empty landscape becomes as worthy of thought as that of the people who once populated its surface.

The formulations of the abhuman and posthuman both converge with the Gothic in a fundamental way: namely, like the Gothic they are both structured around anxieties of interiority and exteriority, and the potential transgression of the barriers that separate inside from outside. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1986) argues, the Gothic genre depends on a central structure comprised of three elements: 'what's inside, what's outside, and what separates them' (p. 12). These elements may be topological features of the Gothic setting, such as the darkness of a cave or the isolation of a crypt; they may appear as psychological barriers, such as the blockage of amnesia or the deceit of a double identity; or they may even appear at the level of the text itself, in the form of nested narratives and lacunae in the story. Most pertinent for the abhuman and posthuman, this Gothic structure may also be read ontologically, describing the exclusionary process that defines normative conceptions of humanity, and the horror that attends transgressions of that boundary, when the human becomes contaminated by something other than itself. The isomorphism of the Gothic with the posthuman goes some way to

explaining the confluence of the two concepts (not to mention the convergence of contemporary posthuman theory with Gothic culture in its adoption of Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a posthuman ur-text), which appear in *Nausicaä* as conjoined, such that the appearance of the posthuman is never far from the Gothic affects of fascination and horror.

Another aspect of the Gothic becomes apparent when we move from the disturbed structure of the human-nature binary to the changed role of their intermediary, Nausicaä. No longer a prophet of peace between nature and humanity, Nausicaä's role in the narrative takes on a far more ambiguous tenor. Whereas in the film she is gifted with a preternatural affinity for the forest, and is in possession of a conviction which is able to change those around her and save them from destruction, in the manga she is increasingly beset by doubt. As she travels through war-ravaged lands, she encounters cultists who celebrate the end of days, declaring: 'The end of this world of suffering has come' (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.126). 'We, the cursed race, will be consumed by fire, and a new world will be born' (p. 2.63). To them, 'the Blue-Clad One is not a savior but a god of death,' come to relieve this world of its torment (p. 2.372).

As Susan Napier (2018) suggests, the course of Nausicaä's character arc in the manga is one of moving 'from messiah to shaman,' as she forsakes the messianic role of saviour and instead preaches love for 'all things on the Earth' (p. 173). This shift in perspective comes not from a miraculous rebirth as in the film, but from Nausicaä's submission to despair and a deepened empathy with the world that her experience of near-death entails. As a shaman rather than a messiah, Nausicaä also foregoes the moral framework of guilt and expiation that had previously driven her toward self-sacrifice, and even comes to see the most evil characters of the series as fellow creatures of the earth also worthy of grace. Denise Ask Nunes (2021) has similarly identified in Nausicaä's final actions a move beyond the morality that informed the early arcs of the series, as Nausicaä decides that humanity must 'succumb to planetary agency' even if it means their destruction (p. 90). The dissolution of the binaries of good and evil and the abandonment of any simplistic moral system are, Miyazaki suggests, the prices willingly paid to achieve a truly non-anthropocentric worldview, even to the point of accepting extinction as one valid outcome among many. In the place of the film's hopeful message of redemption emerges a truly Gothic speculation on the void. As Devendra Varma (1957) writes of the mystical pessimism of the Gothic, it is 'in an ecstasy of communion [that] the Gothic spirit makes humble obeisance before the great Unknown: fear becomes acceptance, and senseless

existence fraught with a dark, unfathomable, sacred purpose' (p. 15). No longer an unambiguous saviour of humanity and nature, it is this spectre of extinction which Nausicaä must learn to face.

Utopian Negativity

What does all this mean for our reading of *Nausicaä's* narrative? If we are no longer safe within the conventions of the fable and its miraculous ending, but are instead surrounded by the far more ambiguous archetypes of the Gothic, where does this new, darkened narrative lead? First, on a formal level, the narrative of the manga supplants each significant element of the movie's plot with a horrifying double: nature becomes unnatural, and the human becomes abhuman. What at first appears as a simple lesson on mediation between warring principles suddenly becomes ungrounded, as the seemingly essential terms of nature and humanity are revealed as figments suspended over the abyss. Second, on a philosophical level, the manga is a full-throated rejection of easy exits from a millennia-spanning era of environmental disaster. We are led through a series of negations (Figure 1), as the simple narrative of the film gives way to the complexities of the manga, which draws toward a conclusion that attains its own Gothic resolution.

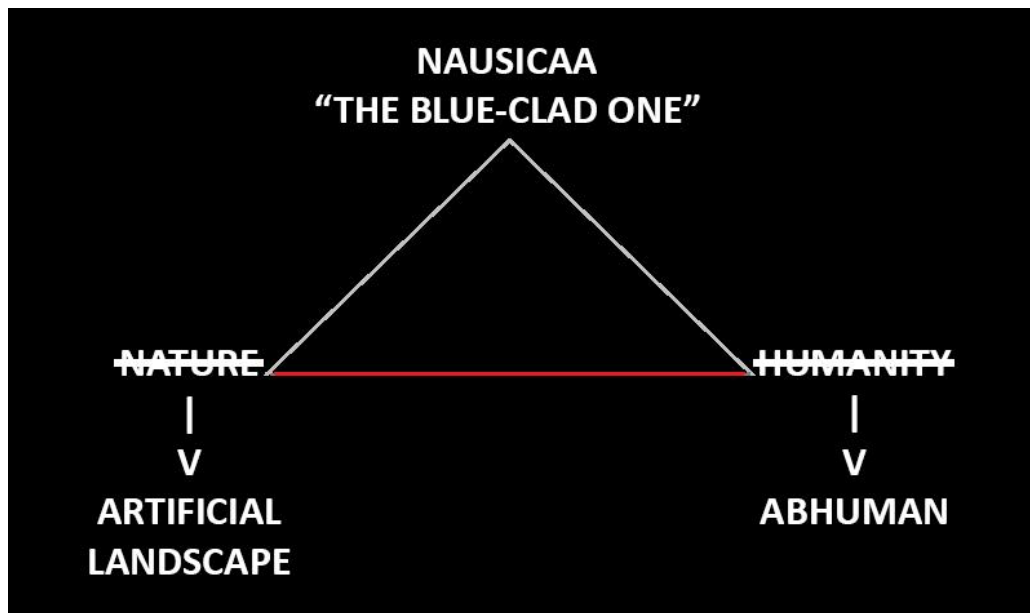


Figure 1: The central binary of the *Nausicaä* film, the synthesis of the two terms, and their negations.

What entices about the film's ending is its miraculous resolution of the seemingly interminable war between humanity and nature, as Nausicaä takes up her role as a messianic figure, simultaneously the daughter of nature and the mother of a new human world. The manga, however, refuses to allow an uncritical acceptance of this messianic narrative. In the final pages, it is revealed that the prophecies of the Blue-Clad One, the miracles which followed in her wake, and the purpose of her existence were all manufactured by the same archaic powers that created the forest and altered humanity. The ultimate antagonist of the manga is not the forest or even the warring lords, but the dark force which resides in the crypts of the ancient city of Shuwa. There, Nausicaä discovers the last remnants of the old humanity, preserved by forgotten sciences for the day when they might re-emerge to populate a purified earth.

The crypt has obvious Gothic connotations, and its residents are a clear analogue to the patriarchs of Gothic fiction. As Anne Williams (1995) writes in her commentary on the legend of Bluebeard, the Gothic descent into the crypt reverses the terms of the Orphic myth, in which a man of culture descends into the belly of the earth:

‘Unlike Hades, or those caves and natural fissures into which so many heroes plunge, a castle is a man-made thing, a cultural artifact linked with the name of a particular family. This structure has a private and a public aspect; its walls, towers, ramparts suggest external identity, the “corridors of power,” consciousness; whereas its dungeons, attics, secret rooms, and dark hidden passages connote the culturally female, the sexual, the maternal, the unconscious. [...] The structure embodies the principles of cultural order’ (p. 44).

In the Gothic tale of descent, it is no longer the matter of a man who penetrates into the secret chambers of the natural world, but rather a heroine who descends into the hidden realm of culture, where the built spaces of the crypt, dungeon, and tunnel figure the repressed elements of that culture. In Miyazaki's tale, these resonances of the crypt are utilised to their full capacity, harbouring the dark truth of Nausicaä's world and the ancient fathers whose will has infiltrated every aspect of the surface world, supplanting nature itself with an engineered double.

Haunting the world that they have made, exercising their diabolical control over its workings, the lords of Shuwa present Nausicaä with a choice: serve them and their goals of domination, or perish. Nausicaä's response, in the manner of the Gothic heroine, is to dispel their Faustian bargain as the trickery of ghosts. She cries: 'You are nothing but shadows' and denounces their intentions to 'go on deceiving us until the very day you plan to destroy us.' 'Why?' she asks, 'Because no matter how much knowledge and technology you have, you will need slaves to do the work for you on the morning you replace the world?' (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.506-8). In the same moment that Nausicaä rejects her role as prophet, she effects an escape from the rigor mortis grip of the past. The utopia of salvation, the promise of a pure earth, is dispelled as the myth which tightens the bonds of ancient masters.

It is in this rejection of naïve utopianism that *Nausicaä* finds a truly utopian moment, which lies not in miracles but in disenchantment. In taking on the role of a Gothic heroine instead of a false prophet, Nausicaä rejects all the subterfuge of the old masters and embraces a conscious, disenchanting relation to the earth and its people. The *Nausicaä* manga finds its narrative conclusion at precisely this point: having torn down the idols of the past, a liberated 'humanity' (or posthumanity?) is faced with the vertiginous drop into history and the long work of shaping their own future. Nausicaä refuses all prophets and puppet-masters, and on the final page is carried off in a mass of people about to shape their own destiny, even on a planet ravaged by the tyrants and owners of the past. In this anti-utopian rejection of the world born anew, a truly utopian wish is expressed: to see clearly, even our own destruction.

The manga's final confrontation between the stultifying forces of the past and Nausicaä's open-eyed embrace of a dying world draw into focus the new dynamic that takes the place of the film's conflict between humanity and nature. Whereas the film's narrative structure centres on a simple binary conflict and its eventual resolution, the narrative of the manga requires an additional dimension to reveal the depths hidden beneath this now ungrounded binary. Growing out of the complementary terms of humanity and nature, this new structure may be spatially mapped by a semiotic square (Figure 2). From out of the two opposed terms of nature (in its primordial oneness) and humanity (in its warring multiplicity) emerge two contradictory terms: the non-human life of the abhuman and the non-natural life of the artificial landscape.

The possibility of mapping the core terms of the *Nausicaä* manga in this way is not merely an exercise in formalism. As Fredric Jameson (2019) argues, the function of the semiotic square is to disambiguate the logical space of a given text ‘by way of two distinct negations, the one specific, and the other general. [...] An initial term, in other words, will stand in an inextricable relationship of negation and definition with a specific opposite number, at the same time that in a more general way its meaning will be generally cordoned off from everything it is not’ (p. 73). From out of the initial binary relations between ‘X’ and ‘anti-X’ (in this case, nature and humanity) are derived the more general ‘non-X’ and ‘non-anti-X’ (here, the non-natural and non-human in their abject forms). In the diagram, the second binary pair are swapped horizontally with respect to the original pair, to signify the relation of implication or inference moving from the implicit second pair up to the explicit original binary; in the case of *Nausicaä*, the anti-natural forces of humanity are symptoms of a wider disturbance in the non-natural landscape (non-X > anti-X), while the abhuman theme of biological alteration undergirds the specific instance of the mushroom forest as an engineered landscape (non-anti-X > X). In these relations of contrariness and contradiction, generality and specificity, the core terms of the text are legible only in relation to one another, in orbit around a centre that may shift and rotate without thereby eliminating the structure that holds the terms together.

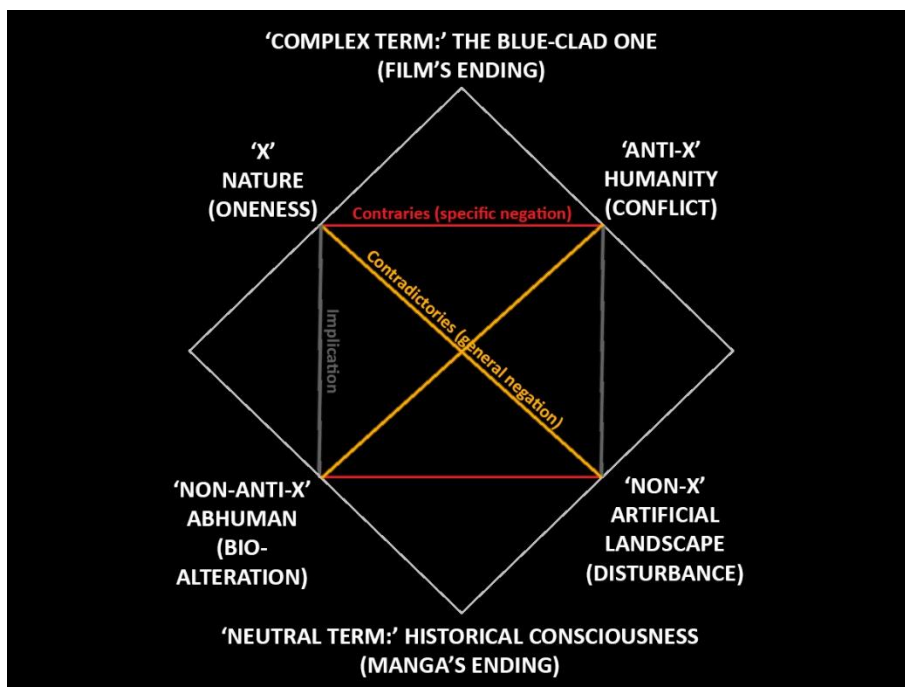


Figure 2: A semiotic square of the *Nausicaä* manga.

Although this structure is indissoluble, the narrative may find a satisfactory conclusion in one of the two synthetic positions, where the binaries are resolved either by a positive synthesis (the complex term that unites X and anti-X) or in a double negation by way of the second pair (the neutral term that is neither X nor anti-X). Whereas the climax of the film centres on the unity of opposites, and the impossible utopian resolution of their conflict in the complex position, the final pages of the manga turn to the neutral space at which the two negative terms meet. This space affords no happy resolution, and no simple moral to be told, but offers a radical negativity that sweeps away all the spectres of the past. As they are dispelled, the voices of the crypt cry out, 'That is nihilism! Nothingness!' and Nausicaä responds: 'Extinction has long since become a part of our lives' (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.511). Far from being a nihilist acquiescence to death, and further still from being the eco-fable of the movie, Nausicaä's position is one of freedom from all the illusions which kept her in servitude. Believing that neither the myths of humanity nor nature will suffice to save her people, Nausicaä declares her allegiance to life itself, in all its ambiguity. 'Suffering and tragedy and folly will not disappear in a purified world. They are part of humanity. That is why, even in a world of suffering, there can also be joy and shining light' (Miyazaki, 2012: p. 2.512). In the place of the film's impossible unity of opposites emerges a new image of utopia: an ethical reversal, love out of darkness, and the triumph of negativity in the face of all false hopes.

Between these two options lies the personal and political impasse that necessitated Miyazaki's continued work on *Nausicaä* after the film's completion, and the development of a more complex conception of nature within his fiction. Although 'the passion and rage that animate Nausicaä echoes her creator's increasingly angry frustration at a society seemingly bent on disaster,' the political messages of Miyazaki's work in the '80s and '90s are also reflective of the growing distance between his life as an artist and the activist practice of his youth (Napier, 2018: 160). Written over the period that saw Miyazaki distance himself from active political life, and which saw his stated political beliefs move from an anthropocentric workerism toward a growing consciousness of the environmental destruction concomitant with all apparent economic progress, the *Nausicaä* manga provided an artistic means of giving voice to Miyazaki's growing political misgivings and for answering from same anxieties in a more satisfying way than was possible in the *Nausicaä* film. As Haraway has recognised in her characterisation of *Nausicaä* as a work of speculative fabulation, the work is an at times desperate attempt to make sense of the ecological problems that traditional political movements

have failed to recognise. But the work is not itself a solution to those problems: it is an attempt on the part of the author to conceptually resolve a dilemma that he cannot change in fact. As a symbolic act, the narrative of *Nausicaä* is caught between real ideological struggles and the comparative inertness of individual actions, artistic or otherwise, to alter the course of those struggles. As Jameson (1981) notes, ‘a symbolic act is on the one hand affirmed as a genuine act, albeit on the symbolic level, while on the other it is registered as an act which is “merely” symbolic, its resolutions imaginary ones that leave the real untouched’ (p. 66). The author in retreat from organised politics seeks out an imagined resolution to the political impasse that now seems practically irresolvable. In seeking a satisfactory solution within his fiction, Miyazaki pushes his work from the naïve resolutions of the *Nausicaä* film toward the mature position of the manga, which clarifies not only the limits of the earlier work but gives a more adequate shape to the ecological consciousness that had demanded expression in that work.

To bring the discussion full circle: why, then, does Miyazaki ‘go Gothic’ over the course of the *Nausicaä* manga? In a word, the Gothic provides for Miyazaki a more fulfilling narrative conclusion and symbolic resolution to the dynamics established early in the manga and present in the film. Given the growing urgency of ecological crisis and Miyazaki’s disillusionment with traditional forms of leftist politics, the simple resolution of the film was no longer sufficient to the task of imagining the real, complex relations between humanity and nature. From out of the film’s binary formula of humanity-versus-nature then emerges a recombination of elements to create a complex re-conceptualisation of the original terms, which are now resolved not in a positive synthesis but by way of mutual negations that undermine the human and the natural in turn. For this purpose, the negative aesthetics of the Gothic are a natural fit, as they describe the limits of human reason and the natural world in moments of suspense and horror, and as they bring with them a repertoire of inhuman figures and unnatural scenes that serve as the building blocks for Miyazaki’s rethinking of humanity and nature alike. The ecoGothic tale is therefore well-prepared to achieve a symbolic resolution both more adequate and more satisfactory than the one offered by the eco-fable: both forms, and both readings of *Nausicaä*, contain a utopian wish, but only in the final form of Miyazaki’s ecological tale has this wish been tempered and transformed, worked over by the negative, so that it desires not a simple harmony but a complex, difficult, and well-deserved redemption of a fallen humanity.

BIOGRAPHY

Gregory Marks completed his PhD in 2020 through the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University, Australia. His thesis was on the Gothic narratives and posthuman nightmares of Thomas Pynchon's novels. His recent publications include 'Apocalypse Never: Walter Benjamin, the Anthropocene, and the Deferral of the End' in *SFRA Review* (2021), 'The Subterranean Imaginary: A Dictionary of the Descent' in *SPLM: Society for the Propagation of Libidinal Materialism* (2021), and 'It's Just One Thing After Another: The Bad Infinities of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*' in *Infinity Wars: Hegel and Spinoza* (forthcoming 2022).

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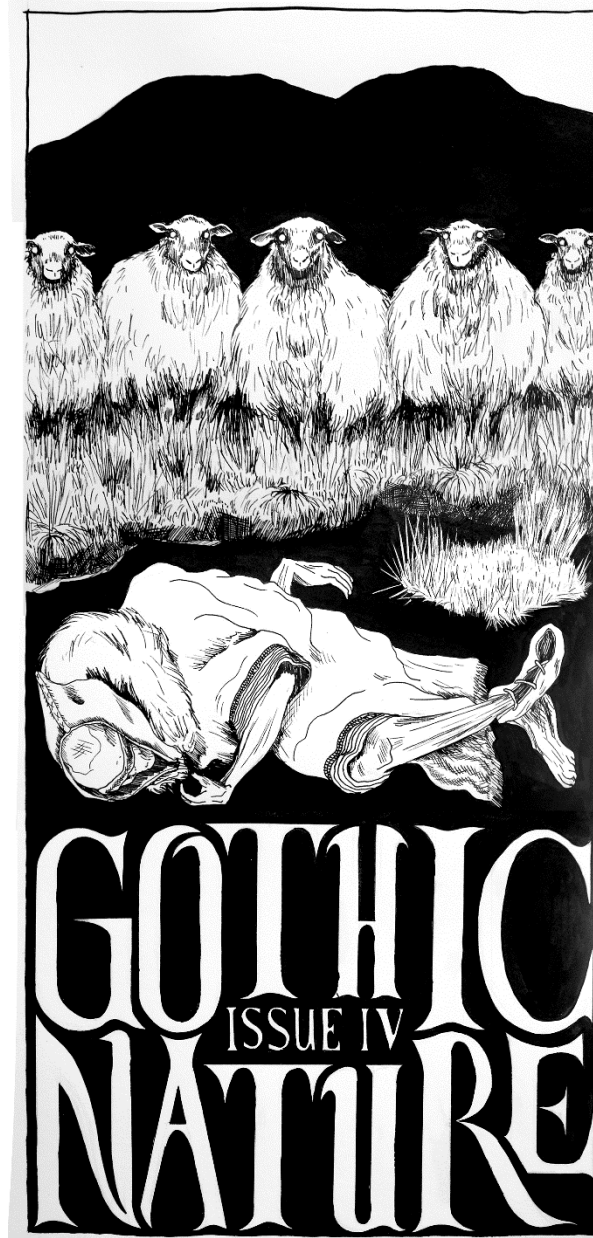
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GOTHIC NATURE



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**Many Paths Through the Forest:
Exploring Arborescence and Ecological Themes in Digital Interactive Narrative**

Kevan Manwaring

ABSTRACT

In this article I reflect upon the process of designing and constructing a digital interactive narrative using elements of biomimicry as an intrinsic part of the ecological themes it wishes to dramatise. The ‘branchiness’ of this modern iteration of the choose-your-own-adventure style of game is supported by a complex substructure of coding and wider ecosystem of coders, mirroring a forest and its exoteric and esoteric networks and labyrinths. Published by West Coast start-up, Tales: choose your own story, *Hyperion: tower of the winds* (2020) is a 24-part, 96,000-word digital novel set in the storyworld of my fantasy series, *The Windsmith Elegy* (2004-2012). I argue that Fantasy has a role to play in cultivating ecoliteracy and in modelling alternative modalities in response to the multiple challenges we face in the Climate Emergency. I posit that the design, playing, and prosumer discourse such ergodic texts generate have a mycelial quality to them—rhizomatic structures, which, as Deleuze and Guattari advocate, are non-hierarchical, resilient, and reciprocal. Acknowledging the compromised entanglement of the digital, I critique the affect and ethics of gaming platforms, which can both raise awareness and be part of the problem: the dirty ecology of every electronic device and virtual noosphere.

Key words: *interactive fiction, ergodic, branching narratives, mycelia*

Abbreviations

CYOA (Choose-Your-Own Adventure)

DIF (Digital Interactive Fiction)

GM (Gamesmaster)

TTRPG (Table-Top Role-Playing Game)

PC (Player-Character)

MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online Game)

NB the subheadings are quotes from *Hyperion: tower of the winds* with one exception.

Introduction

‘Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth’
—Robert Frost, 1915

In his famous poem, ‘The Road Not Taken’ (1915), Robert Frost regretted not being able to take the other path. He was actually alluding to his friend and fellow poet, Edward Thomas, who he used to explore Gloucestershire with in their ‘walks-talking.’ Thomas was well-known amongst his friends for being both a keen walker, and one keen to explore every path. Down one might be glimpsed an orchid; down another a nest. Thomas often doubled-back and did both. The writer/designer *and* the reader/player of a digital interactive fiction can experience something similar to Thomas’ compulsion of exhaustive exploration in the satisfaction of mapping and traversing every narrative pathway, or at least, like Frost, enjoying the illusion of opting for the less-trodden pathways: the contrarian choice, ‘that has made all the difference.’

In this article I will reflect upon the process of designing and constructing a digital interactive narrative using elements of biomimicry as an intrinsic part of the ecological themes it wishes to dramatise. The arborescence, or ‘branchiness’ (a term used by games designers), of this modern iteration of the choose-your-own-adventure style of game is supported by a complex substructure of coding and wider ecosystem of coders, mirroring a forest and its exoteric and esoteric networks and labyrinths. Published by West Coast start up, Tales: choose your own story, *Hyperion: tower of the winds* (Manwaring, 2021) is a 24-part, 96,000-word digital novel set in the storyworld (Hergenrader, 2018) of my fantasy series, *The Windsmith Elegy* (2004-2012). Written during 2019-2020, when environmental protest movements such as Greta Thunberg’s *Skolstrejk för Klimatet* (School Strike for Climate) and Extinction Rebellion were reaching a critical mass, I wished for *Hyperion* to foreground ecological concerns, for I

believe Fantasy has a role to play in raising awareness, and also modelling alternatives in the challenges we face in the Climate Emergency: what has been called the ‘defining crisis of our time’ (UN, 2019). Even if *Hyperion*—set in a storyworld where the ‘winds of the world had gone awry’ and the protagonist is challenged to seek the cause of this climate chaos and to quell it—had not explicitly explore such themes, Timothy Morton suggests that ‘all art is ecological’ (2021), and Mark Bould that all cultural artefacts currently being produced demonstrate the ‘Anthropocene Unconscious’:

‘Must fiction be immediately and explicitly about climate change for it to be fiction about climate change? Is there no room for the symbolic? The oblique? The estranged? No room to think about the capitalist, patriarchal histories, systems and structures that are historically and foreseeably responsible for climate destabilisation, and through which it has, is and will be experienced? No room to consider what happens if we stop assuming a text is not about climate change?’ (Bould, 2021: 4)

Although tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) have many advantages over online gaming, during the Covid-19 pandemic the latter gained increasing relevance and usefulness. The playing/reading of a digital interactive narrative is often done by an individual, however, the experience and results can be shared with friends and wider online community (e.g. via online forums such as Discord). I argue that the design, playing of, and prosumer discourse such ergodic texts generate have a mycelial quality to it—rhizomatic structures, which, as Deleuze and Guattari advocate (1988), are non-hierarchical, resilient, and reciprocal. In the generous advice and sharing of resources in gaming forums there is a kind of virtual mycelial mutualism (Sheldrake, 2020) that creates a plethora of fruiting bodies which all can benefit from.

Ergodic Pathways: ‘The Weather Lately has Been Bosky, Don’t You Think?’

When many so-called TTRPGs are actually played online, ‘play-thrus’ are live-streamed or turned into podcasts, and the whole subculture exists in the Virtual Autonomous Zones—to hack Hakim Bey’s updating of piratical utopias, Temporary Autonomous Zones (1985) —of social media forums such as Discord, the lines between the analogue and digital are continually compromised. To the participants there is no separation, only a continuum of experience and

engagement. Into this ontological interzone slips digital interactive fiction—not quite interloper, new kid on the block, or Johnny-come-lately. There is something familiar about this shadowy counter-narrative.

Interactive fiction has been around, in its broadest sense, for centuries—every novel, it could be argued, is an interactive fiction involving substantial reader effort: literacy, visual imagination, the haptic interface of the page, and not least, the actual acquisition or access to the book, which until the advent of circulating libraries, public libraries, and cheap paperbacks, was very limited (Kastan, 2006). It is easy to forget this, until we note the surge in popularity of audio books, and the resistance of some students to the very act of reading traditional print media. The ‘reading’ of audio books, graphic novels, and other emergent forms require different kinds of (no less complicated) literacies, literacies that often demand equal, or even additional effort, as neurological research has shown (Rogowsky, Calhoun, & Tallal, 2016).

However, within the niche ecosystem of TTRPG, interactive fiction took off in the eighties, when roleplaying games themselves were starting to experience commercial success. Alongside the stacks of boxes of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax, 1974); *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen, 1981); *Traveller* (Miller et al, 1977); *Runequest* (Perrin et al, 1978); and *Warhammer* (Ansell, Halliwell, & Priestley, 1983); and the various hardback manuals and supplements, rival ranges of paperbacks started to appear: *Choose Your Own Adventure* (Packard, 1979), *Fighting Fantasy* (Jackson & Livingstone, 1982), *Lone Wolf* (Dever, 1984), and *Endless Quest* (Estes, 1982) being the most popular. Largely drawing upon the same sub-Tolkienian legendarium (with the odd delve into science fiction, romance, horror, and adventure) the appeal of these books was in the way they enabled the player-reader to experience a roleplaying by themselves, without having to find a group. Even if you *were* a member of a regular gaming club, such books provided a practical alternative: another ‘fix’ that allowed you to keep playing even when alone—and the experience could still be shared with friends afterwards in comparing, reviewing, lending and discussing. Some series developed a legion of dedicated fans, such as the various Lone Wolf clubs (e.g. Kaiwisdom mailing list; Magnamund; Tower of the Sun; Project Aon). What distinguishes such books from conventional novels is what Espen Aarseth termed ‘ergodic.’ In *Cybertext* (1997), Aarseth discusses the etymology of his neologism, explaining that the term ‘ergodic’ comes ‘from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning, “work” and “path” and that:

‘In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extraneous responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages.’ (Aarseth, 1997)

Aarseth parses the ergodic from the nonergodic by the ‘nontrivial effort’ required to navigate the former. In ‘choose-your-own-adventure’ interactive fiction this may require character generation, equipment lists, combat and magical systems, the recording of lore, as well as the navigation of the labyrinth of textual nodes themselves, often via a combination of riddle-solving, luck, skill, and narrative flow. In some gaming books, such as Steve Jackson’s *Sorcery* series (1983-1985), the gaming system became almost as complex as a typical TTRPG. Whileas, in others (*CYOA; Endless Quest*) the mechanics are kept simple, and choices to the minimum. Nevertheless, complexity can still exist, as research into the branching narrative structures have shown (Laskow, 2017). Although such books continue to exist in various iterations (some like *Lone Wolf* have migrated online: www.projectaon.org), they waned in popularity as computer games, and online forums took off. Now, they have a similar retro connoisseur analogue appeal as the vinyl record and audio cassette, with new titles and anniversary editions being released.

Largely replacing their semi-vacant niche in the gaming ecosystem are digital interactive narratives, developed to capitalise upon the functionality of 4G smart phones by (primarily) West Coast start-ups such as Tales: choose your own story, and Choice of Games.

And this is where I enter the story.

Creating Hyperion: ‘The Wind is Up in the Air’

There are substantial differences between a novel and an interactive narrative in the structure, publication platform, and narrative style. Both intrigued and challenged by these, I set myself the goal of attempting one. Some changes were substantial, and involving complex ‘mechanics’—some, aesthetic, although these are no less critical. For Philip Pullman, structure

is something you can recalibrate during the redrafting process, whileas tone is the most intrinsic aspect of a novel: ‘The fundamental feature is the tone in which you tell the story, but you can change the structure.’ (BBC4, 2019) Pullman was talking about novels, not DIFs, but the tone, or style of a story, is its literary DNA, and needs to be there in every word.

For my DIF version of the Windsmith novels, I decided to change the name from the ‘Afterlands’ to ‘Windworld’—the former was more relevant to the posthumous fantasy frame of the print series, the latter for the foregrounding of ecological aspects of the storyworld in this new format. Both share the same magical system influenced by Celtic mythology and the bardic tradition (dipping into the pantheon of the former, and deploying concepts and language systems from the latter such as ‘awen’ and the Ogham tree alphabet), as embodied by the ‘Windsmith’—a magician of sound who can summon and banish winds (Manwaring, 2006). However, in *Windworld*, anthropogenic and catastrophic climate change is happening—and the titular character, Hyperion (named after the Hellenic god of wind, watchfulness and light), is also a title bestowed upon the ‘Maestre’ (my nongendered neologism used as an alternative to ‘master’) Windsmith, who is responsible for the governance of the winds of the world from the Tower of the Winds: the keystone of Windworld (based upon the Horologion of Andronikos Kyrrethes in Athens). The quest narrative involves the player-character undertaking a perilous journey to the Tower of the Winds, to learn from the incumbent Hyperion why the winds of the world have become chaotic, even antagonistic; but it is also a bildungsroman in which the young windsmith undertakes a developmental journey to *become* the Hyperion, and to take over the mantle so that *they* ultimately become responsible for the ecological governance of Windworld.

The ‘dirty ecology’ (Yeager, 2013) of *Hyperion* involves both the guilty pleasure of playing such a text (for many, reading genre fiction is the norm; but in literary circles and even in some sections of academe, it is still considered something ‘lesser’) and in the optionality of playing the ‘bad guy.’ Instead of the virtue signalling of modelling good behaviour, having the freedom to make ‘bad’ choices, and act in unethical ways (albeit vicariously), may actually encourage a *greater* ecological awareness—one in which no shadow is demonised, and the ‘dark side’ is fully integrated (Thomas, 2019), placed centre square rather than marginalised, exoticised, or castigated. In the apparently Manichaean Windsmith ‘universe’ there are two main cosmological forces at play: Harmony and Discord. Whatever the player-character says

or does tips the balance one way or the other. Incrementally, these micro-decisions build up, episode-by-episode, to the climax, where if all sufficient powers have been acquired (the PC starts with 4 winds; they need to maestre a further 4 to match the existing Hyperion) they have the choice to become an Agent of Harmony or Discord: a creator or destroyer of worlds. By the end they must decide whether to be the saviour of Windworld, or its tyrant. My narrative dramatises the maxim: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The achievement of becoming Hyperion is, the player-protagonist may find, something of a poisoned chalice. The epicentre of this toxic power is the Tower of the Winds, which, at the centre of a supernatural maelstrom, fully evokes the ecoGothic: the extreme weather events increasingly experienced across the world. The Tower of the Winds is the eye of this storm, a tornado such as Amitav Ghosh experienced in his hometown and described in his influential provocation, *The Great Derangement* (2017). In its deployment of the catastrophe, *Hyperion* addresses exactly what Ghosh argues the literary novel has failed to do (a mode aligned with the gradualist sensibility), precisely by dwelling in the ‘lesser mansions’ of Fantastika. While not quite the disaster movie kitsch of the *Sharknado* films, or the petronormative endgame of *The Fast and Furious* franchise, which Mark Bould wittily uses as a counter-discourse to Ghosh’s literary anxiety, *Hyperion* nonetheless revels in the allure of the spectacle (with its VFX and SFX), and the shock and awe of the (apocalyptic) Sublime: the sturm-und-drang evoked by the Tales Writer lively palette of ‘assets’ creating a multimedia affect. Indeed, it was often the inclusion of natural ambience (a river running; waves on a beach; a gentle breeze; a howling storm; ice cracking; a campfire; owls hooting) in a digital environment that proved most satisfying and strangely resonant. The natural is framed by the virtual, and yet the player *could* be interacting with the narrative while outdoors. At the very least, it brings a touch of the wild into the palm of your hand, and *may* encourage heightened awareness and greater appreciation of the natural world afterwards, as environmental storytelling has demonstrated (Gerdie, Nanson & Schieffelin, 2021).

By getting lost in *Hyperion*’s digital forest, it may actually help the player ‘see the wood,’ but let us now consider ‘the trees’: the construction of a digital interactive fiction.

Arborescence in Narrative Design: ‘Lucky we Know the Forest So Well, or We Might Get Lost’

In digital interactive fiction (DIF) there are two main narrative structures: ‘railroad’ and ‘sandpit’ (Tales Writer, briefing for writers, private correspondence, 2019). The former is unicursal, a ‘largely linear’ narrative with very few, if any branching choice-points: ‘The writer is moving the player upon a tightly controlled experience and most decisions don’t matter as they have a specific narrative they want the player to experience’ (Tales Writer, 2019). It is easy to navigate such a story, and the narrative flow is largely uninterrupted. However, players have little agency. Their choices, if they have any, do not feel significant. They have been cheated of the ‘promise of interaction’ (Tales Writer, 2019). Examples include Episode Interactive, TellTale, Final Fantasy X, as well as, in print format, Intan Paramaditha’s *The Wandering* (2020), which was hyped as being a literary novel in the vogue of a CYOA (Elkin, 2020), but actually offered very few branching choices. In Paramaditha’s novel, most loosely ‘ergodic’ elements require just turning a different textual node scattered throughout the book, although sometimes the next chapter was merely on the next page. In her review of the book, Elkin concludes:

‘[the ergodic structure] raises formal questions about storytelling; narrative itself becomes a kind of wandering in search of its own sense of completeness. Plot begins to feel as if it is the least important aspect of the experience. The meat of the book lies in the questions that take shape - about travel, and identity, and about what makes a fulfilled life. We fool ourselves into thinking that what matters is what happens, but really, life is what happens in between.’ (2020)

Whether that is the case or not, the result is unsatisfying—not because of Paramaditha’s relegation of plot, but because of the ineffectual use of ergodic elements. As with other literary forays into genre fiction, the results are often a form of literary tourism with varying degrees of success (e.g. Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2015 foray into Fantasy, *The Buried Giant*). The author exploits the affect of the genre, but in an unconvincing, uninformed way, rehashing tired tropes with a lick of literary embellishment.

In contrast, the other main narrative structure, multicursal, or sandpit, offers a spectrum of choice-pathways, allowing the story to go in different directions (this could be literally: left, right, forward, back, or stay). Such stories are (generally) heavy on optional content, and light on the main storyline. The bias is towards game mechanics (or ‘crunch’) than narrative flow. These sandpit narratives offer greater freedom and agency to the player, even if there is only ever a finite number of pathways. In theory, an AI-generated interactive fiction could continually generate endless branching pathways, yet the appeal may be limited except for a few diehard players, and raises ethical issues which many authors and publishers are understandably resistant to (Shotwell, 2022). The challenge of this is mainly for the writer. Drafting one plot thread well is difficult enough; drafting several of the same quality is a big ask, requiring a huge investment in time. The usual progress a novelist may experience in drafting a novel, however slow, is dilated by each new narrative branch. Instead of moving forward, one is going sideways or even backwards in the narrative. Keeping track of continuity and even simply one’s place makes the endeavour arduous, complicated, and time-consuming. One becomes lost in the labyrinth. Examples of sandpit narratives include: Hack and Slash MMOs, Choice of Games, and Tales.

The latter is the structure I aspired to in the drafting of *Hyperion*—this was part of the appeal and challenge of writing an interactive fiction, not just merely a narrative with a series of links. This approach creates an arborescence—as the maps of CYOA show (Swinehart, 2022)—a biomimetic approach that seemed fitting for my ecoFantasy. It is interesting to note that these two narrative structures (railroad/sandpit) evoke a contrast between the manmade and the elemental, the abiotic and the biotic. It is through a multiplicity of choices that nature thrives. Darwinian natural selection could be thought of as the ultimate CYOA—the arborescence of the Tree of Life. A single approach is risky—too much is invested in one option, and its demise (if in the form of a species) is catastrophic.

Nature likes to hedge her bets.

The plurality, plasticity, and ludic ambivalence inherent in arborescence aligns with Morton’s insistence that certainty is *not* ecological (2021). The foreclosure of definitive statements—even about things which we now have scientific consensus, such as the reality of anthropogenic climate change—shuts down discourse, they argue, and can result in the

‘stuplimity’ (Ngai, 2005; 2012); while as an ability to dwell in ontological uncertainty, a ‘truthiness,’ is far more fecund. In the continual slippage away from fixity, life remains possible. This attitude could be seen as problematic, even dangerous, in undermining the scientific rigour and urgency of the IPCC reports, especially in an age of Fake News (even if in the intellectual sandpit of modern philosophy it can seem harmless enough—quarantined by academe, it need not have any real-world impact). However, MMOs, and other, easily accessible games *can* (at least in theory). They can influence the way we see the world, the narratives we live by, and even die by (as Rodney Asher’s 2021 Netflix documentary, *A Glitch in the Matrix*, disturbingly discusses), and the choices we make, as consumers, as citizens. Any game can provide a safe space for modelling real-world choices. On a social level it can show us how to interact with others; or not: a continual deferment of the demands of socialising or even functioning on a day-to-day basis in the real-world, in the entangled messiness of one’s ‘meat suit’ (Churchill, 2007). Why deal with life when you can hide away in your room on a device, lost in the make-believe of an apparently limitless MMO?

The arborescence of *Hyperion* was emphasised by certain episodes being set within a forest, or other habitat (archipelago, mountains, cityscape, sea). The branching structure enabled the player to explore the organic structure of the terrain. Each branch had the potential to ‘bear fruit,’ in terms of rewards of information, magical objects, increase in vitality (Welsh: ‘nwyfvre’) and inspiration (Welsh: ‘awen’).

The significant difference between such virtual forests and real ones is that there is little likelihood of getting lost in the former (or cold, muddy, benighted, bitten, attacked by a bear, a swarm of mosquitoes, etc). As in fairy tales there is a sense of ‘safe fear’ (Bettelheim, 1976). Everything has a meaning, an intentionality, behind it. This runs contra to Western-centric ‘craft’ advice for writers, which advocates hiding anything unusual (‘novel’) with ‘fillers,’ as Matthew Salesses has pointed out (2021). In non-Western narrative modes, such as the epic dramas of The Mahabharata, The Gesar of Ling, or the Dreamtime stories of the Aboriginal people, coincidence and symbolism are key ‘literary’ qualities—ones which are often edited out by the prevailing culture of the Western workshop. The panpsychic immanence that often pervades such stories may suggest a more ‘sustainable’ way of being in the world—one advocated by some, but not all, Indigenous peoples, e.g. the Amazonian Shawi tribe’s ideation of ‘le buen vivir’ (Villanueva-Romero, Kerslake, & Flys-Junquera, 2021). A reliance on ‘type,’

rather than individualistic characters, may suggest a deeper, archetypal, more spiritual paradigm than the reductive, materialist one evoked by the gold standard of literary fiction: mimetic realism—and one that is, critically, no less sophisticated than the artefacts of the so-called Enlightenment Project extol, as Nnedi Okorafor is at pains to make clear: ‘African science fiction will very often (if not usually) include the mystical because that’s the worldview it’s based in. So one shouldn’t be so quick to slap the label of fantasy on it’ (Twitter, 14 February 2022).

So, such stories (on the platforms of digital interactive fiction) may on one level seem derivative and formulaic, a ‘lesser’ form of literature; but on another level they may be offering alternative narrative models, which challenge Western notions of ‘good’ literature as Salesses argues (2021). There is also an element of classism in any such elitist notions of quality. Popular fiction has been often dismissed as corrupting—as the early critiques of circulating libraries showed—but seldom by those who actually read it.

To some, it might seem absurd for such a populist form as interactive fiction to claim any kind of literary merit; however, there is something inherently Borgesian about their labyrinthine structures, both in terms of the way they can be an enjoyable form of displacement activity, as Borges reflects: ‘In adventures such as these I have squandered and wasted my years’ (2000: 84), and in their exhaustive arborescence: ‘For every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences’ (ibid, 80). The multiple ways of navigating a text, when combined with customisation optionality, allows for a sizable network of narrative pathways. Offering an illusion of choice, perhaps, but it is a model that affords far more agency than the typical reader experience, and certainly for the writer it enables a bewildering array of combinations. Coupled with the challenges of grappling with a different language (HTML), the act of authoring a digital interactive fiction effectively defamiliarises the entire experience—which restores the *novel* for the novelist, as opposed to the foreclosure Borges rails against: ‘The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms’ (2000, p. 85).

The other aspect of digital interactive fiction is that it collapses the typical literary chain of production—they are no gatekeepers except one’s own ability to create a functioning narrative in the chosen format. One can upload the end result directly to a platform (such as

DriveThru RPG), or create online to be shared freely (e.g. via Twine). There is a punkish energy to this which has encouraged an explosion of creativity—as with the DIY garage-band ethos, inevitably of varying quality, but some exceptional artefacts do emerge, rising to the heights, often through the goodwilled admiration of fellow creatives (as in the Tales forum on Discord, or the Interactive Fiction Forum). And it is to this mutually beneficial ecosystem I wish to turn next.

Digital Ecologies: ‘Thick, Suckered Tentacles Lash and Writhe, Trying to Ensnare the Master Mariner and Drag him into the Churning Waves’

American philosopher Donna Haraway considers human nature as an ‘inter-species relationship,’ and extends this ideation of entanglement, that we live in an ‘Age of Entanglement’ (*The New Scientist*, 2008), into what she calls the Cthulucene—robustly defending that as a valid alternative to the anthropocentric ‘Anthropocene’ (2016). This entanglement happens across all spheres of human, and more-than-human, activity, and so it is inevitable that it occurs, in microcosm, in the gaming world. Biologist Alan Rayner has long argued against ‘discreetist thinking’ (1997), and we are now seeing a wider acceptance of this—certainly within the arts and humanities. Inter- and transdisciplinarity are two iterations of it; transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2007) is another. Henry Jenkins first formulated the concept of ‘Convergence Culture’ (2006)—the relationship between media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence—and we are certainly seeing that become normative within fandom, and one subculture of that is the gaming scene.

In the plethora of platforms, forums, social media, podcasts, fanzines, vlogs, conventions, and so forth there is a kind of ecosystem—perhaps not in strict accordance with Tansey’s original ideation of the term (1935), but in the modern sense of ‘all the living things in an area and the way they affect each other and the environment’ (Cambridge Dictionary online). Certainly, the writers and player-readers of digital interactive fictions are living, and their networks could be said to be alive in a metaphorical sense, depending on how ‘lively’ they are, of course. Some forums become moribund and are mothballed. Platforms that enable real-time interaction via cameras and microphones convey a sense of interaction with other real, live human beings (as opposed to avatars in an MMO). Posthuman interaction could be said to be just as ‘alive,’ but for many of us, especially after two years of pandemic restrictions, *any*

kind of interaction with other human beings is greatly valued. In an online game there can be real camaraderie experienced by a group of players, all of whom add to the collective storytelling via their improvised contributions. The GM adds an enormous amount of affect to the experience through their use of voice, expression, pacing, and management of the virtual space. In the best games there can come a point when the technological frame fades away, and everyone feels as though they are inside the story. Unlike in traditional TTRPGs, this is not aided by miniatures, dungeon plans, dice, ambient lighting, snacks, even costume, but merely by the power of the human voice and the imagination: in a way, this is pure storytelling, although Anthony Nanson (2021) argues that much is lost in such digital spaces: the stereoscopic quality of voice, space, and ambience, as well as perhaps a certain intangible quality of ‘energy.’

Nevertheless, while deadly viruses persist and mutate in the world, and perhaps regardless of that, online gaming will continue, as it allows for friends to play no matter their geographical location—and there is something positively transnational in this. And RPGs have always allowed for gender- and ethno-fluidity. To paraphrase the chorus of *Bugsy Malone* (Parker, 1976), you can be anything you want to be.

Furthermore, in the often generous spirit of gaming forums, such as those which flourish on metaplatforms like Discord, there is a human form of mycelial mutualism—a beneficial exchange of resources, be they ideas, tips, enthusiasm, hacks, contacts, new games, and so on. From this rhizomatic network, the fruiting bodies of new games appear, each in conversation with what has preceded it. There is a kind of hothouse effect, where innovations in form, mechanics, framing, etc, happen rapidly. A great deal of new content is generated and shared freely, or at very low cost. It is more a kind of virtual gift economy (Hyde, 2012), with members of the gaming community ‘paying it forward.’ The whole thing (outside of mainstream franchises) is largely run on goodwill, a shared passion for the gaming, the ‘buzz.’ And in microcosm, this is certainly the case in the gaming niche of digital interactive fiction where fellow writers often serve as beta-reader/players, and offer generous feedback informally while in progress, then more officially through virtual ‘book clubs.’ The whole dynamic is refreshingly uncommercial and non-competitive, completely changing the discourse.

This is also hardwired into many scenarios (especially within the Trophy Gold/Trophy Dark movement founded by Jesse Ross), where narrative progression and character advancement is not predicated upon violence (at least not as a default response, as in classic ‘Hack and Slay’ games) and ruthless competition, a paradigm that perpetuates a neoliberal survival of the fittest. Although there can still be the threat of violence, insanity, and death (which sometimes are given in games such as Trophy Dark, where player-characters know they are doomed from the outset), an existential acknowledgement of mortality, impermanence, and fragility may actually awaken us to the reality of living in the Anthropocene: a steering into the skid that inculcates not doomism, but resilience, and a certain healthy gallows’ humour. The overall effect is strangely edifying and life-affirming. The player survives even if the player-character does not. By looking into the abyss—indeed, even plunging into it—life is somehow restored. This is *l’appel du vide*, but with a redemptive arc. We go through the darkness to appreciate the light even more. The light is not at the *end* of the tunnel, but an affective effulgence illuminating it along the way—whether the tunnel is full of sick-green trolls, guttering torches, wizards with glowing staves, witches casting spell-hexes, dragons with eyes like embers, the pallor of the undead, the silvery light of a wraith, a moment of shining wit, or just laughter in the face of death.

Conclusion: ‘The Canals Reflect the Bright Sky Like Veins of Fire, the Arteries and Capillaries of a Living Being’

Digital interactive fiction offers one of many modes for exploring ecological themes in a way that is generally accessible and especially appealing to a younger demographic, who while not *all* being digital natives as is commonly assumed, certainly have a greater predilection to phone-based activities than, say, Boomers. Tales Writer point out that the greatest proportion of reader-players are actually Millennials (between 25 and 40 years old) and predominantly female (private correspondence). The fact that this seems to mirror the vast majority of creators on these platforms is perhaps not surprising. The mutability of the format (player-character customisation) allows for a greater breadth of representation, gender roles, and sexuality. DIFs episodes can be played in a few minutes in any location—ideal for a multitasking parent, or person pursuing a career in need of a bit of downtime or a counternarrative to the stresses and boredom of their daily life. The format allows for repeat ‘reads,’ especially for those keen to gamify their progress. Unlike real life we get multiple shots at any situation, and can model

alternate dialogic responses and behaviours. We can play the villain/ess, or just be kickass. It is the ultimate nerd's revenge, and as Anthony Loi has discussed, there is something potentially very fruitful in 'nerd ecology' (2016). Loi suggests suspension of disbelief can be a tool for self-actualisation, or 'self-transformation': 'If wielded communally, it becomes an instrument of environmental transformation as well' (2016, pp. 1-20).

When marginalised peoples unite great things are possible, as that (once) lonely Swedish schoolgirl, Greta Thunberg, has proven—mobilising millions of young people across the planet in environmental protests. As Thunberg herself has written, 'No one is too small to make a difference' (2019). There is a David and Goliath quality to this. Whether the underdogs win the day is yet to be seen. It seems likeliest that 'Mother Nature' herself—or perhaps that should be 'Mother Nemesis,' as Irene Sanz-Alonso argues (2021)—will provide the *Force Majeure*.

Of course, DIFs are by no means the perfect platform. There is tech-poverty to consider (which may not even be on the radar of many Westerners, who may assume everyone must have access to a personal smartphone, or at the very least to the internet (Twitter, McDonough, 2022)—an assumption which is hardwired into the implied critique of a concept like 'digital dualism' (Jurgensen, 2011), a belief that online and offline are separate and distinct realms), even before we consider their environmental credentials. The built-in obsolescence of so-called 'smart' devices, the rapaciousness and human rights record of the lithium-battery industry, the carbon footprint of vast banks of servers, and the possible effect of 5-G on wildlife and humans (Karipidis, Mate, & Urban, 2021) does not add up to a green footprint—the very platform is compromised, and so any kind of ecofiction supported by it would be one of the dirtiest ecologies.

In contrast to this, one can opt to work on a more traditional TTRPG, which is the approach in *Rooted in Crisis*: a collaboration between writers and games designers to develop a number of ecologically-themed scenarios using Jesse Ross' Trophy system as a loose framework: 'A tabletop roleplaying game of dark forests, doomed treasure-hunters, and a world woven on a loom of rumor, history, and myth' (trophyrpg.com). For this, I drew upon my field research into the supernatural ecology of Iceland to develop 'Shadows in the Ice' with Darren Brockes, University of Chicago. Here I used the life cycle of a glacier to create the found

structure of the game's arc: Advance; Retreat; Deflation; Suture-zones; Calving; Melt; and Collapse. The physical manifestation of this will be crowdfunded through Kickstarter—a route that other TTRPGs have found successful, such as *Earthborne Rangers*: 'a sustainably produced, customisable, adventure card game set in the wilderness of the far future' (earthbornegames.com), which managed to secure 8 times its funding goal of \$100,000 in its initial campaign, thereby showing a more environmental approach is possible *and* popular in both content and production.

Nevertheless, DIFs are one way of engaging potentially large audiences, and using the soft power of storytelling to raise awareness about environmental issues, and to consider different modalities. As Okri (2021), Hopkins (2019), and Krznaric (2020) exhort, the power of the imagination *combined* with practical action, may be the most effective multi-tool we have for dealing with the challenges of the Climate Emergency. To end with a quote from *Hyperion: tower of the winds*: 'Heal the wind, Windsmith. Before the world is blown away.'

Hyperion: Tower of the Winds is available on App Store and Google Play.
<https://link.talescreator.com/1e9PBqkE1kb>

BIOGRAPHY

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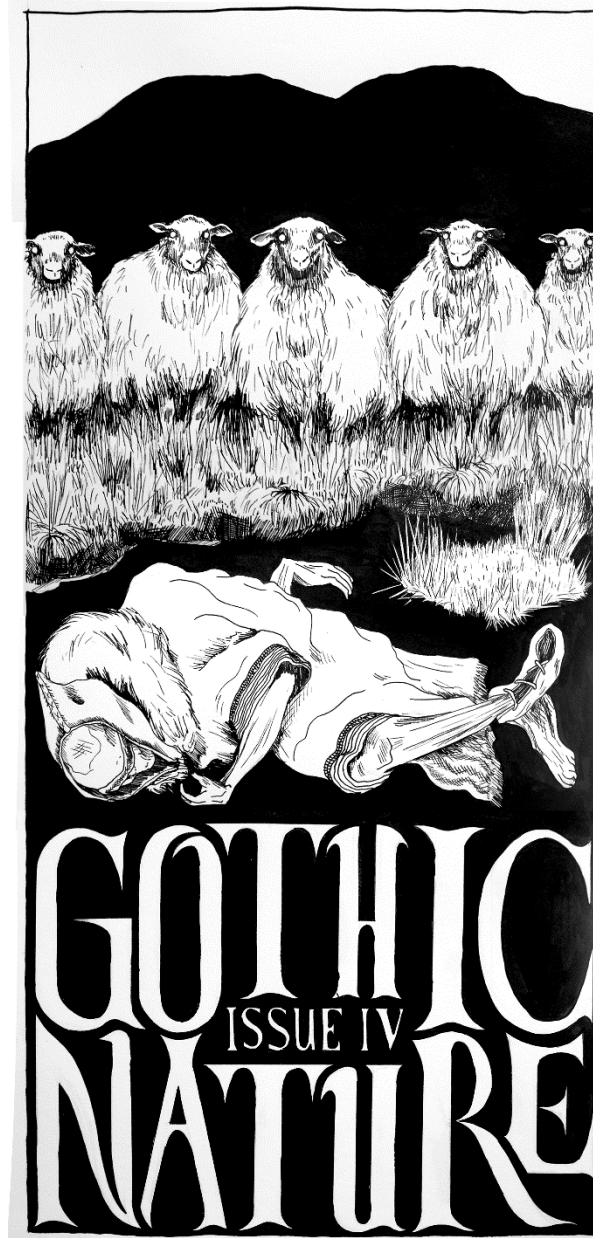
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REVIEWS

FILM, TV, & GAME REVIEWS

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David Lowery, *The Green Knight*:

A Review Cluster

(USA: A24, 2021)

A special collaborative collection from Shelby Carr, Sara L. Crosby, Danielle Howarth, Ann Martinez, and Renée Trilling

INTRODUCTION

Sara L. Crosby

One of the stumbling blocks in the way of solving humanity's current ecological crises is that most modern cultural production has not been able to effectively represent the agency of the environment—of anything beyond the human really. The Holocene environment was the backdrop, the passive quiescent resource, necessary to build modern civilisation. Our extraction-based industrial civilisation does not work if the environment exerts agency as it is doing now in the form of devastating climate change, pollution that comes back at us, etc. We find ourselves baffled, adrift, in search of models of representation we can use to speak the Anthropocene to ourselves. One strategy filmmakers and other artists have tried recently is to reach back. In an attempt to look forward beyond the quickly deliquescing experience of the modern, we find ourselves peering into the past toward the mythic and ancient or the medieval—when humanity had to negotiate a very different relationship with a powerful and agential nonhuman than the domination that modern civilisation has so blithely enjoyed.

This quest motivates David Lowery's *The Green Knight*, a 2021 adaptation of the 14th-century chivalric romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poem reflected what Carolyn Merchant (2019) famously described as an 'organic' (p.1) view of the world, in which the nonhuman was still ensouled and thus still magical and sacred. In medieval Europe, humans were considered only one kind of agential being among many nonhuman ones: Trees thought, animals talked, the earth itself was still your mother's womb and not to be violated without consequence. Extraction of natural resources thus required negotiation and expiation, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* focused on how an emergent Christian and courtly social order should manage these diplomatic relations with the nonhuman. The poem challenged its

protagonist to form an identity that bridged the human social world signified by the court of King Arthur and the natural world embodied by the Green Knight. Chivalry, the poem suggested, or a knight fully versed in and committed to this code of behavior, such as the virtuous Gawain, could negotiate that tricky relationship for us.

Modern film adaptations like Stephen Weeks's 1973 *Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, elided this key aspect of the poem, focusing instead on the human drama and reducing the environment to background, per the usual. By contrast, Lowery's *The Green Knight*, is, as Shelby Carr in one of the following reviews emphasises, an Anthropocene text. It recognises the primacy of the nonhuman, and it asserts that a true hero does not shirk his obligation to engage and negotiate with it. In fact, that's really what a hero is for.

But there is one major difference between the fourteenth century and today that the new Gawain must manage: an issue of representation or, really, genre. The friendly spirits of the Holocene are gone and, with them, romance. Instead, the Anthropocene hosts angry, unpredictable ghosts who people ecohorror/ecoGothic narratives. And so, Lowery's Gawain faces a far more dark and difficult challenge than his medieval model. *The Green Knight*, produced by a studio best known for horror, thus revives the past with an ecohorror difference for the present. By passing one of English literature's most important canonical texts through the lens of ecohorror/ecoGothic, the film attempts a profound revision of the modern literary tradition and its modes of representing the nonhuman. The following reviews investigate this ambitious revision and what it might mean for twenty-first-century humans struggling to understand the planet's new magical monsters.

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THE REVIEWS

Nature Always Hacks Last!
David Lowery, *The Green Knight*
(USA: A24, 2021)

Sara L. Crosby

If David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021) were pitched as a creature feature rather than a pensive arthouse film, 'Nature always hacks last!' would be an apt tagline. While intertitles at the beginning of the film claim that, like its ur-text, the 14th-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is a 'Chivalric Romance' about the triumphant exploits of a brave knight (Lowery, 2021), this new adaptation now also screams 'ecohorror'—from its 'horror movie' sound design to its many tree-dappled gory and ghostly vignettes (Robinson, 2021). Lowery, who both directed and wrote the screenplay for the film, credits his anxiety over the state of the natural world as a key inspiration for his alterations. For example, he explains why he changed the medieval poem's Green Knight from a human-appearing knight who was simply green into a creaking tree monster:

'It 100% came from my own love of the natural world and that conflict I feel between mankind [*sic?*] and nature [...]. I spend a lot of time awake at night thinking about the failure of the symbiotic relationship between mankind and nature. And from there, you can extrapolate and bring in religion or government or any establishment that mankind has let define itself and define its relationship with the natural world [...]. [A]s soon as nature and mankind are pitted against one another, I just see the fallibility and the fallacy of man. And that is something that I can only imagine becoming a more and more central conceit in my work as the world heats up around us' (Hailu, 2021).

The newly arboreal Green Knight thus embodies an offended nature, the nature of a broken 'symbiotic relationship,' a nature that humanity has failed, while the causes of that failure are 'establishment[s] . . . religion and government,' signified by the murderously

patriarchal reign of a declining King Arthur—full of regret—and his menacing self-affirming circle of Christian knights: avatars of the worst kind of toxic masculinity. In fact, the film subtly suggests that these institutions are defined by ecophobic destruction—by ‘pitt[ing]’ humanity against nonhuman nature, which results in fire (the house in flames at the beginning of the film or the kingdom at the end) and carnage (the wrecked, corpse-strewn battlefield) and abuse (the raped and decapitated ghost of Lady Winifred, Gawain’s maltreated sex-worker girlfriend Essel (ACTOR), or even Gawain himself). The question the film asks, then, concerns the ‘fallibility and fallacy of man’—of one man in particular. Will the hapless young Gawain (Dev Patel)—an outsider, a man of colour, a son of a witch without a heroic story—join the ‘establishment’ ranks by proving himself as tyrannical and ecophobic as the rest of them? Will he allow them to ‘define [him] and define [his] relationship with the natural world’? Or will he make another, braver choice?

As *The Green Knight* explores these questions, its plot follows the broad sweep of its medieval ur-text but adds modern ecohorror nuances in line with Lowery’s preoccupation with structural ecophobia: instead of being acknowledged already as the most virtuous of the Knights of the Round Table, Gawain is a callow outsider, a laze-about, who prefers dallying with Essel (Alicia Vikander) to proving himself through militarism. But he happens to be the king’s nephew, and, perhaps with the magical connivance of his mother (Sarita Choudhury), the King (Sean Harris) suddenly wants to groom him as a successor, inviting him to sit beside him during the Christmas feast. That is when the Green Knight (again perhaps summoned by Gawain’s mother) rides in and challenges the smug party to a game.

When the Green Knight (Ralph Ineson) intrudes into the round table’s insular centre and offers up his body for the hallowed brawlers to strike with an axe, he quietly reminds them that ‘I will return what was given to me.’ And when Gawain throws himself forward, anxious to prove he can join the knights and be a proper heir to his uncle, even the King tries to dissuade him from monstrosity, whispering, ‘Remember it is only a game.’ Yet, Gawain cannot resist the pressure of the toxic institutions, and he hacks off the Green Knight’s head. Not the ‘scratch on the cheek’ option the Green Knight mentioned, but a murderous decapitation, which the gathered knights, previously scornful of Gawain, greet with thunderous approbation.

The rest of the film, however, tries to lead Gawain to understand that he must seek another kind of acceptance: from the Green Knight, from Nature (perhaps in league with Gawain's witchy mother). And so, the film immediately negates Gawain's triumphant induction into knighthood with horror. The Green Knight rises, picks up his head, reminds Gawain that next year at this time he will need to come to him and allow him a comparable strike, and then rides off laughing maniacally like a perfect monster. A year passes, and a terrified Gawain, secretly wearing his mother's green girdle of invincibility, rides out amid much fanfare to seek the Green Knight. He has a series of adventures meant to humble him and expose the narcissistic vapidness of the establishment identity he is trying to join: he is robbed by an angry peasant and left for dead in the woods; he finds and returns a ghost lady's head to her, which had been chopped off by a raping knight; he makes 'frenemies' with a talking fox (like a Disney princess?); he witnesses the migration of sublime giants and an equally sublime soliloquy by a mysterious Lady (also Alicia Vikander) on how 'green' devours all men's ephemeral endeavours; he flees induction into a sexy aristocratic throuple that stripped him of his faked pose of flesh-denying knightly austerity and honour; and when, after all these trials and humiliations, he meets with the Green Knight—at first—he runs away and plays through an entire alternate history where he becomes king, rips their bastard newborn away from a sobbing Essel, marries a noble lady he does not love, witnesses his son die of battlefield wounds, and then watches his capitol fall to an enemy—burning and collapsing around him as he fulfills his part in a cycle of destruction; finally in despair, he removes his magic girdle, and his head tumbles from his body. At that bathetic moment, the film snaps him back to his final encounter with the Green Knight. Though this time, a wiser Gawain unties the girdle himself and offers his neck.

With his submission to the Green Knight—no tricks, no more running—Gawain produces a new modern genre: a coherent blend of ecohorror with the 'Chivalric Romance' promised by the beginning intertitles. Instead of an ecophobic triumph of knight over nature, Gawain has rejected the institutions that pushed him into his pose of 'conflict' with the Green Knight and thus relinquished his own delusions of grandeur and the horror it inflicts—on women's bodies, on the land, on the rest of humanity and human infrastructure—and embraces the thing that all of that was intended to help him escape: his own inescapable tie to the natural world, his mortality. In response, the Green Knight glows with sympathy. He kneels down with Gawain, pats his cheek, and congratulates him: 'Well done, my brave knight.' Gawain has

become ‘my [the Green Knight’s/ Nature’s] brave knight’ and not the knight of the ecophobic round table. Symbiosis is restored, but it comes at a cost. Such a heroic, ecologically-conscious posthuman heroism requires sacrifice—of human hubris and identity (at least the destructive hierarchical kind we moderns have known) and perhaps even of human life (at least the foolish refusal to understand that life’s total reliance upon nonhuman nature). Gawain humbles himself before the natural world, recognises that it will always hack last, that it has a right to, that it must. It is just nature. A truly brave knight accepts that. And Gawain does, as, in the film’s last words, the Green Knight sighs, ‘Now off with your head.’

BIOGRAPHY

Sara L. Crosby is Professor of English at the Ohio State University at Marion and author of two books about poisonous women in nineteenth-century American literature and multiple ecocritical essays, such as “Gothic in an Age of Environmental Crisis” (Cambridge’s *History of the Gothic*) and “Beyond Ecophilia: Edgar Allan Poe and the American Tradition of Ecohorror” (*ISLE*). Her current book project investigates the disastrous interplay between extractive interests and American popular culture’s ecohorror/ecoGothic representation of South Louisiana.

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The Time of Nature and the Nature of Time:

David Lowery, *The Green Knight*

(USA: A24, 2021)

Renée R. Trilling

‘I’ve got time. I’ve got lots of time,’ insists Gawain (Dev Patel) after awakening to a bucket of water in the face at the start of David Lowery’s *The Green Knight* (2021). But what kind of time? In this film, the cyclical patterns of ecological time, governed by seasons and life cycles, clash with the linear patterns of human storytelling: tales, genealogies, the hero’s journey. Indeed, Gawain’s character arc requires leaving the solid and knowable temporalities that govern the court of King Arthur (Sean Harris) and encountering the dark, inscrutable horrors of a natural world where time rules over life and death in wholly unpredictable ways. The implications of that encounter rewrite the very notions of honour and valour that undergird Gawain’s identity.

At the outset, time is just about all that Gawain has; he is the very picture of arrested development. Still living at home with his mother (Sarita Choudhury) and occupying himself primarily at the tavern or the brothel, he has no tale to tell his uncle, the king, at the Christmas feast. The film’s Gawain is pointedly not the *Sir* Gawain of the fourteenth-century poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that is its inspiration. As Arthur praises his battle-tested knights and looks out on ‘a land shaped by your hands,’ Gawain’s idleness marks him out almost as much as the blood ties that bind him to the king. Enter the Green Knight, a super-natural force whose appearance offers Gawain the opportunity he seeks to make a name for himself. The Green Knight challenges the men of Arthur’s court to an exchange of blows, and Gawain seizes the chance to prove himself with decisive action and bravely strikes off the stranger’s head. Gawain’s shock mirrors ours when death reverses itself: the body staggers to its feet, reclaims its head, and intones ‘One year hence’ before riding off. Suddenly, time is in short supply, and the clock is ticking on Gawain’s final encounter.

The Green Knight sets up competing models of how time structures human experience. On the one hand is King Arthur’s world of martial glory enshrined in the telling of tales, where the linear forms of legend grant significance, and a place at the Round Table, to each of Arthur’s knights. In this world, the path from royal nephew to proven knight is clear, paved with

narratable feats of bravery and honour. But the straight-line narratives that structure King Arthur's world do not map easily onto the forms of ecological time Gawain encounters in his quest. The cycle of the year passes quickly, marked by the seasonal images on a calendar wheel in the puppet show that launches Gawain's legend. He has a tale at last, with a beginning, a middle, and a projected end. And yet the arrival of another Christmas season does not lead directly to the end of Gawain's story. Instead, his journey through the moors and forests to the Green Chapel offers possibilities that branch and twist like the twigs of the Green Knight's beard, and the film maintains a constant sense of unease, following Gawain as he stumbles from one ambiguous encounter to the next.

Ecological time presents a direct challenge to the linear temporalities of genealogy and legend, giving the lie to smooth narrative arcs and hinting at the complexity and ambiguity beneath: the violence and barbarism that underwrite legends of conquest, and the moral rot that pervades a supposedly heroic kingdom. These themes suffuse the medieval source material as well, and they combine with horror tropes of haunting, dismemberment, and persistent ruin to lend the film a profoundly Gothic sensibility. The forests and heaths of Gawain's quest are alive with both possibility and danger; in perhaps the film's most striking visual, the camera pans from a bound and gagged Gawain, alone in the forest, through a 360-degree shot that, like the calendar wheel in the puppet show, passes through the changing seasons of the year to land on Gawain's bones, mouldering in his decaying clothes. But then the camera pans back the other way, reversing time with its sweep to return to Gawain in the present, who works himself loose from his bonds to continue his quest. The filmic language is clear: a projected narrative of death and decay can be reversed, and Gawain gets the chance to choose a branching path that leads instead to another adventure. The sequence cleverly yet subtly foreshadows the film's climax, a fifteen-minute sequence beginning with his cowardly flight from the Green Knight's axe and ending in his death and the destruction of his kingdom—only to return abruptly to the Green Chapel and allow Gawain another choice, and a different potential future. Gawain's projected future as hero and king plays out, following the legendary formula, but it is only one of many possible futures. Most viewers will have a strong feeling about how to interpret the film's closing 'Off with your head,' but the fact is that we do not know for certain what comes next. What has passed is prologue, but Gawain's wandering in the wilderness has shown him (and us) that knightly honour need not follow a prescribed narrative path.

That tension between human and nonhuman experiences of time is thematised by the green that pervades the film, from its title to its colour palette to its plot and its dialogue. ‘Green is the color of earth, of living things, of life,’ says the Lady (Alicia Vikander); ‘And of rot,’ Gawain replies. Indeed, it is tempting to view the film thematically as a series of conflicting dichotomies. The vegetal apparition of the Green Knight, conjured by a quartet of magic-wielding women from wood, bone, earth, and fire, directly challenges the masculine brutality of Arthur’s martial court and its steel-and-stone dominance over both people and landscape, pitting nature against civilisation. In that battle, of course, nature will always triumph; as The Lady puts it, ‘Moss shall cover your tombstone, and as the sun rises, green shall spread overall, in all its shades and hues.’ Director David Lowery appears to agree:

‘My parents would love for me to say it’s not a war,’ Lowery says. ‘But in 2021, I have to say, I kind of view it that way. I find great solace in the fact that the last image of the film is the Green Knight, and that he has the higher ground. I’m someone who loves peace, and I want to live in a world where those two things can exist hand in hand and with mutual benefit to both. But in our culture now, I don’t see that happening’ (Robinson, 2021).

The triumph of nature over culture is apparent as the film progresses and a dark Gothic palette of greys and browns gradually gives way to brightly-lit greens, golds, and ambers as Gawain’s quest nears its end. Yet in ecological time, growth and decay are in constant, reciprocal process; there is no beginning, middle, and end. The Green Knight himself shows us how to disrupt these dichotomies: neither human nor plant but somehow both at once, in the grand tradition of medieval foliate heads, he is a deeply uncanny figure of undecidability and a challenge to anthropocentric epistemologies (Dinshaw, 2013). The film does not, finally, suggest that there is no place for the human in this world of green. Instead, ecological thought offers Gawain the possibility of making another choice, of following another path, and of stepping outside the linear human narratives of dynasties and genealogies to forge a new identity as a person at home with the world and with himself (Morton, 2010).

BIOGRAPHY

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**‘Green shall spread over all’:
A Gawain for the Anthropocene
(David Lowery: A24, 2021)**

Shelby Carr

David Lowery's *The Green Knight* is a gorgeous and imaginative retelling of the 14th-century, anonymously authored *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; and, it is a retelling apt for this

environmental moment. *The Green Knight* focuses heavily on the interplay between human and nature, and the anxiety-ridden consequences therein. Nature and its cycles haunt the film, evoking ecophobia, not unlike the way nature is expected to haunt and to unsettle in the ecoGothic mode. At the heart of the film is the understanding that, in the end, nature comes for us all. If Gawain's meeting with the Green Knight is any indication, we fear nature most when we are confronted with what we have wrought upon it and how it might choose to retaliate. In the age of the Anthropocene, this is particularly salient, as we sit upon an environmental precipice, contemplating how our own actions might come back to haunt us.

Much of the anxiety evoked within *The Green Knight* hinges upon Gawain's (Dev Patel) initial interaction with nature embodied: the Green Knight (Ralph Ineson). Gawain's beheading of the Knight plagues him, but this offence against nature is subtly mirrored throughout the rest of the film. King Arthur's (Sean Harris) opening speech during the Christmas festivities remark upon the growth of his empire as he tells his guests, '...for out my window this morn I looked, and I saw a land shaped by your hands.' Indeed, the land that Gawain encounters beyond civilisation is a land shaped by humanity's hand, but not for the better. Twice, we are shown land brought to ecological peril by the actions of humankind. The first is a brief glimpse of Gawain riding through a copse of trees completely chopped down by foresters. The second is a field turned into a bloody, muddy mess by acts of warfare. These two scenes signify humanity's environmental impacts, noting how the consumption of natural resources and human acts of violence often come at the expense of nature. The Lady of the manor (Alicia Vikander) echoes this sentiment to Gawain later, telling him:

'But green is the color of earth, of living things, of life... We deck our halls with it and dye our linens, but should it come creeping up the cobbles, we scrub it out, fast as we can. [...] *And when we, together all, find that our reach has exceeded our grasp, we cut it down, we stamp it out* [...] but it comes back' (emphasis mine).

Here, the Lady plainly outlines our dual relationship with nature: reliance on 'green' and our suspicion and outright fear of it. It is difficult not to see the resonances of the Lady's monologue with the ecoGothic, which often dances around the fact that part of the horror of nature is what humans exact upon it. It is even more difficult not to see how this resonates in the here and

now, as more and more of our environmental discourses centre questions of consumption, sustainability, and conservation of natural resources. What *The Green Knight* suggests is that perhaps we *should* feel uneasy about what we unthinkingly take from nature.

The Green Knight couples the fear of nature's retaliation with instances of ecophobia, particularly the fear of the inescapable necessity of death in nature's cycle. The film frequently displays this cycle, especially in reference to Gawain. Throughout the film, Gawain seems unwilling to come to terms with the inevitability of death, whether by drinking to avoid his meeting with the Knight or clinging to the protective enchantments of his belt. Before Gawain's journey, we are repeatedly shown a puppet show that uses a wheel of the seasons to highlight the year Gawain must wait before his appointment. The show always ends with the Gawain puppet's beheading in the winter, not only the date of his meeting with the Green Knight, but also the symbolic 'death' of the year, when nature recedes into itself. The cyclic puppet show is also mirrored by a vision of Gawain's death after meeting with banditti on his journey. As Gawain lies on the earth, tied up, the scene tracks in a circle from where he lies, depicting his spot in the forest through its seasons, before ending back on him, where his skeleton lies, ensconced in moss and crawling with bugs. Both scenes are utterly beautiful and masterfully scored by Daniel Hart, but they also highlight Gawain's own fear of death, especially a death that accords with the cycles of the natural world. To a man part of an emerging Arthurian empire, looking to make his name in myth and legend, the prospect of becoming another nameless corpse sucked in and disposed of by nature is not exactly a desirable one. If nature is meant to be a source of horror in *The Green Knight*, it is because it effaces the actions of humanity over time.

As such, the film portrays the green, vegetal excess of nature as one and the same with a type of death and decay—the Green Knight embodying vegetal qualities of nature as much as he represents reckoning and death to Gawain. When Gawain nears the end of his quest and stays with the Lord (Joel Edgerton) and Lady in the manor, the three contemplate why the Green Knight is green. It is the lady who delivers a rich monologue about the myriad meanings and powers of green, telling Gawain:

‘...When you go, your footprints will fill with grass. Moss shall cover your tombstone, and as the sun rises, green shall spread over all, in all its shades and

hues. This verdigris will overtake your swords and your coins and your battlements, and try as you might, all you hold dear will succumb to it. Your skin, your bones. Your virtue.’

Nothing lasts in the path of green. The Lady explains that in the end, nature will subsume all aspects of human identity and culture. Nature is characterised as a detached and ever-advancing force. Nowhere is this clearer than at the green chapel itself, where the Green Knight waits among the ruins for Gawain, ensconced in vines and greenery. Mimicking the slowness of nature’s time, the knight makes Gawain wait patiently for him to awaken. The green chapel visually demonstrates the Lady’s monologue, portraying starkly how nature reclaims all in the end. Gawain’s vision of his life if he chooses to avoid the Green Knight’s returned blow furthers this sentiment—proving that even if Gawain runs, his kingdom will fall and death will reach him.

Perhaps the appeal of *The Green Knight* at this moment is that it reflects our own hopes and fears in the Anthropocene. Though we may fear what awaits us after centuries of plundering the natural world, we also hope beyond hope that somehow, we may be spared. What *The Green Knight* makes clear, however, is that we must first begin to do *something* before we ascertain our fate—we can not wait idly for it to find us. In the Anthropocene, *The Green Knight* might be useful for prompting us to interrogate the legacies our species will leave behind and may also spur us on to make sure those legacies are worth remembering, even if green overtakes all in the end.

BIOGRAPHY

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With Rotez a Hundredth: The Uncanny Medieval Roots of *The Green Knight*

(David Lowery: A24, 2021)

Danielle Howarth

David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021) weaves fresh EcoGothic threads around the complex knots at the centre of its source text, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*). *SGGK* is a fourteenth-century poem, ripe with ecoGothic elements of uncanny human/non-human entanglements, and dark wilderness backdrops juxtaposed with dangerous court settings. *The Green Knight* picks up on the elements of horror in *SGGK*, which leaves its hero, Gawain, literally and metaphorically scarred by his coming-of-age adventure. The breaking down of Gawain's courtly, knightly identity lies disturbingly beneath the poem's ostensible happy ending. At the same time, this breaking down offers a glimpse of a potential new identity for Gawain, branching away from heteronormative masculinity and entangling, instead, with the queer, the feminine, the non-human. Lowery's re-imagining of Gawain and his story widens the cracks created by the anonymous *Gawain*-poet, letting the non-human creep outwards in equal promise of threat and growth.

The image of the pentangle—an interlocking, five-pointed star—that Gawain carries on his shield in the poem, and which decorates Arthur's court in the film, introduces the ecoGothic entanglements of both. The clean, chivalric lines of the pentangle are disrupted by the slippery, entrapping, and—it should be emphasised—*green* girdle that Gawain is coerced into carrying by the poem's unnamed Lady. He ties the girdle around his armour, literally entangling these symbols of masculine, human order and feminine, non-human power.³³ That the girdle is green introduces the importance of the colour in the poem; green at once suggests the natural and the supernatural, and is both restorative and threatening. When Gawain ties the girdle around the pentangle's sharp lines of honour and piety, the boundaries between human and non-human begin to break down. In *The Green Knight*, Gawain receives the girdle from his mother, whose

³³ Many scholars have discussed the symbolic significance of the girdle; see especially Geraldine Heng, 'Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,' *PLMA* 106, no. 3 (1991): 500-514 and Sheila Fisher, 'Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,' in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 71-105. For a more material and ecocritical perspective, see Richard H. Godden, 'Prosthetic Ecologies: Vulnerable Bodies and the Dismodern Subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,' *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (2016): 1273-1290.

magic creates not only the girdle's mysterious power, but is also connected to the arboreal Green Knight and his axe. The axe slowly spreads green over all it touches—but not before Gawain uses it to cut off the Green Knight's head, dissecting the pentangle engraved into the stone floor of Arthur's court with blood. This violence, and the unsettling tone of the film, beautifully echoes the spirit of the poem, and the horror associated with the ways in which Gawain's identity is insidiously deconstructed by both human and non-human forces. He emerges from the Green Chapel at the end of the poem as a changed man—for better and worse.

One way to view Gawain's journey from *SGGK* to *The Green Knight* is through the lens of the colour green. The film's colour palette is largely autumnal, deepening the chill of the winter setting. But there are some striking uses of vibrant green; for example, in one of the film's most memorable shots, a slow pan of a forest cycling through the seasons as Gawain's tied-up body decays—a cycle that is then reversed to return us to the living Gawain's attempt to free himself. The unsettling juxtaposition of non-human growth and human decomposition encapsulates the ways in which the film reflects the ecoGothic horror of *SGGK*.³⁴ Gawain is entangled with the non-human in an uncanny subversion of anthropocentric structures that both threatens and nourishes his character.

The Green Knight himself also stands at the intersection of human and non-human. In *SGGK*, the Green Knight is literally green—greener than grass, greener than enamel (lines 235-236)—and clearly alien.³⁵ His otherness in *The Green Knight* is similar—Gawain says 'he is not of this earth'—but his greenness is more arboreal, with his bark-covered body continuously creaking in the background of his scenes. This re-imagination of the text's most debated character acknowledges and builds upon the murky meaning of the Green Knight's greenness. Arthur's court in *SGGK* 'had meruayle quat hit mene myȝ / þat a hapel and a horse myȝt such a hwe lach' ['had wondered what it might mean / that a knight and a horse might take such a

³⁴ I discuss this further in chapter three of my PhD thesis: Danielle Howarth, 'From Little Acorns: Trees and Wood in Middle English Romance,' PhD diss., (University of Edinburgh, 2020).

³⁵ For a more thorough exploration of the Green Knight's greenness—and the debates surrounding it—see Gillian Rudd, 'The Green Knight's Balancing Act,' in *In Strange Countries: Middle English Literature and its Afterlife*, ed. David Matthews (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 25-45 and Gillian Rudd, 'Being Green in Late Medieval English Literature,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28-37.

hue'] (pp. 233-234). Countless scholars have done the same, and, likewise, Alicia Vikander delivers the question as the Lady: 'Why is he green, do you think?'³⁶

What then follows is a chilling and exhilarating monologue on the colour green in which The Lady weaves marginal narratives together in a powerful ecofeminist exploration of 'green' as a non-human, feminine force: 'But green is the colour of earth, of living things, of life', she starts, and Gawain replies 'And of rot.' Life and death are finely balanced in the images she then evokes of moss covering tombstones and green spreading over all: 'This verdigris will overtake your swords and your coins and your battlements and, try as you might, all you hold dear will succumb to it.' This unchecked, avenging non-human force swallows the patriarchal world of knights and kings. Just as the green girdle overtakes the pentangle in *SGGK*—representing the influence of the Other over the masculine norm—*The Green Knight* gives us a green re-imagining of the decline of the chivalric, courtly structures surrounding Gawain.

The film, then, is a worthy variant of the medieval story—and takes *SGGK*'s subversion of heteronormative patriarchy further. Dev Patel's vulnerable and gripping performance as Gawain breathes new life into a seven-hundred-year-old character, adding a new dimension to a figure that already existed within the wider corpus of Arthurian literature, intertextually connected to countless other Gawains, medieval and modern. *The Green Knight*'s Gawain makes different choices than his predecessor in *SGGK*, most notably surrounding the girdle, which haunts *SGGK*'s Gawain following his failure to relinquish it to *his* Green Knight. Allowing such changes provides a satisfying end to the story of the imperfect, but still honourable—still good—man that *SGGK* contributed to the Arthurian corpus. This new Gawain is the embodiment of the image the *Gawain*-poet gives of Gawain preparing for the Green Knight's blow at the Green Chapel:

'Gawayn grayþely hit bydez, and glent with no member,
Bot stode style as þe ston, oþer a stubbe auþer
Pat rapeled is in roché grounde with rotez a hundredth.
Gawain duly waits for it [the blow], and flinched with no limb,

³⁶ For another summary of medievalists addressing this question, see Derek Brewer, 'The Colour Green,' in *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 181-190.

But stood still as stone, or else a stump,
That is entwined in rocky ground with a hundred roots' (2292-2294).

As arboreal in metaphor as *The Green Knight*'s eponymous character is in appearance, Gawain becomes a tree stump—cut down by his journey and the difficulties of the choices he has had to make—but strong nevertheless, entwined with the earth. The final title card of the film, a tree stump with 'The Green Knight' scored into it, visually embodies this metaphor and punctuates how *The Green Knight* embraces Gawain's fourteenth-century roots, the strange and complex knots of medieval literature, and the uncanny non-human presences it so often relies on. An ecoGothic interrogation of human/non-human and masculine/feminine binaries can lead to the understanding that Gawain exists in the liminal spaces between them—and lives on in this new version of his story.

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Danielle Howarth (she/her) completed her PhD, titled *From Little Acorns: Trees and Wood in Middle English Romance*, in 2020, and is interested in ecocritical, ecofeminist, and new materialist interpretation of the medieval. She now works for the University of Edinburgh's library, specialising in digitisation of special collections material.

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The Green Knight's Monstrous Nature

(David Lowery: A24, 2021)

Ann M. Martinez

David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021) is labeled by A24 Films as an 'epic fantasy adventure' that is meant to give audiences a 'fresh and bold spin' on the medieval Arthurian romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. At times dreary, dirty, and dark, the film follows Gawain (Dev Patel), the yet-unknighted nephew of King Arthur, as he embarks on a seemingly suicidal quest that showcases the human fear of the unknown and nature's slow, unrelenting purpose to recover what it has lost to human expansionism.

From the moment early in the film when he pushes through the doors into Arthur's court, the Green Knight's stature, weaponry, and otherworldliness frighten all those present. His yet unknown purpose and power are meant to unsettle the audience as well, and it comes as no surprise that his destruction via decapitation is advocated by all. But the Green Knight, with a face reminiscent of the foliage-covered Green Man himself, and the movements of a tired, slightly stiff Ent straight out of Tolkien's world, is a figure of rebirth instead of death. Other than the challenge itself, one that is presented as a game to those at court, the Green Knight never appears to cause physical harm to anyone. The beautifully decorated green axe that he carries into the challenge spills no one's blood, other than the Green Knight's. When the axe is placed on the floor, green moss instantly begins growing around it in the groves between the flagstones. When stored away in a crate, while Gawain waits for a year-and-a-day, the axe sprouts greenery within the sealed crate. When stolen away and seemingly lost, the axe reappears once St. Winifred is made whole again, her missing skull placed atop her skeletal body. Rather than a weapon in the hands of the Green Knight, the axe is more symbolically reminiscent of a forester's tool, one believed in the Middle Ages to allow for clean cuts in a tree that fomented regrowth and rebirth. It is when taken up by human hands, Gawain's or the young thief's (Barry Keoghan), that it becomes an instrument of potential harm and death, underscoring the human culpability in mishandling the natural world and transforming a tool of regeneration into a weapon of destruction.

It is toward his own seeming destruction that Gawain journeys, as he promised the Green Knight to do. The time spent outdoors on the journey differs markedly in the film, as does the lens used to examine nature. Gawain's trek through the wilderness takes up just under 3% of the medieval poem, while in the film it is almost 30% of the total screen time.³⁷ In the text, Gawain faces a bevy of beasts that hinder his progress, from dragons and wolves, to bulls, bears, boars, and ogres. There is no tranquility or beauty in the natural world he faces—just unrelenting danger and cold. But this is not the case in the film. Not a single beast makes an appearance—no, the fox that follows Gawain during the journey, becoming an unlikely companion, does not count. Instead, Gawain faces death at the hands of other humans, when three thieves waylay him, take his possessions, and tie him up. But they leave him alive, and then the true horror of that moment is made clear on screen as the film fast-forwards in time via a striking panoramic that offers a possible glimpse of Gawain's skeletal remains, as nature reclaims his lost and forgotten body back to dust.

The film shows audiences the beauty and complexity of nature, both of which exist outside the human world, but when this same nature is seen through the characters' eyes, the threateningly horrific side of nature takes centre stage. While sitting comfortably inside his estate, Lord Bertilak (Joel Edgerton) asks Gawain, 'Have you ever seen a hawk kill a horse?' When Gawain responds in the negative, the Lord adds, 'It's terrible. Every man should see it at least once. But that is the world. And the world is fit for all manner of mysteries.' Yet such violence never makes it on to the screen, just our imagination as we ponder on the savagery and strangeness of such an encounter in nature. When Lady Bertilak (Alicia Vikander) speaks, her words emphasise the mutability of human life and human creation. It is nature, in the end, she states, that will win: 'When you go, your footprints will fill with grass. Moss shall cover your tombstone, and as the sun rises, green shall spread over all, in all its shades and hues.' As much as humans try to erase it, blot it out, control it, and alter it, there is no defeating it. Nature has a purpose, to subsume all back to a natural state. With time on its side, nothing can be done to stop the inevitable disappearance of humanity.

³⁷ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2.84% (ll. 691–763) of the poem's lines (72 out of 2,530) are dedicated to Gawain's journey. In *The Green Knight*, 29.83% (from minute 0:36 to 1:13) of the film (37 minutes out of 2 hrs. 4 min.) are focused on Gawain's journey.

In the film we see a mother torn away from her child, the death of a beloved son, and a war-ravaged world. Suffering, death, and destruction are plentiful by human hands. But even for those who might survive such pain and anguish, there is still nature with which to contend. Humans have been trying to leave their mark on the Earth for millennia, while nature has been methodically erasing those markers. In the end, nature will win by wiping all away for a rebirth.

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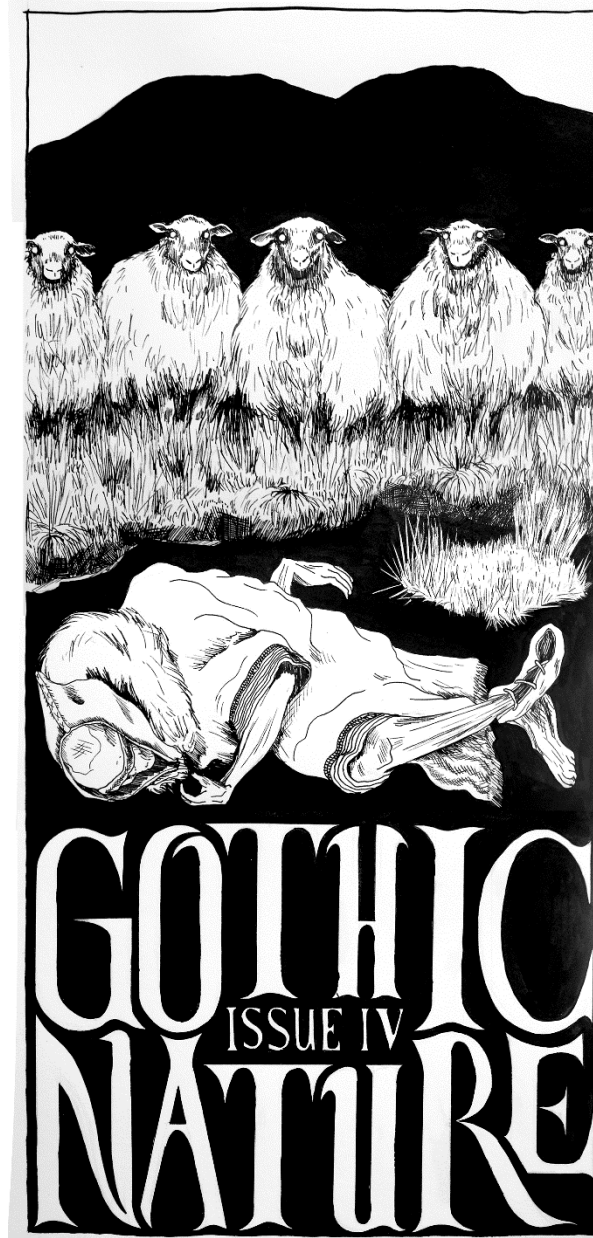
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Mark Jenkin, *Enys Men*
(United Kingdom: Film4, 2022)

Amelia Crowther

One of the earliest and most striking images in British filmmaker Mark Jenkin's magnetic latest offering, *Enys Men*, is an extreme long shot of a woman standing on a rugged island, the bold, textured 16mm print emphasising the lurid red of her raincoat against muted greens and browns, creating a sharp and disconcerting juxtaposition between the natural world and the lone visitor. This image is indicative of the tone and thematic resonance of the rest of the film, which unfurls as an enigmatic, weather-beaten work of folk horror, evocative of films such as *Penda's Fen* (1974) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) not only in its 1970s setting and cinematic language, but in its disquieting exploration of the clash between an archaic, arcane nature and modern human authority. In deliberately collapsing the boundaries between human and nature, order and disorder, past and present, *Enys Men* uses this language to provocatively and productively articulate the anxieties of a contemporary era of environmental crisis in which humanity is both the cause and eventual victim, domineering but inevitably devoured.

On a remote island off the coast of Cornwall, an unnamed volunteer (Mary Woodvine) lives alone in a solitary stone cottage, every day donning a red rain jacket and walking to the cliff edge where she observes a small cluster of flowers and measures the soil temperature. On her way home, she stops to drop a stone into an abandoned mine shaft. This act of superstition functions simultaneously as a scientific one: the splash of the stone hitting the bottom of the shaft indicating the depth and limits of the otherwise engulfing black hole. Back in the cottage she sits at her desk and records her findings, then refuels her generator, makes a cup of tea, listens to the radio, takes a bath, reads a book, and goes to sleep. At least at first, the film is shot and edited to emphasise the carefully controlled, routinised nature of the volunteer's existence: the sequences of static shots creating an observational quality, while their rhythmic repetition over multiple days visually evokes the findings she writes in her neatly ruled notebook: 'no change, no change, no change.'

From the start, though, there is a feeling of ecoGothic foreboding that hangs in the atmosphere, in large part created by Jenkin's score: an ambient, echoing droning entangled

with the sounds of the whirling wind, crashing waves and shrieking seagulls, as well as fragments of radio static, altogether composing a natural soundscape distorted into something strange and ominous. Visually, it is the huge standing stone that provides the film with its name ('enys men' translates to 'stone island') that produces this sense of vague dread, exerting its dark, heavy presence from its position high on the hill, watching over the island as the volunteer goes about her daily routine. Here, as Adam Scovell (2017) writes of folk horror more broadly, the rural environment is turned into 'an unmappable shadow-landscape' (p. 38), isolating and soon overwhelming the agent of modern order. Standing on the cliff edge in her red raincoat, the volunteer is reminiscent of Little Red Riding Hood, the island simultaneously the treacherous forest and the hungry wolf, waiting to swallow her whole. As the film progresses, we witness the disruption of the volunteer's routine: she skips the mine shaft, runs out of tea, the generator fails, and lichen begins to grow on one of the flowers. The routinised structure created by the editing is physically ruptured by the interjection of strange visions, and the volunteer herself begins to unravel, succumbing to the anarchic, horror-inflected rhythms of the natural world, eventually discovering lichen is flowering across a large scar on her abdomen. In this unravelling, Jenkin provokes anxiety around the collapse of the human/nature distinction, drawing attention to the way nature is not, in Stacy Alaimo's (2010) words, 'mere background,' but 'always as close as one's own skin—perhaps even closer' (p. 2). As the volunteer comes to recognise that her own body is irrevocably enmeshed with her object of study, *Enys Men* offers an intriguing vision of 'trans-corporeality,' directly challenging the historic human desire to 'imagine ourselves as rarefied rational beings distinct from nature's muck and muddle' (Ibid: p. 8).

The fact that the lichen appears on the volunteer's scar is evocative, too, of how Jenkin is concerned not just with collapsing the boundary between human and nature but between past and present, opening old wounds and excavating the ghosts of the Cornish landscape with a careful curiosity echoed in the way the volunteer caresses her flowering abdomen. Meticulously paced, the volunteer's breakdown progresses at the same time as we uncover fragments of the island's past, including mining cart tracks now rusted and overgrown, a broken wooden boat sign, and a yellow rain jacket, suggesting a fraught history of human habitation. We learn, too, about the standing stone, a crackling radio explaining it was erected as a 'monument of grief' for those who have been lost to the sea. Both natural and manmade, forging a connection between past and present, the stone acts as a talisman pulling forth the ghosts that

remain tethered to the land and that haunt the volunteer in her disjointed visions of a drowned seaman, children dressed in white, dirty-faced miners and bal maiden in their bonnets. These haunting visions, particularly invoking Cornwall's troubled history of labour and industry, prompt reflection on humanity's historic exploitation of the land, rooted in the comforting fantasy of humanity's ability to dominate a distinct, separate nature, unearthing a deeply rooted anxiety around how this ideology leads only to humanity's own destruction. In *Enys Men* human life is a fleeting moment in the grander history of Nature, leaving behind only fragments and ghosts enmeshed in an island that stands silent and immovable amongst the raging waves.

The film thus effectively articulates a potent unease around human fragility, and yet what is particularly interesting is how Jenkin infuses this with a sense of guilt and grief, of struggle and loss, that speaks empathetically to the specificities of the Cornish setting. In his previous film, *Bait* (2019), Jenkin tells a story of gentrification, the exploitation of the Cornish landscape and its workers, concerned with the people losing their connection to the land at the hands of capitalist forces beyond their control. Perhaps less overtly political, *Enys Men* nevertheless uses its ecoGothic landscape and ghostly visions of Cornish history to bring similar concerns to the fore. One of the most arresting images is that of the volunteer gazing into the abandoned mining shaft only to see the face of a miner staring back, drawing together the ways in which the Cornish people have been exploited as workers in the same way that the earth has been plundered for centuries: the two inextricably intertwined.

Perhaps most anxiety-inducing of all, Jenkin offers no respite or meaningful conclusion, with the film's form giving in so completely to the unruly rhythms of stone island that it becomes a jarring collage of dream-like visions, memories and apparitions, building to a crescendo and cutting to black. Rather than ending with a confrontation between human authority and unruly nature, as seen in folk horror films such as *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), *Enys Men* emphasises only the steady, inevitable disintegration of boundaries, offering something more experimental, equivocal and elegiac. The ecoGothic landscape becomes not an Other to be railed against but a chaotic, ambiguous 'contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature' (Ibid: p. 2) in which humanity can reckon with itself, looking back on the marks it has left on the land, inward at its own natural substance, and forward to its self-ordained decay. *Enys Men* is a haunting, hypnotic, and purposefully puzzling cinematic experience that is, aptly, influenced by films of the past while finding its place in the

contemporary resurgence of folk horror, speaking urgently and profoundly to a culture in which there is a dangerous loss of touch between humanity and the natural world.

BIOGRAPHY

Amelia Crowther is a PhD candidate at the University of Sussex researching the changing face of the witch through cinematic history, interrogating how these images construct, reconstruct, and negotiate the category Woman within their specific cultural climates. They are also the co-host of podcast *Every Film is Gay*, which explores the queer undercurrents of popular cinema.

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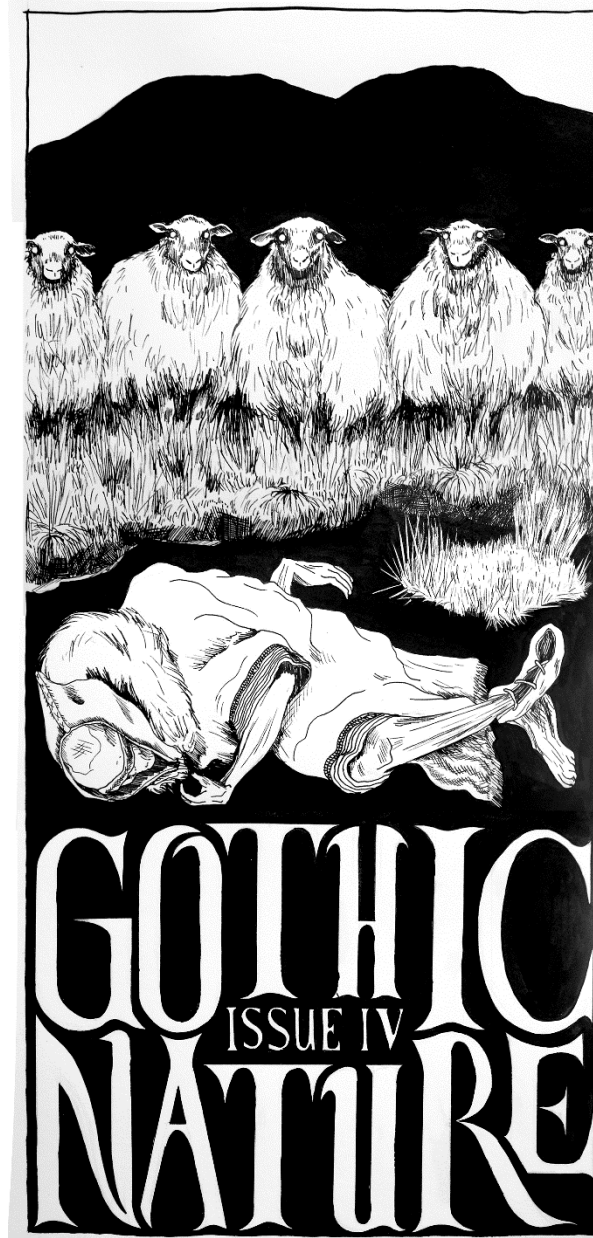
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Choi Chang-yong, *The Silent Sea*
(South Korea: Artist Company, 2021)

Lindsay S. R. Jolivet

When considering what new shows or films to watch for research, I am not usually one to seek out space travel horror or celestial-based sci-fi, preferring more organic narratives deeply rooted in the soil of planet Earth—zombies emerging from the ground, moss-covered lagoon monsters, and the like. Given that, imagine my surprise when the recent South Korean science fiction series *The Silent Sea* (2021) had me on the edge of my eco-academic seat in excitement at each new twist and turn in the ways the show visualised the horrors of humanity’s encounters with the elemental nonhuman. Even with some minor shortcomings in terms of melodramatic plot predictability, this Netflix series is an engaging spectacle of aquatic ecohorror that not only draws connections between terrestrial and lunar environments but also between the human and nonhuman, reminding us how risky those intersections can be when approached with a mindset of resource extraction.

The basic premise is that Earth’s usable water has been almost entirely depleted and humanity is in crisis. As a last resort, a team of South Korean scientists and astronauts are sent to the moon to recover research material from a now abandoned space station where top-secret studies on a newly discovered resource called ‘lunar water’ were formerly being conducted. This new resource *looks* like Earth water, and at first appears to be the miracle humanity needs; however, it turns out that the substance is deadly to *homo sapiens*. Not only drinking the ‘water,’ but even allowing the smallest trace of it to touch the skin is enough to kill a human. Eventually, the scientists discover that lunar water is a living organism akin to a virus that, while visually indistinguishable from Earth water, is its own being and not a ‘lifeless’ resource. They must then decide if this ‘water,’ whether it be resource or creature, is too dangerous for humanity or if it can still be of some ‘use.’

In traditional ‘creature-from-the-deep’ horror a physical monster appears as the agent of the aquatic realm. A recognisable monster is needed for the narrative because water, unable to communicate in human language and rarely conceived of as independently conscious,

requires an anthropocentrically comprehensible body to express its grievances. Iconic films such as Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla* (1954) and Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (2006) are prime examples of using aquatic-born monsters to visualise the way environmental damage hurts bodies of water and how pollution rebounds back on humanity. In *The Silent Sea*, however, the lunar water *is* the monster. Subverting the genre expectation of providing a surrogate body, this show makes the innovative choice of creating agency for the element itself; nature is not obscured by a fantasy monster, rather it is the primary focus and arbiter of its own vengeance. Silent and camouflaged by its indistinguishability from Earth water, the lunar water is a killer hiding in plain sight, much like all the invisible pollutants that seep into our environment every day in the real world.

To make bodiless nature work as a character in visual media, *The Silent Sea* employs techniques from the horror genre more broadly to emphasise this new form of strictly elemental eco-monster. Throughout the early scenes in the station, the show implements suspenseful soundtrack design, long camera pans, and slow pacing to build up tension and make the viewer feel that *something* dangerous is lurking around every corner. Yet, the repeated appearance of the 'monster' onscreen goes unnoticed by characters and viewers alike in its innocuous form of 'water.' While clearly drawing on conventions of aquatic monster media, like the examples mentioned above as well as other well-known films such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *The Silent Sea* prioritises the elemental horrific by emphasising the fear and danger associated with water itself and not just the fear associated with what might live in the water.

Similarly, without a clear corporeal monster, it is the human body that showcases the monstrous effects of the silent liquid adversary; to this end, we are exposed to the aesthetics of drowning and overhydration to embody the grotesque *a la* the body horror genre. Anyone who comes in contact with this nonhuman substance in the show quite literally fills with it, their blood transforming into lunar water and then reproducing at an unstoppable pace until it gushes from every orifice. The show implements sound muffling and underwater filters to portray the affected characters' experiences of drowning on dry land. This means of death is starkly ironic. In this world, humans have through their own folly destroyed terrestrial water and the characters of *The Silent Sea* have never in their lives on Earth seen bodies of water, yet they die not of dehydration, but overhydration, in a dark expression of environmental justice.

Without a voice to speak with or a monstrous body to destroy with, the lunar water communicates in the only way it can: direct impact on those who try to control it.

Ultimately, *The Silent Sea* is an exercise in making water itself horrifying and it complicates both post-apocalyptic and sci-fi tropes by implementing ecohorror themes that span the terrestrial and the lunar—removing the option of ‘salvation’ for humanity via resource exploitation of other planets—and by imagining a resource that seems almost agential in its ability to fight back against the attempts to exploit it. This setup offers those interested in environmental revenge narratives a concept-oriented as opposed to entity-oriented way to consider media where non-human elements strike back against humans. A celestial displacement of the theme of resource depletion allows for a focus that is less on the Earth’s material resources themselves and more on the core ideological issues behind the origins of the environmental revenge drive itself, such as anthropocentrism, capitalism, and expansionism. While it may seem counterintuitive to address ecological concerns in a non-terrestrial setting, one message viewers can take from this show’s articulation of environmental revenge is that punishment for exploitation of the nonhuman is *not* bound to Earth or to Earthly entities.

Scholars and viewers interested in themes of environmental revenge, aquatic monsters, and ecohorror in general will certainly find moments of interest throughout *The Silent Sea* as the visuals and plot explore the varied ways an essential resource, and not just its absence, can become horrific. Though there are many intriguing additional eco-elements to the show’s ecohorror narrative—hints at ideas regarding the role scientists play in human/nonhuman relationality, the potential for nonhuman coexistence that excludes humans (lunar water does not kill plants), the ethics of celestial resource extraction as a general practice, and so forth—these ideas rarely reach full fruition, as the lives, deaths, and personal relationships of the human crew take centre stage. Despite its perhaps overreliance on human melodrama, *The Silent Sea* joins valuable films such as *Solaris* (1972) and *Annihilation* (2018) in interrogating the intersection of the terrestrial and the cosmic—and how exactly this intersection can create generative spaces for questioning just how far into the expanses of the universe ecohorror can reach.

BIOGRAPHY

Lindsay S. R. Jolivette is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of East Asian Languages & Cultures at the University of Southern California. Her research focuses on representations of nonhuman others in contemporary South Korean and Japanese horror media with a methodological emphasis on environmental humanities and visual studies.

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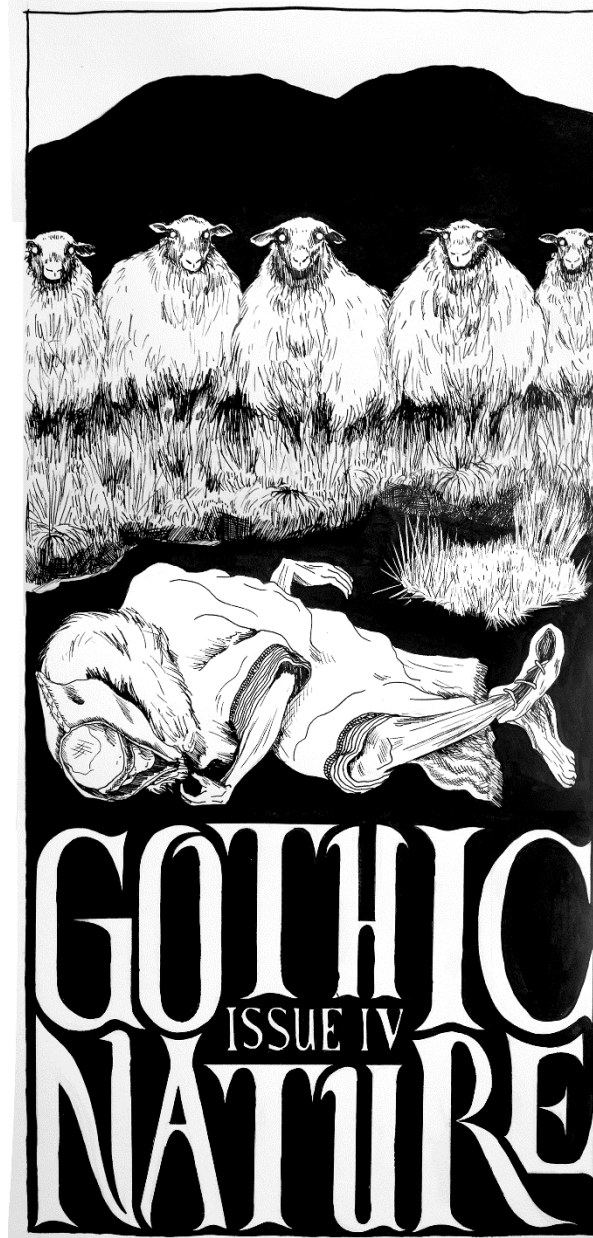
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**Safeguarding Our Own Replacement:
The Subversive Futurity of *Sweet Tooth***
(New Zealand: Netflix, 2021)

M. E. Boothby

In *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World* (2020), scholar Jemma Rowan Deer offers two interpretations of her subtitle. Firstly, she says, ‘it can be read in an apocalyptic vein, as referring to the kind of reading that might be appropriate to this time of catastrophic climate change’ (p. 1). But then she notes the etymology ‘of the word “world” as “the age of man” (coming from the Old Danish *wær-æld*, meaning literally “man-age”),’ and encourages us to consider what it might mean to actively participate in ‘reading that is in favour of the end of the age of man—a reading that is for the end of the *wær-æld*.’ In my own attempts to embrace such a practice, I have been seeking out narratives of what I will call ‘hopeful apocalypse,’ a category for which Netflix’s *Sweet Tooth* (2021) is an ideal representative. Hopeful apocalypses are stories that explore or advocate for the end of the man-age by imagining a ‘next people,’ a sentient lifeform that is positioned by the narrative as carrying on after humanity’s extinction. Next people are written in many forms, but the most fruitful for those of us who study the ecoGothic are, perhaps, the biologically-mutated—combinations of the human and the earthly nonhuman. Theorists of material ecocriticism, like Anna Tsing (2017) and Donna Haraway (2016), call these collaborative eco-bodies ‘monsters,’ and the mutant hybrid children of *Sweet Tooth* are ‘monsters in the best sense; [...] they belong to no one [...] They make and unmake.’ (Haraway, 2016: p. 2).

Netflix’s *Sweet Tooth* is an adaption of Canadian graphic novelist Jeff Lemire’s 2009-2021 comic series of the same name. The narrative presents a post-apocalyptic future caused by a virus, in which human babies inexplicably begin being born as human-animal hybrids. The virus and the hybrids are connected, though it is unclear which led to the other. The show’s protagonist is a hybrid child named Gus (Christian Convery), part human and part deer, and he is out of his deep-woods home for the first time, in a world where many of the remaining human adults hunt down hybrid children for experimentation, in hopes of creating a vaccine. While the hybrids are monsters in all the traditional grotesque senses, they are simultaneously depicted as children in need of protection. In this way, *Sweet Tooth* takes us beyond

straightforward empathy for the eco-monster and asks us to become complicit in safeguarding humanity's replacement. By positioning the hybrids as vulnerable, *Sweet Tooth* manipulates the audience into siding with the hybrids *against* the desperate, virus-stricken adults. The child hybrids subvert audiences' instinctive human-species alliance so effectively because they have been positioned as figures for what Lee Edelman (2004) calls 'the cult of the Child' (p. 19) in Western reproductive futurism. That is to say, children are understood as representing hope for the future, and so a choice between an adult's life and a child's life accepts that the child's is inherently more valuable (Edelman, 2004). *Sweet Tooth* perverts this understanding with delightful effectiveness. Now the kind and guileless children are also the mutant monsters inadvertently marking humanity's destruction. In this world, reproductive futurism and moral 'goodness' implicates us in our own species' undoing.

The ecohorror genre has a particular fascination with the idea that interspecies hybridity could become contagious—that infectious mutation could create a new species of more-than-human beings. What I would like to propose here is that we might subvert our fear and disgust when confronted with these eco-mutants and monsters-of-matter, and begin seeing the hybrid mutant body as a metaphor for collaborative ecological practice. *Sweet Tooth* asks audiences to consider: is it possible to embrace eco-monsters as the heralds of a new age of next people—figures of hopeful futurity instead of repugnance?

Sweet Tooth is not a subtle show, as evidenced by Bear's speech in episode four. Bear is one of the last children to be born fully human before the virus took hold, and the leader of a semi-feral army of human teenagers. She tells Gus:

'Hybrids are how the Earth survives. Before the virus, Earth was dying. Humans—grown-ups—had ruined it. [...] But once kids like you were born, the Earth could start to heal. You can live without taking. You can keep the Earth alive.' ('Secret Sauce')

Before groaning and criticising this as patronising heavy-handedness, we should remember that this series has a preteen audience as well as an adult one, and acknowledge that sometimes a simplified thesis statement is necessary, if the goal is to communicate radical reconceptions of personhood to a non-academic public. Yes, as a television series, *Sweet Tooth* does suffer from

some confusing disparities in tone, occasionally failing to smoothly integrate its ecoGothic, post-apocalyptic wilderness with its family-friendly-adventure energy. Perhaps, too, it relies too heavily on the appeal of post-apocalyptic ruin-porn. But the way *Sweet Tooth* subverts reproductive futurism and imagines a more-than-human humanity makes the series not only worth watching, but worth genuinely contemplating.

The monstrous, mutant child across ecohorror and ecoGothic narratives offers us hope that there could be other ways of existing after our current ways have collapsed. These kinds of fictions can be active tools for the present, beyond the spectre and spectacle of catastrophic futures, because in order to embrace a hopeful apocalypse, an end of Deer's *wær-æld* (2020), we must first be able to imagine it. *Sweet Tooth* offers us one such vision. It is a show written and glossed for mainstream, mass-appeal popularity, yes, but it encourages critical thought and challenges the human species as a construct. We do not know where the second season will take the narrative, but characters like the CGI gopher-child Bobby, whose human-to-nonhuman ratio is vastly more animal than Gus', suggest that this fiction's next people are not done evolving yet. The ecocritical monster children of *Sweet Tooth* may still have more radical things to teach us.

BIOGRAPHY

M. E. Boothby (she/her) is a temporary, human-shaped assemblage of matter and microorganisms, currently existing on the traditional territory of the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq peoples, in Newfoundland, Canada. Her research explores neuroqueer and ecocritical intersections in speculative fiction. She has a fondness for mischievous cephalopods, apocalyptic fungi, and monstrous children.

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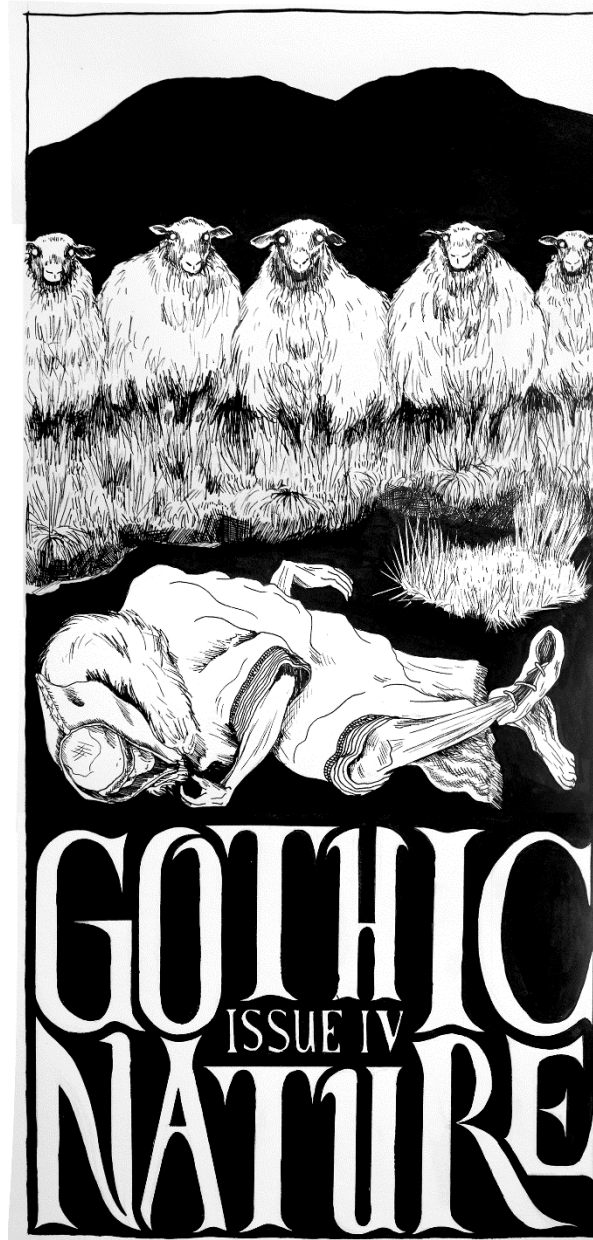
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Josh Ruben, *Werewolves Within*

(Los Angeles, California: Ubisoft Film & Television and Vanishing Angle, 2021)

Andy Hageman

Two recent experiences prompted me to review *Werewolves Within* for colleagues curious about gothic nature cinema. First, I recently taught the film in a first-year undergraduate seminar I called ‘Weird Readings.’ The students almost universally loved the film, and they came to class eager to work together through its combination of ecology, gender, race, and genre signals. Together, we approached *Werewolves Within* as a mystery with multiple monsters—within, without, and perhaps a bit of both. As several students noted, when the co-protagonists, Finn (a forest ranger played by Sam Richardson) and Cecily (a mail person played by Milana Vayntrub) first meet, the sequence juxtaposes her reading Thoreau’s *Walden* with a petrol industry executive trying to persuade environmental holdouts to greenlight a new pipeline through their town of Beaverfield. Their meet cute subtly signals the connection that runs throughout the film of ecology, economy, and ideology that come bundled with the proposed construction of an oil pipeline. The intersection of these forces in the culture of fossil fuels is the very fabric of monstrosities upon which the werewolf tale unfolds. And my second reason to review the film was being struck by the following statement in Roger Luckhurst’s recent book, *Gothic: An Illustrated History* (2021): ‘But it is the werewolf that has been the most enduring survival of this belief [therianthropy], both as folklore and Gothic convention [...] The werewolf in folklore and Gothic fiction usually articulates a transgression of norms, whether bestial, sexual, or racial’ (p. 232). All of the embodied transgressions in Luckhurst’s list are present and interconnected with each other at the heart of *Werewolves Within*. This film combines the more conventional fears of wildness and Nature that we attach to the werewolf with current horrors of climate change, racial injustice, and patriarchal misogyny. As such, *Werewolves Within* is an ecohorror film about fighting a convergence of ideologies that trick us into misrecognising the monster that threatens us from without and within.

Werewolves Within establishes an ecoGothic tone for its comedy-horror approach to intersectionality from the very start. The film opens on a black surface with a gradual, line-by-line, reveal of an epigraph:

Listening is where love begins
Listening to ourselves
and then our neighbors
—Mr. Rogers—

Accompanying the text is a strings soundtrack that starts softly, intensifies its tension by line three, and then pauses before a sting—a curt musical chord that punctuates a jump scare—when Mr. Rogers’ name pops into view. The dissonance of ‘Mr. Rogers’ underscored by a musical horror sting feels silly at first blush. Yet, the quote is no joke. Being an open and loving neighbour is an extremely demanding ethical task that is central to civil and ecological life. Josh Ruben deploying this epigraph is akin to Stephen King opening his novel *Later* (2021) with ‘There are only so many tomorrows’ by Michael Landon. Both instances of odd/goofy contradiction invite audiences to perceive humour that amplifies, albeit counterintuitively, the darkness of the narratives that follow and stimulates interpretive activity to discern what position the proposed mashup of horror and gentle goodness asks its audience to inhabit. In the case of *Werewolves Within*, this means exploring the obstacles to being loving, inclusive, ecological neighbours on planet Earth.

One of the most subtle and fascinating of these obstacles in *Werewolves Within* is race, which Luckhurst includes among the social transgressions that werewolves embody. Sam Richardson playing the role of Finn as the lone Black person in a mostly White, non-urban, and Gothic setting immediately puts the film into conversation with recent anti-racism horror texts like Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) and Little Marvin’s *Them* (2021). While those texts are set in the suburbs and a remote wealthy estate, Ruben’s film places its Gothic representation of racist horrors within a small town and its adjacent forests. The result is an unsettling, yet absolutely vital, integration of racism with the ecological fears bound up with wolves in the woods. The point is that *Werewolves Within* does not layer racism on top of some universal human fear of the forest. Instead, it very subtly delivers a story that aligns with Timothy Morton’s (2017) claim in *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, that ‘The struggle against racism is exactly the struggle against speciesism’ (p. 133). What is especially poignant is that *Werewolves Within* hardly raises race in its dialogue at all. When Finn first meets Trisha Anderton (Michaela Watkins), the heir to a maple syrup business and avid crafter, he responds to a likeness of himself she gifts him by saying it’s a ‘little pale me,’ and Trisha then asks if he

celebrates Kwanzaa. And that's it. For the rest of the film, Finn's Black identity never comes up in public or private. When I taught the film, students immediately took the discussion to race. They found themselves deeply unsettled by the film's suppression of race dynamics across the story, equating it to a Gothic mode of keeping the monster just off screen. We discussed how spectators can find themselves waiting for racism to erupt into violence as much or more than for the next werewolf attack. In this way, *Werewolves Within* fits Luckhurst's observation yet with a deceptive subtlety that asks spectators to step into a horror space rather than delivering a pre-formed horror message.

To elide race discourse as *Werewolves Within* does is a bold choice that comes with risk. Observing the students react so strongly to the film's near total suppression of race and racism in its narrative circumstances, I suggest that the film sparks active reflection and conversation through its clever awareness of genre conventions and innovation. Even though the omission of race will likely empower some spectatorships to see the film as 'nicely' colour blind, as Christy Tidwell (2021) astutely asserts in a review of *Werewolves Within*, I argue that the elision in *Werewolves Within* complements other Gothic horror reimaginings of race and racism, such as *Get Out* and Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016). After all, White supremacist horror fans will find ways to disavow or ignore ideologies of race in films. But fans and scholars of genre cinema intersections of race, gender, and ecology can take from this film a new way of leveraging monsters who are constantly present and just off screen. For, even as the hunt for the lycanthrope's identity activates each character as a hyperbolic 'type,' the unnamed monster of racism that haunts the film reframes them as subject positions within a capitalistic framework that exploits racism, as well as misogyny, to distract from the still more elusive monster of extractivism that builds profits by burning the planet and all the neighbours living on it.

Like race, gender is deceptively complex in the film. Cecily is the primary voice of gender constructions, hierarchies, and justice across nearly the full film, until the end, when it turns out she is the werewolf. An initial reading might grasp her monster identity as undermining all of her gender insights. However, Cecily's insights are themselves quite inconsistent. When she first meets Finn, she reminds him in precise words that 'gender is a construct,' and she invokes #MeToo. Later in the film, however, she chastises him for not being aggressively masculine. Cecily's erratic gender positions are explained as she is revealed to be the werewolf preying on Beaverfield. She claims that everything she said to Finn was to turn

him against the other residents so that she could add everyone to her private larder. Indeed, this explains her shifting values, but it also means that Cecily being the monster does not fully negate her gender politics. What remains significantly true through Cecily's monster reveal is her pointing out to Finn that werewolves are more real than a woman who loves reading Thoreau's *Walden* while drinking kombucha and getting turned on by his Yellowstone stories. That creature, she says, is part of a violent mythology that devastates civic and ecological life. This confrontational dialogue enhances the fact that the only sexuality, to point back to Luckhurst's list, in Cecily's transgressions as a werewolf have nothing to do with the more conventional fears over female sexual agency or pleasure. On the contrary, the sexual transgressions of this werewolf tale are the actions men take within a normalised culture of misogyny.

Such a reading of the film's gender politics resonates with the hard-cut ending of *Werewolves Within*. Emerson Flint (Glenn Fleshler) has come to town, inspired by Finn's 'nice' pitch about being a good neighbour, to help dispatch the werewolf. The two men believe they have just succeeded after a classic horror sequence of the monster that must be killed multiple times, and their last lines of dialogue jokingly wonder if Jeanine Sherman (Catherine Curtin, who also plays Dustin's mother on *Stranger Things*), the proprietor of the Beaverfield Inn, is still alive and available to make them sandwiches. Just at this moment, Cecily rises to attack again but is finished off by Jeanine who drops the 1980s-horror-worthy one-liner, 'Make your own damn sandwich.' The camera cuts to Finn, and as he opens his mouth to apologise and/or rationalise, the film hard cuts to black and then the credits roll. Jeanine gets the last action and the last word, which highlights the sheer inertia of misogynistic hierarchy that persists in Finn and Flint, who were just making it seem like the film's central message was men being nice and neighbourly. Jeanine's claim on the final frame overrides the idea that these two men's niceness breakthrough is the moral to this Gothic ecohorror narrative. Instead, she reveals their rehearsal of the Mr. Rogers epigraph as ultimately hollow. If they still disrespect the powerful middle-age woman who has opposed the local building of a pipeline from start to finish, how can the men and their trite words stand for an ecological future? The abrupt ending posits this question for the audience to tarry with. Admittedly, though, it takes rewatches and sustained analysis to discern how the ending can pull the film's parts together in a progressive take on Gothic ecocinema and an intersectional approach to being ecological neighbours. Rewatches

and analyses are our work, and *Werewolves Within* opens the way to honing our critical capacities and those of our students.

This review has barely begun to explore the depths of characters, dialogue, and suggestive cinema techniques in *Werewolves Within*. Queer love intersects with wealth inequality, scientific forensics intersects with the powers of monster myths and political divides, and innovative cinematography and editing complicate the contribution of Emerson Flint to the tale. With so much in it still to explore, *Werewolves Within* will prove fruitful material for scholars investigating how the werewolf can reframe the multi-headed monster of race, gender, and ecology that is always within, whether felt through the immediate presence of one or more heads or through the Gothic suspense of its invisible yet palpable presence in the structure of our lives and stories.

BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Hageman is Director of The Center for Ethics and Public Engagement and Associate Professor of English at Luther College, Iowa. He teaches and researches intersections of ecology, race, and gender in speculative fiction and publishes on Chinese SF, David Lynch, horror and weird literature, cinema, and more.

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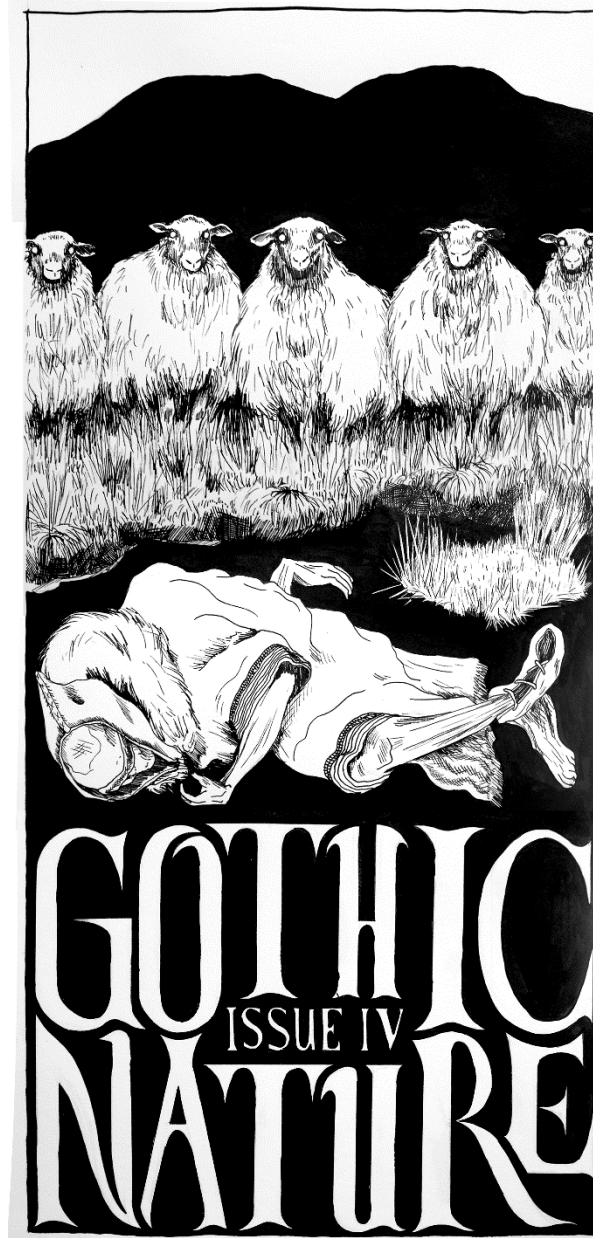
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**The Megamycete at the End of the World:
Resident Evil: Village and Gothic Ecophobia**
(Antony Johnston: Capcom, 2021)

Lauren Woolbright

In June 2015, I sat in the audience at the eleventh biennial conference for the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ALSE), listening to Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing delivering a plenary address titled ‘Tunneling in the Cthulucene.’ In their talk, Tsing commented that working with fungi ‘has helped me see the underground as a space of life. I think too often we think, maybe because of burial customs, [of] underground as a space of death’ rather than as the ‘lively world’ that it is. She highlighted that fungi are in the business of ‘making space, making livability for many species including us’ (Haraway and Tsing): that is, of enacting crucial ecological work that we do not always see or appreciate. However critical this dirty work may be to planet and people, it is our unease with the dark and unknown, with that which dwells underground and consumes the dead, that nevertheless makes us fear the fungal, and which can escalate in media representation into complete ecophobic dread.

Interestingly, gamer culture has repeatedly villainised the cultural spectre of the ‘bad feminist’ in ways that notably mirror this mycophobia, attacking female developers and defending harmful representations of women in games, even though women make up half the player base. The representation of female villainy in games has certainly done women no favours, offering them power only to render them monstrous and put them ‘in their place’ at the story’s end, often without even learning the lessons their actions serve to teach. It was while listening to Haraway and Tsing that I therefore began to question how this particular relationship, between female and rhizomatic beings, might be explored in games, specifically through horror. Often, horror plots serve to reinforce the status quo and punish deviation from norms, but sometimes the heroes learn from their experiences and can help progress to flourish in the aftermath.

The newest game in the *Resident Evil* franchise, *Village*, reimagines fungal ecology as monstrous with a sentient fungus partnered with a determined mother at the game’s centre; but unfortunately, rather than exposing critical fault lines in our cultural engagement with the

nonhuman world, the game sinks to new depths of ecophobia and reverts to a fallacy of solving complex ecological problems with hypermasculine violence. Players enter the game as Ethan Winters, who seeks to rescue his abducted infant daughter, Rose (her name invoking delicate flower imagery in contrast to the fearsome fungus), from Mother Miranda, the game's archvillain who plans to make Rose the vessel for the consciousness of her own lost daughter, Eva. This is portrayed as possible in the game through the megamycete, a colossal underground fungal entity that, through the absorption of the bodies of the dead, has developed the ability to also soak in the consciousness of anyone whose body it consumes. Dwelling unseen by humans, the megamycete is only discovered by accident when Miranda, after losing her beloved Eva to Spanish flu in 1919, retreats to a cave with the intention to end her own life. When she touches the fungal root, she has a vision of all the consciousnesses the megamycete has absorbed into itself, and immediately she begins scheming how to cull Eva's from the horde and place her into a new body. Nearly a hundred years later, we have the events of *Village*.

Although its destruction makes up the game's conclusion, the megamycete is thoroughly overshadowed by the numerous Gothic villains that players face between the kidnapping of Rose and the game's end, mainly because it operates out of sight, puppeting charismatic human antagonists, each with their own ecosystems of lair, minions, and abilities. Next to them, the mushroom at the game's core is easily overlooked, even though without it, there would be no story. Furthermore, of all people, Ethan, who has lost his daughter, should arguably be able to sympathise with Miranda and help to put her actions in perspective. Instead, Ethan finally bombs the megamycete's foetus-shaped root, cratering the village, and aptly ends the game with the image of a mushroom cloud for the mutant-making mushroom. It is all too decisive an ending for a complex and ancient primordial entity and the ecosystem of more-than-human creatures it has grown. As such, the game misses the opportunity to grapple empathetically with the gravity of parental love and loss, the unsettling indifference of nature to human suffering, the vast unseen presence of nonhuman nature, and the nature and emotional fallout of reproduction.

Precarity of life and our need to control it in the face of world-altering circumstances are frequently foregrounded in games, which centre players seeking to right the wrongs in these digital worlds, generally with guns in hand. Ends of worlds are commonly depicted, but games fall prey to anthropocentrism: humans may end, but worlds go on without us. In *The Mushroom*

at the End of the World, Tsing (2015) uses mushrooms as a vehicle for understanding the breakdown of the world as well as for hope in its survival and eventual renewal—life after life as we know it. She writes, ‘This book tells of my travels with mushrooms to explore the indeterminacy and the conditions of precarity, that is, life without the promise of stability [...] the uncontrolled lives of mushrooms are a gift—a guide—when the controlled world we thought we had fails’ (2015 p. 2). She could almost be describing *Village* through a lens of best intentions: when Miranda’s life falls apart, she does unspeakable things in pursuit of her lost daughter, threatening the entire world with chthonic destruction from below—or more neutrally, transformation of the human into a closer relationship with the fungal. Miranda believes that spreading the megamycete’s mould and its mutations are a ‘gift’; she uses the Romanian word for gift—‘cadou’—to name the parasite she uses to infect people in an effort to create a suitable vessel for Eva, and the failings of reproduction result in new ‘children,’ a misexpression of her motherly love, which the game is as quick to quash with its traditional male hero as the megamycete itself.

The megamycete is not evil, nor does it apparently have any will other than what all things share: a desire to exist, to grow, to be healthy. Only human meddling brings about evil, and the fallout from this toxic interference lies at the heart of the ecohorror subgenre, and more particularly, of ecophobia as described by Simon Estok. According to Estok (2018), ecophobia ‘is more than a persistent fear. It is more than an irrational hatred. And it is more than the human indifference to nature’ (p. 12). Ecophobia, in other words, is a complex expression of our deep anxiety about our survival in a challenging and unpredictable world. The megamycete’s mould causes those infected with it to lose their individuality and become part of a hive mind controlled by female antagonists. *Village*’s ecophobia presents players with the all-too-familiar fantasy of putting both women and unknowable nonhuman nature in ‘their place’—namely, under the hero’s boot. The real danger of media repeatedly presenting audiences with these tired themes is how it continues to erode any progress for either women or the environment. Next time, perhaps, rather than merely raising a host of troubling and interesting questions about the human relationship to nonhuman nature, a game might try addressing some of those questions with a more sophisticated toolkit than a nuke.

BIOGRAPHY

Lauren Woolbright holds the position of Lecturer of Digital Media at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia. Her research sits at the confluence of game studies and environmental humanities, focusing on how environments and mechanics communicate meaning in games using theories of game design, interactive storytelling, media studies, and environmental communication. Her recent work examines darker aspects of ecomedia in games using ecophobia, environmental mourning, and the monstrous-feminine as lenses. She is co-founder and lead editor of *OneShot: A Journal of Critical Play and Games*, which publishes scholarly and pedagogical games and essays contextualising them.

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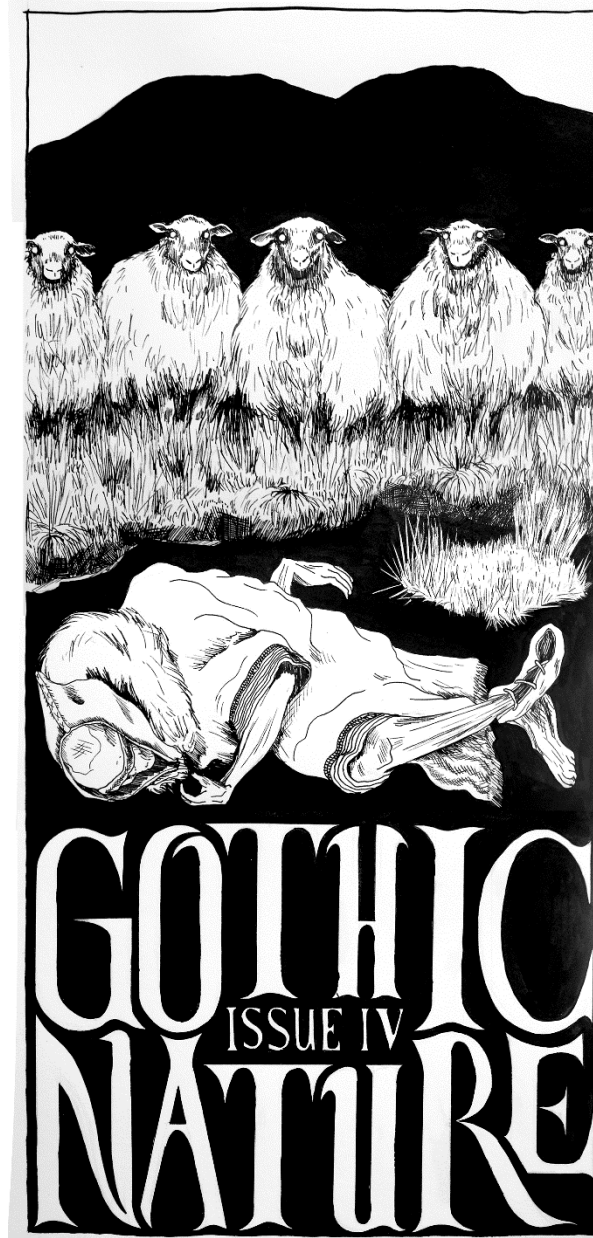
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GOTHIC NATURE



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In the Earth and Gaia
A Review Cluster
(Ben Wheatley: Universal Pictures, 2021;
Jaco Bouwer: XYZ Films, 2021)

A special collaborative collection from Ashley Kniss, Allison Mackey, and Christy Tidwell

INTRODUCTION

Christy Tidwell

In 1993, not just one but two movies about dinosaurs were released: *Jurassic Park* and the much less well-known *Carnosaur*. In 1997, there were two major volcano movies (*Dante's Peak* and *Volcano*); in 1998, two asteroid movies (*Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*); and in 2006, two films about 19th-century stage magicians (*The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*). More recently, in 2021, two ecohorror films about fungus—*In the Earth* and *Gaia*—were released, in another instance of a phenomenon known as ‘twin films’, movies addressing the same topic being released at the same time. This is not uncommon, and sometimes this happens simply as a result of Hollywood competition between studios or producers, but in the case of *In the Earth* and *Gaia*, as both Ashley Kniss and Allison Mackey note in their reviews, there may be something larger going on.

But what *is* going on? What is the appeal of the fungal reflected in these two films and their near-simultaneous release? One answer might be found in the tension between fear and hope, between attraction and repulsion, that both Kniss and Mackey identify in these movies. It is a tension common to monster movies more broadly, as in our fear of but also sympathy for a figure like Godzilla. But here, who—or what—is the monster? Mackey describes the fungal itself as a ‘hopeful monster’ while Kniss alludes to both the mycorrhizal monsters and the human monsters present in the films, both indicating that the monsters here are complex and not easily pinned down.

The tension between fear and hope, attraction and repulsion, is often resolved at the end of a monster movie by concluding with the death of the monster and the triumph of the human;

however, these films resist such conclusions. And this tension is perhaps irresolvable when discussing mushrooms. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015), about how ‘the uncontrolled lives of mushrooms are a gift – and a guide – when the controlled world we thought we had fails’ (p. 2). Both gift and guide, temptation and warning, mushrooms are out of our control and beyond such simple resolutions.

As such, they frighten us, but they also offer an opportunity to change. Tsing writes, ‘We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others’ (p. 27). Further, she argues, the precarity of such situations ‘makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival’ (p. 27). The ends of these films involve dramatic change for humans and contamination of the human with the fungal, but this change may not always be positive. If changing is the ‘stuff of survival’, is this kind of change a form of survival? What counts as survival in a case like this? *Whose* survival are we concerned with?

These questions remain unanswered at the end of each film. Perhaps this is part of the films’ appeal, the acknowledgment of what is unknown, the mysteries of the mycological. On the other hand, I do not want to overstate their popularity. Rotten Tomatoes reports that although the films have received high scores from critics (80% for *In the Earth* and 85% for *Gaia*), they have scored much lower among audiences, with *Gaia* at 43% and *In the Earth* at only 24%. Their open-endedness and lack of resolution, their resistance to ending with human triumph, may contribute to audiences’ more negative responses.

So, too, may the films’ aesthetics, which have been described as ‘heady sylvan psychedelia’ (Bitel) and ‘a trip and a half’ (O’Malley). Ben Wheatley notes—as have many filmmakers before him—that ‘you can make a much wilder movie at a low budget than you can necessarily with a massive budget’ (Bitel). You can experiment more in low-budget movies, both in style and content, presenting much more challenging ideas and in weirder ways.

In the Earth and *Gaia* reflect radical ideas about ecology and humans’ place in the natural world. We may not, these films indicate, be as dominant as we would like to believe. These radical ideas themselves may prompt the audience to react with both fear and hope, attraction and repulsion, and, as with many other horror movies, there is a tradeoff between

widespread popularity and radically challenging ideas. Maybe these movies do not resonate positively with all audiences, but perhaps they can also pave the way for more serious consideration in the future of mushrooms and the possibilities they present.

BIOGRAPHY

Christy Tidwell is associate professor of English and humanities at the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology. Her work primarily addresses intersections between speculative fiction, the environment, and gender, and she is co-editor of *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* and *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*.

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THE REVIEWS

In the Earth and Gaia
(Ben Wheatley: Universal Pictures, 2021;
Jaco Bouwer: XYZ Films, 2021)

Ashley Kniss

Fungus is having a moment in popular culture. A ‘fruiting body’ contaminated the biologist in Jeff Vandermeer’s now well-known first installment of the *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014); Merlin Sheldrake’s study of mushrooms, *Entangled Lives* (2020), was featured in an episode of *Ted Lasso*; and fungi are a compelling presence in recent young adult novels like *Mexican Gothic* (2020) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia and *Sorrowland* (2021) by Rivers Solomon. Two films—*In the Earth* and *Gaia*—both released in 2021, also explore the mycological potential of fungus as a manifestation of Nature with a capital ‘N.’ On one hand, these mycological forms of life attract us, as is clear from the number of amateur mushroom hunters on Tik Tok and Instagram who gleefully showcase their finds with an enthusiasm that borders on spiritual zeal. On the other hand, fungi are also a source of horror and repulsion, an alien life-form, proliferating as slime-molds and grotesque fruiting bodies, some masquerading as edible prizes with deadly results. Fungi also populate our bodies in ways that are at times benign, but at others harmful. While we are colonised by millions of beneficial fungal microbes, when these colonies overpopulate and tip the microbial scales, we end up with ring worm or other unmentionable fungal infections. Both *In the Earth* and *Gaia* capitalise on this tension. *In the Earth* uses a mycorrhizal network as a representation of sentient nature and explores our longing for contact and connection with that greater ecological whole. *Gaia* more fully interrogates the consequences of such connection by suggesting a reversal of the human and nonhuman in which Mother Earth, in fungal form, colonises the human body, transforming it into a posthuman fungal monster as a reckoning for the damage humanity has inflicted upon the earth. Depicting fungi as both monster and deity, both films consider what a sentient nature might say if it could communicate to humankind. The answer is unsettling, undermining the notion of humanity’s inherent superiority and emphasising instead our tenuous position in the midst of the Anthropocene.

In the Earth was written and directed by Ben Wheatley and follows the story of Martin Lowery (Joel Fry), a scientist, as he attempts to reach a remote scientific outpost where his former lover, Dr. Olivia Wendle (Hayley Squires), conducts research into a mycorrhizal network that grows most densely around a mysterious standing stone. Martin is accompanied by Alma (Ellora Torchia), a park guide, who leads him to Dr. Wendle’s camp. Outside the main camp, Dr. Wendle’s ex-husband, Zach (Reece Shearsmith), squats on park land, drugging and killing wayward hikers in order to dress them in costumes and take their photograph as a form

of praise and worship for what he calls the ‘thing in the woods.’ In one scene he asks, ‘can you feel him now, in the earth,’ referring to a spiritual deity that Dr. Wendle also attempts to contact, but through science. Both Zach and Dr. Wendle exhibit a terrifying disregard for human life, both having attempted to kill Martin and Alma in their quest for contact with the more-than-human ‘spirit of the woods.’ However, they also represent something essential about the relationship between humans and the more-than-human—a desire for connection, a recognition of our interdependency, an acknowledgement of our kinship.

The idea of concrete communication with the natural world seems idyllic from a human perspective, but the non-human world plays by different rules, and all such contact comes at a cost, whether it be contamination, transformation, or even termination. At one point, Zach insinuates that mycorrhizae always demand a price from their hosts, though by the end of the film what that price is exactly remains unclear. Indeed, mycorrhizal networks are not purely altruistic. At times they form symbiotic relationships with a variety of plant life, but at their worst, they are parasitic, destroying the host entirely. Every character in the film breathes in spores that hang over the camp like mist and emerge visibly from fungi in several scenes. Dr. Wendle seemed willing to sacrifice a human life in the name of establishing communication with the more-than-human. Martin lost half of his toes and remains colonised by ringworm. Alma had direct contact with the thing in the woods, and how that has transformed her is unclear. Zach ends up dead. No one is unscathed after venturing into these woods.

Gaia, directed by Jaco Bouwer and written by Tertius Kapp, is more direct: there is a price to be paid when we willingly entangle ourselves with the more-than-human, and in particular, fungi. The film opens with park rangers in South Africa, Gabi (Monique Rockman) and Winston (Anthony Oseyemi), paddling down a river to inspect their wildlife cameras. Gabi disembarks from their boat when her drone is captured by Stefan (Alex Van Dyk) and his father, Barend (Carel Nel), survivalists living in the wilderness. While searching for her drone, Gabi is wounded by one of their snares, which pierces through her entire foot. Winston hears her cries for help, but becomes lost in the wilderness, chased by a fungal-human hybrid.

Unlike *In the Earth*, *Gaia* is not ambiguous about the risks involved in human and non-human entanglement and explores a monstrous blending of human and fungus that signals the end of humankind as we know it and ushers in the posthuman future. When they are attacked

by a fungal hybrid who breathes out spores and infects Gabi, Barend reveals, ‘It’s fungus [...]. Feeds on the eyes, the mouth, the lungs. First it grows down, saves the muscles for later, connects to the fungal network filling up with spores until its ready to repeat itself. And it’s ready to spread.’ There is certainly horror here, but also a recognition of the vitality, agency, and if we are willing to admit it, intelligence of the more-than-human as it colonises the human body to spread its spores.

Barend displays his belief in this intelligence when he describes the fungal colonisation of the human body as ‘one of the greatest reckonings of all time.’ Gabbi and Barend eventually discover Winston, lying on the forest floor covered, grotesquely, in a variety of fruiting bodies, revealing what will ultimately be Gabbi’s fate as well as she begins sprouting lichens on her arms and thighs. In one of the most disturbing scenes, Barend delivers a scathing indictment of humankind that also indicates that what Gabbi is experiencing—a complete colonisation of the human body—is more than just an individual tragedy, but rather the beginning of a posthuman future:

‘You swarm like maggots around your neon towers and multiply exponentially [...]. All you know is excess and devouring [...]. Look how you congratulate yourselves on your achievements, your tremendous victories—the internal combustion engine, the atom bomb, democracy[...]. And look, look where that got you. Look at humanity choosing its own demise time and time again! Hurrah for your free will! [...]. If you love [humankind] so much, rather wish for mercy, a swift end to the Anthropocene.’

And this is how both films capture the precarious position of humankind in the age of the Anthropocene. We continue ‘choosing [our] own demise’ as we refuse to recognise the agency of ecological others, an agency that both films highlight through a living, thinking, and communicating fungal manifestation of the more-than-human.

These films also foreground the fact that the ecological Other is not human and does not reason like humans do. It feeds. It spreads. It desires to live, and like most organisms, it will colonise and kill to survive. Alma and Martin find themselves at the mercy of a ‘creature’ (never revealed to the audience) that Alma says ‘looks human but it is not human.’ When Alma

asks Dr. Wendle what she thought the creature was trying to communicate, Wendle responds, ‘How we can all live together without destroying each other. This is the same as any other creature. It’s worried about its environment, food, shelter’—to which Alma responds, ‘you keep talking about this thing as if it’s human. It’s not.’ This alien nature and lack of anthropomorphic sentiment is also clear in the final scenes of *Gaia*, when Gabbi, like Winston, is covered in a variety of lichens and fruiting bodies. The final scene depicts Stefan leaving for the city with the remains of a fast-food meal on a table. Mould colonises the meal in seconds after he leaves. This scene suggests that Barend’s prediction—the end of the Anthropocene and the rise of a fungal power—has begun without any consideration of the human cost.

Both films depict humanity in a posthuman light that reduces humankind from the anthropocentric ‘superior species’ to organisms who are merely part of a larger, evolving ecosystem that is not merely agentic, but powerfully so. Furthermore, this ecosystem, embodied by either ‘the spirit of the woods’ or the great Earth Mother, Gaia, recognises humanity as a potential or actual threat, and both films explore the possibility of a reckoning in which the more resilient monster in the form of fungi, gains mastery over the human monsters who have destroyed so much. *Gaia* and *In the Earth* point toward a positive message, but not for humans; instead, they highlight the resilience and intelligence of the nonhuman world, positing the possibility that the human hegemony over the natural world may be more tenuous than we would like to admit, and imagining the dawn of a new era of posthuman dominance.

BIOGRAPHY

Ashley Kniss is an Assistant Professor at Stevenson University in Owings Mills, Maryland. Her research interests include American Gothic literature, ecohorror, the ethics of waste, American religious history, apocalypse, and the Posthuman. Her chapter, “‘The hand of deadly decay’: The Rotting Corpse, America’s Religious Tradition, and the Ethics of Green Burial in Poe’s ‘The Colloquy of Monos and Una’” can be found in the 2021 publication, *Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*. Her writing can also be found in *Gothic Nature* and on ASLE’s series on teaching ecohorror.

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In the Earth and Gaia

(Ben Wheatley: Universal Pictures, 2021;

Jaco Bouwer: XYZ Films, 2021)

Decomposition and Recomposition: Ben Wheatley's *In the Earth* and Jacob Bouwer's *Gaia* as Post-Pandemic Fungal Horror

Allison Mackey

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth.

Our foot's in the door.

—from 'Mushrooms' by Sylvia Plath

[Horror] seems to grow best in the soil of communal insecurity.

—James Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures* (50)

The year 2021 saw the release of Jacob Bouwer's *Gaia* and Ben Wheatley's *In the Earth*, South African and UK/US productions respectively, that engage with folk and body horror tropes through visions of abject and uncanny mycelium and the fruiting bodies of fungi. Production on both films was interrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19, and thematically they reflect a post-pandemic revival of primordial fears of Mother Nature. As film critic Julia Kaminski (2021) notes, 'one of the side effects of our collective existential crisis, is the suspicion that we have taken our understanding of science and nature for granted and that the earth still possesses a cornucopia of yet undiscovered threats' (n.p). The fear and mistrust of the fungal stems at least in part from the terror of losing one's individuality by merging into a collective entity, the

kind of vague threat that is expressed in Plath's poem (1960). Indeed, the shock and slowly dawning terror produced in the very last seconds of *Gaia*—quite literally, if you blink, you miss it—traffics precisely in these fears regarding the speed, virulence and unboundedness of microbial contagion.

How do we square the contemporary 'shroom boom' (Thorne, 2021: n.p.)—in which fungi are poised to offer sustainable solutions to many of the problems facing humankind in the 21st century—with the fact that they are still largely fodder for abject horror in popular culture? As the title of a recent piece in *Book Riot*, 'Why are Horror Novels So Obsessed with Mushrooms?' (2022), would suggest, fictional representations still tend to reflect ecophobic attitudes toward the fungal. Ecophobia is what Simon Estok (2009) calls our 'irrational and baseless hatred of the natural world' (p. 208). Fungi occupy a liminal position as neither animal nor vegetal, but intimately connected to both biologically and evolutionarily. With their ambiguous association with decay and degeneration, it is not surprising that writers and filmmakers have long turned to mushrooms for metaphors of rottenness and death. However, more than just trafficking in cultural fears of death and decay, I suggest that by exposing fantasies of human exceptionalism based on individual subjectivity, and challenging the centrality of what Donna Haraway (2016) calls 'the forward-looking, sky-gazing *Anthropos*' (n.p) by reconnecting the human to primordial earthly processes, these films can help us think through what other forms of human/hon-human relations are not only possible, but necessary, in the wake of multiple contemporary crises.

The figure of the fungal exposes and questions the modern individual as a self-enclosed, rationally willed subject, by compromising the ideal of Shildrick's (2002) 'clean and proper body' (p. 54). To be sure, the ideal of bounded autonomy has been a humanist illusion all along, since we now know that more than half of the human body is not even made up of human cells, but instead of microscopic colonists.³⁸ Viewers experience an unsettling decentring of the human through disorienting camera angles, strange diegetic and extra-diegetic sounds, and lighting and timing effects that blur distinctions between human agency/consciousness and natural processes. *In the Earth* and *Gaia* both remind audiences of the non-bounded

³⁸ As Eugenia Bone (2013) sardonically suggests: 'We think of ourselves as rugged individualists, but where would we be without our *E. coli*? We are conglomerates. It's not a bad thing to be. It means you never have to eat alone' (p. 348).

permeability of the human body through gory corporeal penetrations: in the former, Martin (Joel Fry) stumbles and gashes the bottom of his bare foot on a stone, while in the latter, forest ranger Gaby (Monique Rockman) has her foot spiked through when she triggers a trap set to catch small mammals. It is interesting that in both films it is the protagonist's feet that are violated. The abject fear of the microbial world is rooted in shared anxieties about human supremacy and transcendence, since we do not like to be reminded that 'our bodies' are 'never truly separate from the non-human environment [and] will eventually decompose and become food' (Keetley and Sivils, 2018: p. 9). In the penetration of their inferior extremities, both Martin and Gaby are rendered almost vegetal in their lack of mobility, at the bottom of the food chain and vulnerable to infection, death, and decay.

As Kaminski observes, unlike the tendency toward technohorror in the first decades of this century (reflecting the *Frankenstein*-like fear that our own creations have begun to turn on us) the most horrifying moments in these films comes from the 'existential realization that we were never the one's in charge in the first place' (2021). In a pivotal scene from *In the Earth*, park guide Alma (Ellora Torchia) dons a gas mask and hazmat suit and ties a rope around her waist in order to traverse a barrier of airborne spore particles that have settled over Dr. Wendle's camp, surrounding and containing the human protagonists.



Figure 1: Earth as final frontier?

In a visual nod to a very different speculative genre (where similarly attired and roped astronauts leave the relative safety of their ship, often to repair some kind of mechanical

problem in space) the uncanny realm that Alma explores reminds us that there are still plenty of ‘final frontiers’—albeit microbiological ones—right here on Earth.

The idea of the earth itself fighting back against human land use (and misuse) through fungal agencies also resonates in both films. *In the Earth* opens with a young scientist, Martin, arriving at a former tourist lodge turned forest management station, having come to study the region's fertile soil—and especially the mycorrhizal networks that lie beneath it—in the interest of maximizing ‘crop yields.’³⁹ Yet we later learn that both Martin and Zach have unknowingly been drawn to Dr. Wendle’s (Hayley Squires) research site through a ringworm infection that connects them through a vast mycorrhizal network. *Gaia* opens with forest rangers discussing ‘whiteys’ and ‘crusty old hippies’, alluding to racially coded conflicts over land use.⁴⁰ As a ‘whitey’ Afrikaner survivalist, Barend (Carel Nel) comments on the parasitic and destructive nature of humans, who he calls ‘Anthropocene monkeys.’ The film’s title alludes to James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, the fundamental basis of which is that the earth functions as one organism: as both disease and cure, Barend and his son Stefan (Alex Van Dyk) understand the fungal *pharmakon* as the earth’s way to restore equilibrium through the purging of its human parasites.⁴¹ Most importantly, in his uncritical acceptance of ‘Anthropocene’ as universalising concept, Barend does not seem to register that it is not *human* activity per se, but a small powerful minority of humans (and a particular kind of racial and economic order, and specific political choices) that are the cause of environmental devastation.

In ‘Unruly Edges’ (2012), Anna Tsing notes how ‘science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions’ (p. 144), and, in both of these films, science and religion are revealed to be two sides of the same coin. *In the Earth*’s scientist Dr. Wendle is pitted against and her ritual-obsessed ex-husband Zach (Reece Shearsmith), but they

³⁹ Martin’s employment of techno-instrumentalist language presumably explains where the research funding for this project has come from, especially in the wake of a devastating global pandemic: as Tsing points out: ‘fungi are the enemy of mono crop farms and farmers’ (2012).

⁴⁰ Filmed largely in the Tsitsikamma National Forest in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, a marine protected area established during apartheid, *Gaia* reminds us of ongoing conflicts between local communities whose ancestral land has been taken by colonial agencies, which are the same agencies of the state who are responsible for ‘protecting’ wildlife on that land today.

⁴¹ Father and son’s gleeful collusion in the Earth’s plan to rid the world of humanity resonates with the kind of ecofascist logic that Naomi Klien has identified in narratives emerging in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic: the insinuation that ‘humans are the virus’, and that the ‘pandemic is weeding out people who needed to be weeded out anyway,’ instead of realising that, in fact, ‘capitalism is the virus’ (quoted in Corcine 2020).

are revealed to have been working together all along. The scientific and religious mastery of nature is tied intrinsically to the subjugation of women, as the couple make use of the fifteenth century text *Malleus Maleficarum*, which was used to justify the persecution of witches until well into the eighteenth century, in order to make contact with the woodland spirit known as Parnag Fegg. In *Gaia*, after losing his wife to cancer, as well as his faith in science, Barend fashions himself into a fervent disciple of the maternal yet malicious force of nature that he calls ‘God’, which in the film manifests in a literal embodiment of forest ecologist Suzanne Simard’s (2022) Mother tree. However, despite his efforts to supersede the failings of humanity, he is unable to move beyond worn out narratives that rely on patriarchal and sacrificial familial logics.

Both films juxtapose villainous, older white male zealot figures with young, brown women who represent the promise of a new kind of order. Reversing the gendered tropes of Gothic horror, these women find themselves in the position of having to ‘save’ intelligent and sensitive, but also socially clueless, young men. Gaby and Alma are both single and childless women who have devoted themselves to careers in environmental care: Gaby is a forest ranger (and a vegetarian, given her reaction to the mention of roast beef in the first few minutes of the film) while Alma is a park guide. Alma’s last words to Martin in *In the Earth* are ‘let me guide you out of the woods.’ In her role as guide, she is a literal embodiment of her name, which means ‘kind’ in Latin and ‘soul’ in Spanish. She is the only character who remains relatively unchanged after prolonged exposure to mind-altering mushroom spores, and her generally non-anthropocentric view of nature suggests that she is already attuned to whatever teachings that the mycelium might have to impart. ‘I don’t think you’ve been listening,’ she says to her scientist counterparts, ‘you’re talking about this thing as if it’s human; it’s not.’

Similarly, the transformation of Gaby’s body as she gradually transforms into a bouquet of mushrooms and lichen can help us read *Gaia* in terms of what feminist film critic Barbara Creed has called the ‘monstrous feminine’ (1993). The time-lapse spectacle of her no-longer-fully-human—but somehow quite beautiful—body marks an aesthetic counterpoint to the zombie-like human-fungal male creatures, who are decidedly less aesthetically pleasing in their GCI rendering, and are visually reminiscent of the fungal zombies in the video game, *The Last of Us* (YEAR), which has recently been adapted by HBO into a highly successful television series.



Figure 2: Zombie clickers à la The Last of Us.

In contrast, at the end of the film, the shot of Gaby's body, transformed into a multiplicitous compost bed of fungi and flora, eventually pans out and merges with the same aerial view of the forest that opens the film.



Figure 3: Gaby as more-than-human assemblage.



Figure 4: Human, fungi and flora merge into forest.

Gaby as more-than-human assemblage is indistinguishable from the forest itself, and thus resonates with Donna McCormack's (2015) usage of Goldschmidt's theory of the 'hopeful monster' in evolutionary biology, as profoundly mutated organisms that have the potential to establish a new evolutionary lineage. As radically ecological entities, fungi embody the fundamental reality of interspecies entanglement: what might we—as a species that is interconnected with others in a continual intra-active process—eventually become?

Ultimately, the closing images of each film—Alma as guide to alternative paths out of the woods, Gaby as post-human, trans-corporeal monster—might be interpreted as hopeful moments in otherwise dystopic visions. The vague threat of subversion in Plath's (1960) poem—'So many of us! / So many of us!' [...] 'our foot's in the door'(p. 37)—can also be understood in terms of potential revolutionary change. Thinking about the end of the world leads us to question how things fall into disrepair, as well as how they can be re-made or made differently. Sometimes, in order to repair it is first necessary to destroy: mushrooms' function is to decompose existing structures and create something new from the detriment, reframing crisis and destruction as making way for the possible emergence of something else. Thinking about fungal and human assemblages as hopeful monsters is therefore a fruitful way to consider what might spring from the compost heap of failed settler-colonial, capitalist, humanist and patriarchal models.

BIOGRAPHY

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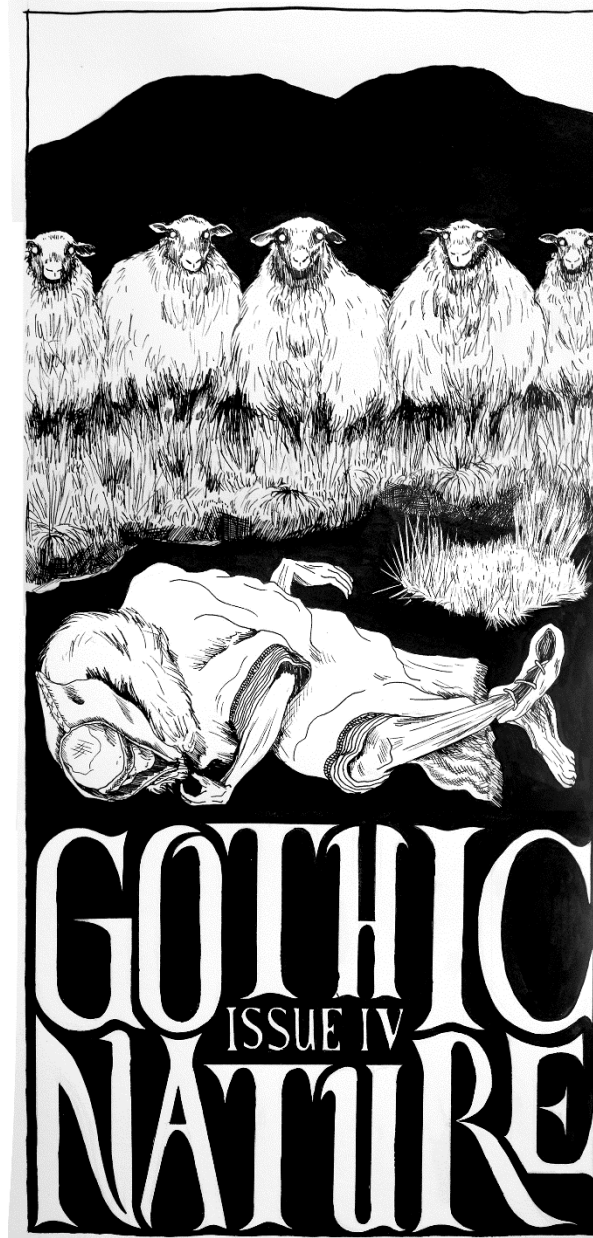
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BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

GOTHIC NATURE



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Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The Morning Star*

(London: Harvill Secker, 2021)

Heather Ray Milligan

‘Why was the thought of it so unsettling?’

It wasn’t the way things were supposed to be. It was a change in what was supposed to be unchanging.’

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The Morning Star* (p. 315)

In 2023, the city of Bergen, Norway, is beset by signs of apocalypse. The world of *The Morning Star* (*Morgenstjernen*, 2020), Karl Ove Knausgaard’s latest novel to be translated into English, is populated by ecoGothic phenomena: a great migration of crabs on land; a hawk hunting sparrows outside a city-centre café; thousands of ladybirds swarming a veranda; the demonic calls of a great reptilian bird; and the appearance of a new star, the brightest in the sky. Romantic encounters in the landscape prove rare among these moments that overwhelmingly unsettle and disturb. Nature has been made strange and threatening.

The new star is the common link between the novel’s nine first-person narrators, who each perform psychological contortions to explain it away and then ignore it. The unexpected agency of the nonhuman world and cognitive dissonance of Knausgaard’s human observers make the star an appropriate vehicle for examining the affective registers of climate change. Indeed, in an interview for *Independent.ie* (2021), Knausgaard claimed, ‘[Climate change] was certainly on my mind when I wrote this novel [...] But I didn’t want to confront it directly, as that would feel like preaching a sermon.’ Instead, the crisis haunts quietly, as if from the corner of one’s eye. The story takes place during scorching summer days, yet the only people to address the abnormal heat are anxious children performing a play about a melting snowman (they have not yet learned that social etiquette demands *not* talking about it).

Knausgaard paints the star through his characters’ various sightings and interpretations: a glimpse of the hyperobject constructed from its diverse and disparate parts (Morton, 2013).

Rather than trying to encompass the magnitude of deep time, Knausgaard renders the passing of just two days from the limited perspectives of everyday people: an academic, a care assistant, a journalist, a nurse, a filmmaker, a priest. Here, Knausgaard plays to strengths familiar from his six-volume autofictive tome *My Struggle* (*Min Kamp*, 2009–2011): namely, an intense observation of the myriad minutiae that make up life, piling on detail to evoke a hyper-verisimilitude. A vision of the whole is sketched from the details of the microcosm.

Supernatural elements allow Knausgaard to explore the uncanny effects of climate collapse, in which day-to-day experience feels *off*. Yet this novel is not restricted to thinking about climate change; indeed, an advantage of ecoGothic fiction is its capacity to contextualise climate change as one facet of a dysfunctional human–ecological relationship corrupted over thousands of years of colonialism, extractivism, and extinction. This is an important distinction; as Nicole Seymour (2013) notes, climate fiction (or ‘cli-fi’) often manifests a ‘heteroreproductive futurism—which looks ever-forward, to new life and new generations’ (p. 213), new technology and new policies capable of overcoming the problem. EcoGothic, by contrast, dwells in the present experience of collapse and locates its revelations in the past, looking backwards to origins, inheritance, and haunting remains.

Most strikingly, where cli-fi typically depends on narratives of survival and resilience, Knausgaard’s novel instead examines the value of mortality. *The Morning Star* concludes with an essay ‘On Death and the Dead’, written by the character Egil, who wonders whether ‘[t]he best way of exploring the nature of death [...] is perhaps to imagine what life would be like if death did not occur’ (p. 617). The novel’s major mystery is that *nobody dies*. Car-crash victims survive lethal injuries, an organ donor wakes up on the operating table, and a coma patient is plunged into purgatory, finding the bridge to the afterlife mysteriously closed. In Egil’s essay, death is heralded as necessary for the construction of meaning, for the reproduction of new life, and as a cure for stagnation—without which the Earth would rapidly become wasted.

With renewed emphasis on the nonhuman, ecoGothic narratives interrogate familiar subjects of Gothic fiction such as fear, monstrosity, and the body (Del Principe, 2014: p. 2). These concerns manifest in *The Morning Star* through an exploration of liminal zones: between sanity and madness, sobriety and drunkenness, human and nonhuman, life and death. Knausgaard’s character studies, while steeped in the banal, contain terrible secrets: a baby

fallen on its head; the unwanted advances of a stepson; a mother's beheading of the family cat; patients in a psychiatric hospital turned prophets of doom. In the latter case, it is unclear from this first instalment whether Knausgaard seeks to draw attention to subjects typically hidden from society, or is reanimating a reactionary Gothic tendency to conflate mental illness with monstrosity—or both, or something else.

The Gothic mode intrudes upon and co-constructs the landscape: it's 'hot as hell' (p. 349), bull-headed human hybrids stalk the forest, and, high above, the new star watches all. These are signs of ecological crisis, but they are also indications of the Last Judgement. For as the Gothic is wont to do, *The Morning Star* reminds us of the stubbornly irrational: the mythical, monstrous, and miraculous. The disparate hyperobject of ecological collapse is given discrete form as the morning star—an emblem of both Jesus and Lucifer in the Bible—and a framework of meaning shaped by the Abrahamic Day of Reckoning. Where a strictly rational and secular framework might offer scientific explanations for a breakdown in earth systems and mass extinctions, Knausgaard confronts the existential significance of these phenomena by evoking a Christian eschatology. What if, he seems to ask, we viewed these crises not as problems to be solved by human hubris via technological or technocratic means, but as a moral judgement on actions already taken?

The Morning Star offers a conflicting blend of biophilia and ecophobia, stringent rationalism and resurgent faith. As an approach to the climate and ecological crises, its strengths lie in Knausgaard's expert crafting of atmospheric unease and anticipation—a literary exploration of what it feels like to live amidst slow collapse, between disaster and safety, before and after. What Knausgaard intends for his next instalments remains to be seen, but we can predict: the Devil will be in the details.

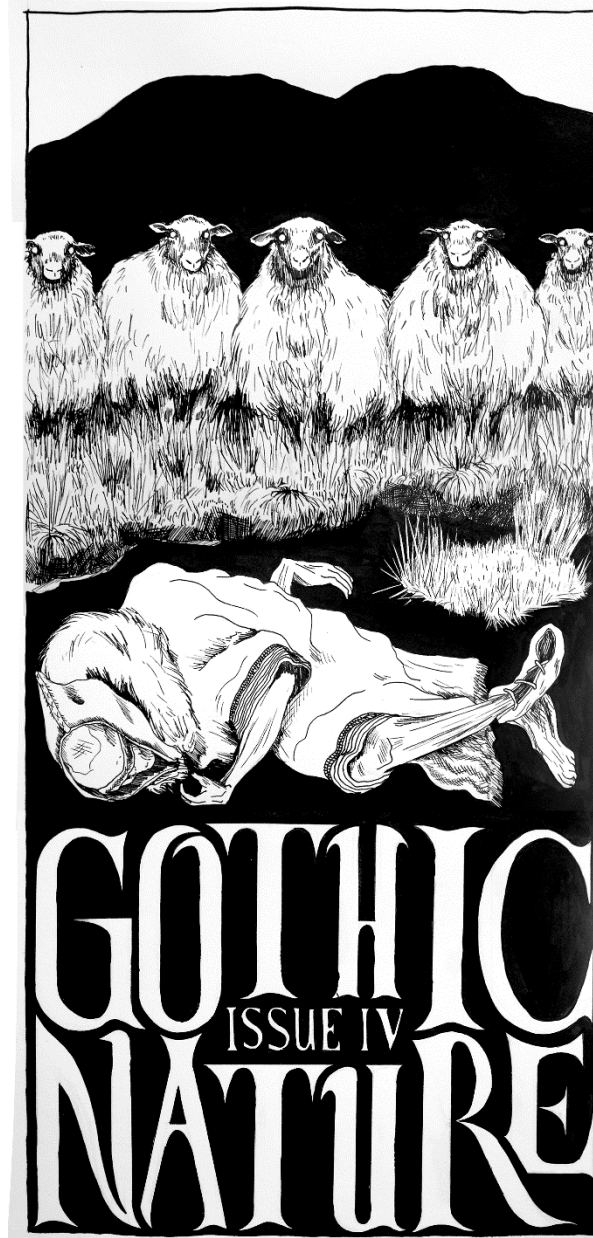
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Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau*

(New York: Del Rey, 2022)

Melissa Purdue

Silvia Moreno-Garcia has written another engrossing Gothic story with her recent *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* (2022). Her previous, best-selling novel *Mexican Gothic* (2020) told the ecoGothic tale of a predatory family who possessed a symbiotic relationship with a fungus. This new Neo-Victorian work focuses on Carlota Moreau, the daughter of Dr. Moreau as the title suggests, and is set in the Yucatán peninsula on a secluded hacienda. As in H.G. Wells' novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), which inspired Moreno-Garcia's work, Dr. Moreau here pursues experiments on animals that pose serious ethical dilemmas. Moreau discusses his work early in the novel, explaining that,

‘Darwin’s vision is too shallow. What I seek is to explore the essence of all matter of creatures and then leap beyond that. Which I have. I’ve managed to surpass him, to look at life and isolate the most basic unit of it and from it build something anew, like a bricklayer might build a house’ (p. 26).

Through painful surgeries and treatments, Moreau manages to transform animals of the jungle into human-animal ‘hybrids’ who are capable of complex thought and speech. The hybrids suffer from painful ailments and tumors, but Moreau continues with his work in hopes he will discover cures for human diseases.

One of Moreno-Garcia's important alterations from Wells' novel is the creation of meaningful female characters—Carlota, Moreau's daughter, and Lupe, a hybrid who is raised as her sister. In Wells' novel there are a few female creatures, most notably the puma that kills him at the end of the story, but these characters do not speak or play significant roles. Likewise, while we see the addition of scantily clad cat-women characters in film adaptations of Wells' novel—*The Island of Lost Souls* (1932), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1977), and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996)—they add sexual tension but little depth (see Purdue [2005] for more on this topic). Moreno-Garcia, however, makes Carlota and her coming-of-age journey the central focus of the story.

Carlota begins the story naïve and unsure of herself. Yet, she is certainly no damsel in distress by the end. Roughly halfway through the novel, Carlota begins to see things more clearly and changes how she views her father: ‘She did not believe it when he spoke to her now’ (p. 183). The theme of sisterhood is strong as well. The moment Carlota comes into her true strength, in fact, is when she called to protect Lupe: ‘she kept thinking, *No, not my sister. You’ll never hurt my sister*’ (p. 293). She never exhibits disgust or repulsion for the hybrids as a Victorian heroine might and treats them as equals instead.

Further, in Garcia-Moreno’s novel Carlota is fully in control of her sexuality. She is initially pushed to use her body to seduce Eduardo Lizalde (the son of the wealthy man who has previously funded Dr. Moreau’s research) into marriage to secure her father’s financial stability, but she ultimately resists. When she does engage in sexual activity, it is on her terms. This is a fitting change from Wells’ original novel in which Prendick is disgusted by the female creatures’ sexuality. In *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau*, Carlota’s budding desire is not shameful.

Another obvious and important change is the location of the novel. References to British colonialism in much Victorian fiction are here refocused to discussions of Mexican history. As Moreno-Garcia explains in her afterword, the novel takes place ‘against the backdrop of real conflict’—the Caste War of Yucatán in the late nineteenth century, during which the native Maya people of the peninsula rose up against Mexican, European-descended, and mixed populations (p. 305). The struggle began in 1847 and lasted more than five decades. *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* takes place during this time and the hybrid characters are sympathetic to the rebels’ cause. In fact, when the hybrids must flee later in the novel, it is the jungle and rebel leader Juan Cumux who help them.

The jungle that surrounds the hacienda and provides shelter to the revolutionaries is an important force in the novel. EcoGothic descriptions of ‘birds crying out in sonorous discontent’ (p. 3) and ‘murky brown’ rivers (p. 13) lend foreboding to the story, but Carlota is at home in nature:

‘She loved the rhythm of the Yucatan, the ferocious rainy season and the calm of the dry months. She basked in the humid heat that still made her father mutter under his breath and hide inside his room, trying to cool down. She chased the rays of sun and ran her hands down the bark of the trees’ (p. 67).

The jungle of the Yucatán is a dark and fearful place to the wealthy male landowners who wish to kill the rebellion and Moreau’s hybrids, but it is a very different place of safety and beauty for Carlota, her hybrid family, and the rebel leader, Cumux, who ‘knows each tree in the jungle’ (p. 97).

Like so many late nineteenth-century Gothic stories such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *Dracula* (1897), *The Beetle* (1897), *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), and ‘The Great God Pan’ (1890), Moreno-Garcia’s *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* plays with the theme of monstrosity. Where the creatures inspire disgust and are referred to as ‘grotesque caricatures of humanity’ (p. 53) in Wells’ *Dr. Moreau*, it is very clear that in Moreno-Garcia’s novel the wealthy Lizaldes are the ones who are monstrous in their greed and racism. Eduardo’s claim that he views ‘every Indian with distrust these days’ disgusts Carlota and readers alike (p. 34). They exploit the labour of the poor, seek to use the hybrids as slave labour, and are violent and predatory. Likewise, Dr. Moreau, in his deceit and painful experiments, is a monstrous force. It is not the hybrids with their fur, claws, and fangs who seek to harm others.

Though Garcia-Moreno makes many alterations to change and adapt Wells’ story for a modern audience, one particularly interesting difference is her treatment of the Montgomery character. His growth in *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau* is much more substantial. Chapters alternate between Carlota and Montgomery, and as such he becomes an important voice, sympathetically shaping how readers view both Carlota and the hybrids. He still struggles with alcoholism, but he is a more complicated character under Garcia-Moreno’s pen who tries to grow beyond his mistakes.

Moreno-Garcia’s novel is an enjoyable read for those interested in Gothic, Victorian, and Neo-Victorian literature. Though inspired by Wells’ novel, Moreno-Garcia’s retelling tackles the themes of colonialism, women’s rights, scientific experimentation, animal rights, and religion in new and modern ways.

BIOGRAPHY

Melissa Purdue is a Professor in the Department of English at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Her current research focuses on late nineteenth-century supernatural fiction, Human-Animal Studies, and environmental humanities. She has recently been published in *Reassessing Women's Writing of the 1860s and 1870s* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), *The Journal of Victorian Culture Online*, *The Wilkie Collins Journal*, and elsewhere. She is also editor-in-chief and a founding editor of the journal *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (www.ncgsjournal.com).

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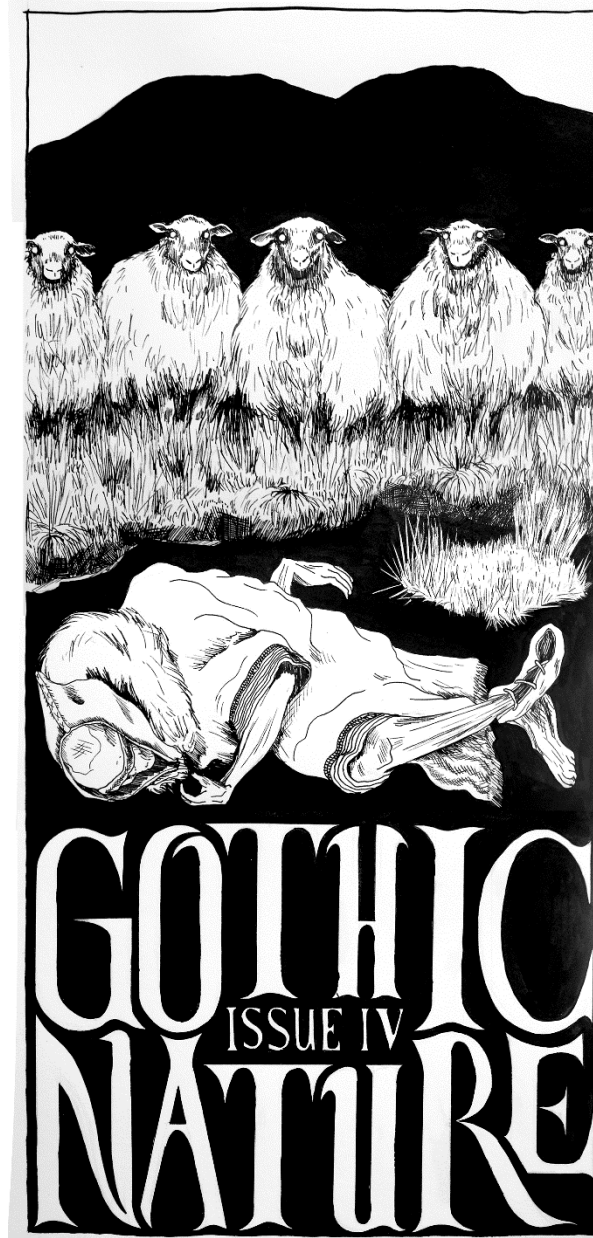
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Aliya Whiteley, *The Secret Life of Fungi: Discoveries from a Hidden World*

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Evelyn Koch

Fungi are a literary trope of both the Old and New Weird, and due to their unfathomable strangeness, they are perfect embodiments of everything that is uncanny or abject. By now, fungi as a literary motif has also traversed to other genres. Particularly in recent years, fungal fiction flourished like sprouting mushrooms in works by writers such as Jeff VanderMeer, Silvia Moreno-Garcia or Aliya Whiteley. In popular culture, there even has been the emergence of the fungal zombie which threatens human agency and brains to be hijacked by fungal control. At the same time, *goblincore* has been aestheticising fungal weirdness as a fashion trend recently (Bramley, 2021: n.p.). In non-fiction, fungi appeared for example in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), and the mycologist Merlin Sheldrake explains the kingdom of fungi to a wider audience in *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* (2020). The writer and novelist Aliya Whiteley (2020) approaches the subject of fungi from a kaleidoscopic perspective since '[i]t's not possible to know a subject truly without seeing where it touches other fields of knowledge' (p. x). By looking at fungi and their deep entanglement with our lives—after all '[t]hey can invade bodies and thoughts, and they can live under our feet or on them, between our toes or between our floorboards' (p. xi)—Whiteley's text does not only offer a better understanding of fungi, but also of ourselves.

Composed of three main sections—'Erupt,' 'Spread,' and 'Decay'—*The Secret Life of Fungi* mirrors the life cycle of a fungus. Each section comprises brief chapters on various topics such as the biological and evolutionary background, the historical and contemporary functions of fungi for humans in medicine and food—there is even a recipe for 'Slow Mushroom Stew with Cheese Dumplings' (p. 20)—as well as their relationship with plants and animals. The text offers a plethora of, frequently curious, facts and information on fungi. Who has heard about the 'UK Fungus Day' (p. 26) on 3 October, fungi in space (pp. 117-121) or the rare Hawaiian mushroom whose smell is said to cause mild orgasms in women (p. 66)? Who knew that *Armillaria ostoyae*'s mycelial network is so vast it 'could fit [...] 110,000 blue whales within it' (p. 76)? And that there are people who call their sourdough starters 'Clint Yeastwood' (p.

95)? But *The Secret Life of Fungi* is not just a random collection of facts and curiosities. Whiteley also explores her personal connection to foraging for mushrooms and how this has sparked her general interest in fungi, and ultimately in writing literature. In these sections, the foray into the kingdom of fungi becomes a form of self-explorative nature writing. The text finishes with a ‘Dramatis Fungi’ and a bibliography. Literary scholars and interested readers will find ‘A Reading List of Fungal Fiction’ useful as a starting point for fiction featuring fungi.

The Secret Life of Fungi shows how highly dependent we are on fungi—they helped Neolithic humans to light fire (p. 29); they provide us with penicillin (p. 34); they might help humanity in the future to battle ‘the profusion of plastics that is overtaking our world’ (p. 36); and in the form of yeast, they even provide us with our daily bread (pp. 96-97). So why is it that despite all these beneficial uses we are often unsettled or even scared by the fungal world? Mycophobia, which Robert Graves (1962) has defined as ‘the unreasoning fear of mushrooms’ (p. 126), is a thing, after all. Fungi may form friendly symbioses with trees, and they help orchids to grow (p. 47), but, at the same time, they also destroy many trees (p. 102), or ‘*Ophiocordyceps sinensis* [...] colonises the body of the ghost moth larva in winter, then breaks through its head come the spring to produce the fruiting body’ (p. 108). Some mushrooms are also deadly poisonous to humans (p. 132) and fungi can make us severely ill. It is this ‘darker’ side of fungi that unsettles us: their ability to feast on death to form new life. Aliya Whiteley aptly identifies what is so scary about this process; ‘It’s a vision of the body after death: colonised, utilised, broken down and rebuilt into fat, healthy fungal growth, the slippery eruptions from the sucked-dry corpse’ (p. 152). These are the qualities that pertain fungi to the ecoGothic, too, when Whiteley points out that ‘[g]reat stories of fungal fear recognise that it’s the alteration that entrances and horrifies us. To be not quite dead, and not quite alive, in any way that we understand’ (p. 156). The ability of fungi to easily traverse the borders between life and death and to invade or infect the bodies of various life forms makes them suitably abject and abject protagonists in horror and weird fiction, in general.

Whiteley explores the use of fungi in fiction, too, and identifies a change in the way fungi are employed as a literary motif. Before the twenty-first century, the ‘focus has long been on the act of the fruiting body. It’s the change represented by the growth from the ground, a mutation from the mushroom to a man, say, or being caught between such states’ (p. 152). These fictions focus more on the fungal threat to individual identity. In more recent fiction, by

contrast, there is a shift to ‘the idea of the fungus infecting the world itself rather than just the body—a societal nightmare rather than an individual one—[that] gained traction, as did fear of the small changes, the unseen alterations, that lead to strange, altered environments’ (p. 154). In this way, contemporary fungal fiction represents our human fears of global infections, decay, and ultimately extinction.

Not only do fiction and the fungal kingdom intersect when it comes to horror and weird fiction, but Aliya Whiteley also ‘suspect[s] it’s harder to write good poetry about fungi’ (p. 76); “*Armillaria*” and “rhizomorph” don’t rhyme with much, I suppose, which might be part of the problem’ (p. 77). Another problem is to find a language for something we can only attempt to understand but never fully grasp. By approaching the subject from many different angles and crossing the borders of various fields of knowledge, *The Secret Life of Fungi* employs an almost fungal structure of entanglement. Just like fungi connect with various different life forms, Whiteley finds a way to epistemologically and aesthetically tackle fungi at the same time. The greatest strength of the text is to make the poetry and beauty of fungi apparent by emotionally engaging the reader with a life form that we usually find hard to emphasise with; after all, ‘a mushroom is never just a mushroom, and it is never wise to take any of them for granted’ (p. 5).

BIOGRAPHY

Evelyn Koch holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Bayreuth, Germany, and is currently working as a lecturer in British literature and culture at the Philipps University of Marburg, Germany. She is also working on her postdoctoral project on posthuman landscapes in 19th-century fiction. Further research interests include early modern and 19th-century literature, science and literature, landscape and literature, as well as fantasy, horror and weird fiction.

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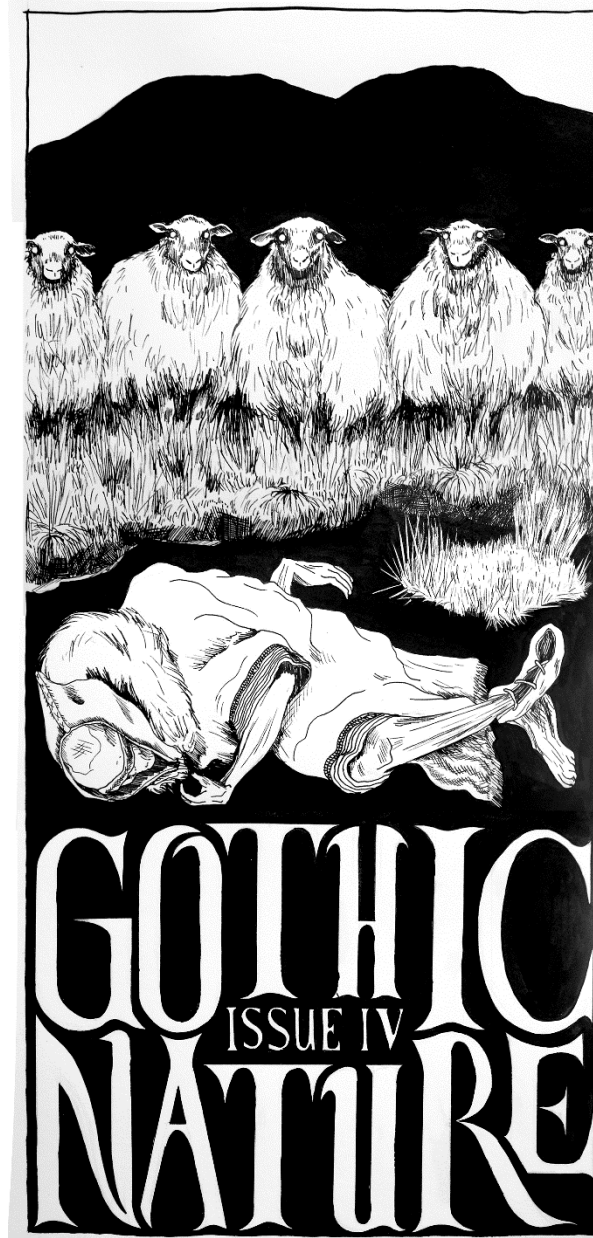
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GOTHIC NATURE



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Rosalind Galt, *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization*

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2021)

Douglas Clarke

In *Alluring Monsters: The Pontianak and Cinemas of Decolonization* (2021), Rosalind Galt seeks to demonstrate that a Malay *hantu* (spirit) not only has staying power in the cultural imagination of Malaya and Singaporean people, but that it has an important and meaningful role in films as well. The Pontianak is a female spirit that has long fangs, a disfigured face and unnatural strength. She is often created after she dies in childbirth, and she is known to hunt down those who killed her or her child. In traditional stories she can be monstrous and kill at will, but she has also been known as a spirit of revenge, upholding feminine values and protecting women from misogynist males that seek to harm women. Further, the traditional way to defeat her is to put a nail in the back of her neck. If this is achieved, the Pontianak turns from a vicious creature to a marriage-worthy beauty. If the nail is removed, she turns back to her former self. *Alluring Monsters* makes the argument that this female vampiric spirit is polysemious and can be read as both a precolonial folkloric figure and an anticolonial symbol. The Pontianak's femaleness, strength and ability to be both hero and monster, according to Galt, creates a philosophical and sociological space that challenges traditional colonial hierarchies and provides us with an animism that demonstrates the importance of traditional knowledge in the face of ecological disaster.

Galt's book principally focuses on the Pontianak in Malay film. This means that much of her work centres on the description of films and their aesthetics. While this can sometimes cause frustration for a reader that is not versed in South Asian film, it is a necessary exegesis that provides much context and nuance. Though there are not many Pontianak films, relatively speaking (having only started in 1957 and regaining popularity in the early 2000s), Galt draws on many of the films to illustrate her main thesis. Her argument is based on the Pontianak as polysemious 'monster'— both feminist and misogynist, heteronormative and queer, both monster and hero. Movies reach a large audience, and as such, they are a vehicle for ideas that can be used to challenge patriarchy and hierarchies that come with the colonial history that plagues the Malay people. Galt, throughout her work, also attempts to show that modern

cinema has created a multiethnic industry that fosters cooperation between Chinese, Malay, and Indian producers, directors and writers (p. 47).

What makes this work of particular interest is that Galt contends that the Pontianak is a monster that can express anxieties about the environment: the kampung (village) against the city. These interconnected areas provide the most attractive arguments of the work, as they demonstrate that folkloric creatures hold a tension between the modern and the pre-modern as well as what comes from colonialism and the post-colonial period. Galt discusses the ecological anxieties at the end of her work as if everything else has been a build up to this discussion on animism and the environment. Stated briefly, animism is the idea that there are spirits in the natural world that can interact with humanity and vice versa. The Pontianak being a vampiric creature that is more spirit than human situates her as mediator or liminal being. This means the Pontianak can disrupt ideas about organised religion (like Islam which is predominant in Malaysia), by being a bearer of pre-religious, traditional knowledge.

Interrogating the connection of the Pontianak and the environment also leads to an understanding of the dichotomy of city and country. In the Malay tradition this pits the traditional kampung (village) against the modern city. In most of the films, the Pontianak resides in, is seen in, and is framed by the kampung—the traditional centre of life for Malay people. Like most traditions, the kampung is nostalgic, recalling better times, time before colonisation and most importantly, a time before mass development and the pollution that comes with it. Further, it is in the kampung that the Pontianak protects women and takes her revenge against those who have hurt her. This is her home as well as the home of humans and other spirits that surround the village in the natural world. The Pontianak teaches us truly how to live together. It is the reciprocity of the animist spirits of nature, the *hantu* spirits and the human spirit that creates the ideal notion of the village and human connection. Big cities, industrialisation, and destruction of the ‘traditional way of life’ pushes the Pontianak out of cultural memory. This is dangerous. Though the Pontianak is a monster, it is also a cultural artefact that symbolises memory and resistance to colonisers and other dangerous individuals.

What we get in *Alluring Monsters* is a unique voice that deploys a South Asian monster into the ecoGothic. While many westerners are familiar with vampiric creatures residing in castles and elite settings, what Galt shows is that human and non-human spirits, including those

of the forest, can work together in new counter-colonial epistemologies (p. 236). The incessant drive toward development and the destruction of nature that comes with it is shown to be a practice that damages ways of knowing and knowledge that come from the traditional village. Animism and the spirit of the Pontianak ‘do things’ (p. 236); they have a point of view, and they have agency to make a difference. What Galt shows is that the ecoGothic needs monsters like the Pontianak—they force us to think about harmonious living and how humans and other spirits can (and should) live harmoniously. While this may be a spiritual argument, it is also an epistemic one: an argument that challenges the reader and viewer of films to engage with traditional knowledges of their own cultures and others. Dismissing such knowledge is dangerous and foolish, perhaps summoning the wrath of spirits (and nature) that we have tried to ignore, but who continue to live with us.

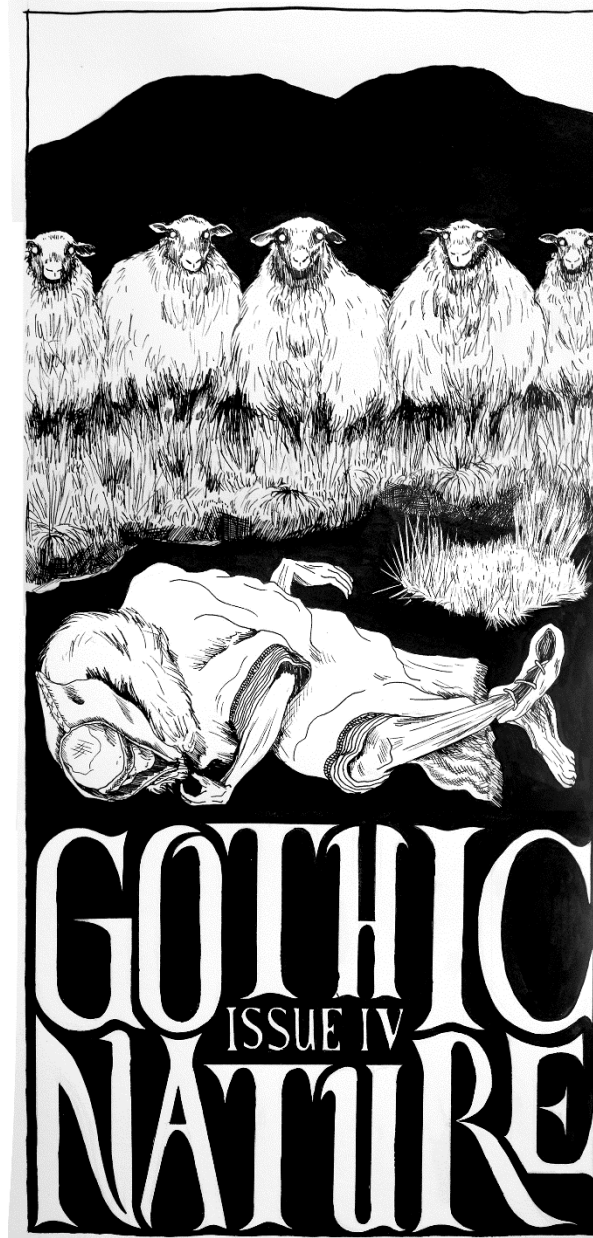
BIOGRAPHY

Douglas Clarke is pursuing his PhD in religious studies in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He has an abiding interest in monsters and the ways that they can teach us about ourselves and our world. His main area of study is on the Black perspective on death, religion and theology (and of course, monsters).

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Tanya Krzywinska and Ruth Heholt (Eds.),
Gothic Kernow: Cornwall as Strange Fiction
(London: Anthem Press, 2022)

Peg Aloï

This study of Gothic Cornwall in literature and film narratives, co-authored by Ruth Heholt and Tanya Krzywinska, is tightly focused, scintillating, and boldly original. At just 80 pages, this compact but dense volume comprises three chapters and a thoughtful, detailed introduction, as well as a fine assortment of black and white illustrations, engravings, and photos. Each chapter is well-researched and well-realised, drawing in points of reference, theory, and context from many pertinent strands of discussion. *Gothic Kernow* is also of very timely interest, given its exploration of Gothic Cornwall as it relates to the burgeoning Folk Horror genre (in which texts are often deeply concerned with the centrality, and strangeness, of landscape).

The introduction offers a deeply-considered approach that centres Cornwall as a previously-overlooked but nevertheless crucial presence in Gothic literature. Wasting no time, it begins by stating ‘Cornwall is the hidden heart of the Gothic’ (p. 7). Cornwall’s history as a region supported by human labour, mostly in the mining and fishing industries, saw a steep economic decline in the post-Industrial era and following the ‘Great Migration’ of the 1850s. These ‘times of loss and decay’ (p. 1) are offered as vivid context for Cornwall’s inherent suitability for Romantic and Gothic writing and aesthetics. Further, Victorian-era interest in British folklore saw a growing fascination with the rich legends of Cornwall. Heholt and Krzywinska point out that Tennyson’s poem cycle *Idylls of the King* (1859) focused particularly on the Cornish landscape, locating the dramatic events of the Matter of Britain, including King Arthur’s birth, reign, and death, atop the cliffs of Tintagel. They also mention prominent Victorian authors such as Wilkie Collins, Bram Stoker and Arthur Conan Doyle choosing Cornwall as a setting for some of their works of Gothic fiction. The authors argue that Cornwall has been a ‘major catalyst’ (p. 11) of and within the Gothic imagination.

The introduction effectively explores an intriguing array of influences that Cornwall has had not just on literature but on culture, politics, and even emergent religions. Two well-known folklorists (William Bottrell and Robert Hunt) began collecting Cornish tales and

legends, with one volume published in 1870 becoming a standard-bearer that later influenced a revival of Cornish folk traditions within the context of contemporary modern witchcraft practices. The retention of Cornwall's unique language and culture, its 'culturally-acquired liminality' (p. 6), is described as being partly due to its remote location, which deterred invasions by the Saxons, Romans and Danes. This remoteness is also connected to the selection of Carbis Bay, Cornwall, as the site for the G7 summit of world leaders in 2021 to address world crises (including climate change and the COVID pandemic). The authors also state that Cornwall itself also became a sort of 'refuge' during the earlier portion of the pandemic for people trying to escape infection in densely-populated cities, as well as hoping to avoid so-called 'lockdown' mandates. They underscore the subconscious, pervasive understanding of Cornish geography as a place one escapes to, both physically and psychologically: 'The summit neatly signifies the hold that the uncanny Gothic doubling of Cornwall's landscapes has on the imagination' (p. 4).

This conceptualisation of Cornwall as a place of remote exile, apart from the world's urgent worries but also as providing a secret mode of escape known only to the initiated, paints a Gothic picture, indeed. The writing in the introduction is not only well-organised and informed, but often evocative and beautiful: clearly the authors are also inspired by this uncanny landscape, this 'land of mists and magics' full of standing stones, deep forests, and dark mines, which is 'ripe terrain for the Gothic' (p. 6). The introduction effectively intertwines varied points of interest across a wide range of contexts: geographic, historical, cultural, literary, and spiritual, giving the three main chapters a full and rather profound resonance mindful of Cornwall's unassuming yet important place within humanities. For the authors, Cornwall's mysterious presence is an otherworldly force, akin to the vivid dreamscapes of cinema and the vast mindscapes of religious mystics: 'Kernow provides therefore a redolent *mise en scène* that supports all manner of imaginings, where we become free and at one with the untamed elements: the light is perfect, the morals loose, the repressed returns, and the deep magic of the old gods still hold sway' (p. 6).

The first chapter, 'Dark Romance and Du Maurier's Kernow,' looks closely at permutations of Cornwall's wild, haunted landscape as a picturesque and alluring setting for her writings. The chapter positions Du Maurier's works as representative of 'popular fictions' that employ Gothic tropes and sensibilities, in particular themes of 'identity, desire, animism

and ambiguity' (p. 11). This provides a very effective backdrop for the detailed analyses that follow in subsequent chapters. It is worth noting that each chapter contains its own brief introductory summary, another example of this book's well-structured readability and clarity. As the authors describe in their introduction, the three body chapters each contain a text, artefact or practice 'around which our comparative analyses hang,' and this approach allows an effective weaving of themes and references throughout. In Du Maurier's case, the central text is *My Cousin Rachel* (1951), and its film versions made in 1952 and 2017. Additional fictional and film texts explicitly influenced by her writing are also discussed, including the 2019 folk horror film *Bait* by Mark Jenkin, which was soon to be followed by the 2023 premiere of his companion film *Enys Men*. Kryswinska (who was writing about Folk Horror before anyone was calling it Folk Horror) and Heholt (who has organised conferences on Folk Horror) are thoroughly equipped to craft fluid and meta-literary discussions melding themes, imagery and modes of expression across print literature and cinema.

In the second chapter, 'Suspensory Gothic Kernow: Magic, Mysticism and The Esoteric Aesthetics of Emergence,' we find a thoughtful and engrossing exploration of Cornwall's presence and influence in the visionary art of poet, occultist, and surrealist painter Ithell Colquhoun. The artist resided in Cornwall for four decades and produced most of her significant works while living there. The authors mention that both Colquhoun and Du Maurier followed an urge to find refuge and inspiration in Cornwall's quiet, secluded environs. Here we read of Cornwall's mystical surfaces and hidden magical depths, fortified by folklore, which found expression in the painter's intuitive, quixotic images and her dreamy writings. There is also fascinating analysis of the importance of the artist's occult studies and unorthodox creative processes. The authors perceptively locate Colquhoun's connection to Cornwall in the artist's mystical sensibility which does not traffic in mere representation; in this way, they argue, one sees a connection to the late work of J. M. W. Turner, whose paintings of Cornwall employ airy, shadowy essences of 'rock, sea and light' (p. 32). The authors also argue eloquently throughout this chapter for the status of Colquhoun as 'a foundational figure of the Cornish Gothic' (p. 33).

In the third and final chapter we come to a rather meaty and satisfying exploration of Cornwall's Folk Horror inspiration and legacy. As the second chapter explored the mystical truths of Cornwall, 'Strange Folk: Folk Horror Cultures, Ritual, and Witching Women'

examines Cornwall's relationship to mysterious fictions. First off there is a well-rounded look at Folk Horror's underpinnings in agrarian rites (some employing symbolic human sacrifice) and colourful seasonal festivals specific to Cornwall. The authors show that many of these customs inspire literary and cinematic portrayals, such as David Pinner's 1967 novel *Ritual*, set entirely in Cornwall, which became the basis for the iconic Scottish-set film *The Wicker Man* (1973), a foundational Folk Horror text. The concepts of 'strangeness' and 'wrongness' expressed in Cornish folk customs are explored here, as well as Cornwall's undeniable legacy of paganisms old and new, and the tales of ritualised carnage and witchcraft set in remote places that one sees across many contemporary Folk Horror narratives.

This small book is like a buried oaken chest of riches, humble and revelatory, speaking passionately across multiple disciplines and lines of inquiry of the significance of Cornwall's landscape, history, folklore, culture, and inimitable singularity of place.

BIOGRAPHY

Peg Aloï is a freelance film and TV critic, a former professor of media studies, and co-editor (with Hannah Sanders) of *The New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture* (Routledge, YEAR) and *Carnivale and the American Grotesque: Critical Essays on the HBO Series* (Macfarland, YEAR). With Hannah she also co-organised two scholarly conferences at Harvard University on paganism, witchcraft and media. Peg's forthcoming book, *The Witching Hour: How Witches Enchanted the World*, is a cultural analysis of the witch in contemporary media. Her long-running blog 'The Witching Hour' can now be found on [Substack](#). Peg won the 2002 Morris Cup (for Best English Poem on a Cornish Subject) at the Gorseth Kernow with her poem 'Boscawen Un, Samhain, Midnight.'

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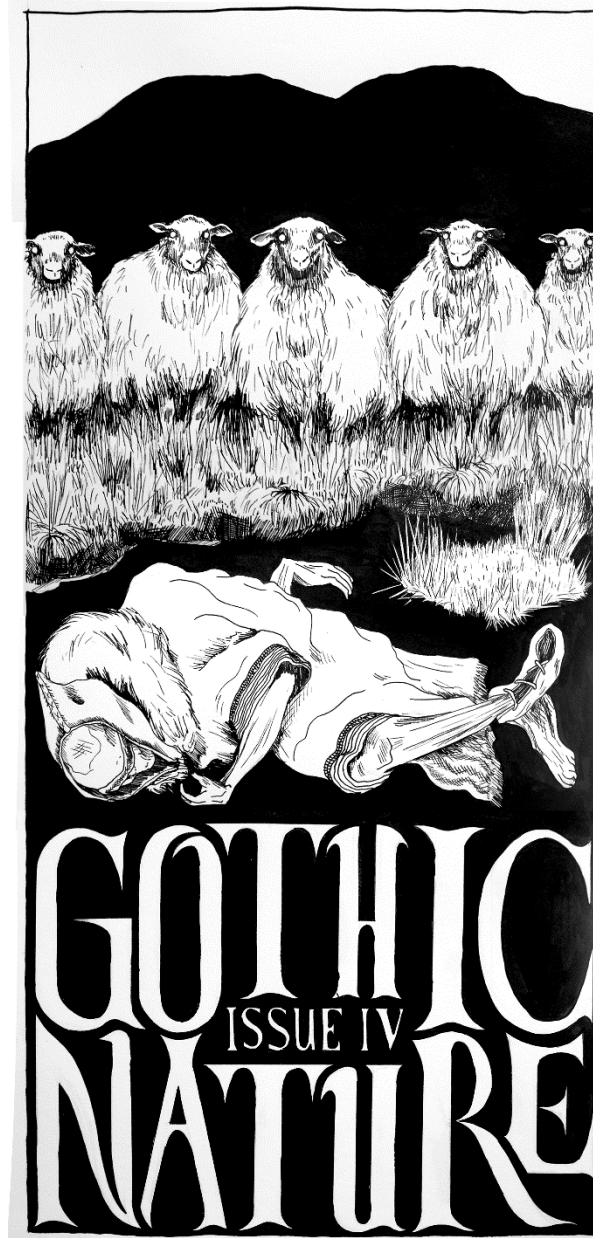
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Arthur Schopenhauer, *On The Suffering of the World*

(London: Repeater Books, 2020)

Leo Zausen

Although suffering is often relegated to the human as the default of episodic trauma, with Arthur Schopenhauer the world too suffers. While Schopenhauer is previously known as proprietor of a single thought (contained in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), his most viral work), his recently published collection of essays, aphorisms, and notes from later in his life neglects this schematic scaffolding. *On the Suffering of the World* (2020) is more preoccupied with a collapse of these two formally distinct terms, either out of an increasingly hyperbolic proximity between self and world looming in the climate of Schopenhauer's own late thought, or his susceptible noontday exhaustion of systematic philosophy. Continuing these depths, this collection indexes the incommensurate gulf between phenomena and noumena, a site-specific and slow horror story that narrates an outside of lived experience (noumena) that irredeemably nourishes and sustains a representation of self (phenomena), yet is entirely beyond detection. This rift between self and world announces for Schopenhauer an estrangement from the world that is as irresolvable as silence, and as explainable as horror. Suffering is oftentimes precisely this abyss, deeply profound yet inexpressible, at once all too human and yet otherworldly.

The collection is introduced, edited, and compiled by Eugene Thacker, who's own work often recoils back to a similar downwards gravitational pull *as* suffering, which unifies terrestrial entanglements and other maligned striations of organic and inorganic forms of life. It is under the rubric of worldly suffering that Schopenhauer becomes, then, a strange theorist of contemporary anthropocentrism. The nexus of the will as fundamentally indifferent and blind invokes counter-spells to the ongoing installation work of the 'Anthropocene' and the various ecohorrors that have yet to be unearthed. Schopenhauer (2020) anticipates this regime of 'anthropos,' but also diminishes this wrought species when he asserts no baseline difference between the belief that '[...] I perish, but the world endures' and 'The world perishes, but I endure' (p. 195). This contrivance arrests 'anthropos' as both the inheritor of Earth as well as its demolition agent: either way, 'the world's existence is expressly a groundless one, namely

a blind will-to-live' (p. 75). With Schopenhauer, the full terrestrial complicity with this otherworldly gravitational volition *is* will – or, the threadbare relation between self and world.

Reversibilities inundate this book, as Thacker comments in his introductory essay, 'Philosophy in Ruins, an Unquiet Void,' of a vertiginous impulse throughout Schopenhauer that yields encounters like 'I do not live, I am lived' (p. 15) as well as 'I do not exist, so much as I am existed' (p. 17). Schopenhauer as theorist against the anthropocene might render him all too contemporary; yet his global misanthropy yields a curious flatlining of all species matter, privileging neither over another. This unquiet void could ask: How to differentiate suffering from a human's crying or a deep sigh, adjacent the ongoing ferment of deeply sedimented pseudonymous materials? Each participates in a decomposition process that is agnostic to form:

'[...] dust and ashes will soon form into crystals when dissolved in water; it will shine as metal; it will then emit eclectic sparks. By means of its galvanic tension it will manifest a force which, decomposing the strongest and firmest combinations, reduces earths to metals' (p. 139).

Schopenhauer's invocation of the natural sciences stages a fold to discuss his human audience, as for him, each are participants of will. A confessing subject and natural history equally confirm the suspicion of a worldly variant of suffering. In contemplating the earthquakes of Lisbon (1755) and Haiti (1751), which invoked eternal fears of an entire city consumed by an active faultline that '[dwells] underneath the firm crust of the planet' (p. 82), Schopenhauer finds amassed suffering along a tectonic fissure. A substantive 'accident' spirals downwards engulfing 'that crust with everything living on it' (p. 82). In the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake, continental grounding lost its apparent innocence as a theoretical and stable metaphor (Hamacher 1999) as well as injected a scarred physicality to romanticist movements in the visual arts. A retrospective Richter scale reading of 8.5 magnitude merely pictures and represents a cold rationality of terrestrial and unfathomable destruction—not unlike current ICPP models of global warming and the deluge of metricised accounts of future scenario planning for a sustainable future, resembling 'the planet that would fall into its sun if it ceased to hurry forward irresistible' (p. 93).

Schopenhauer counts these regionalised extinction events in the plural, and speculates on the degree to which life on earth is strangely comfortable within the set of prefigured terrestrial limits: ‘an insignificant alteration of the atmosphere, not even chemically demonstrable, causes cholera, yellow fever, black death [...] which carry off millions of people; a somewhat greater alteration would extinguish all life’ (p. 82). Schopenhauer’s suspicion in the unfaith of tomorrow’s guarantors that hold the optimistic belief that each and every world unceasingly glows, that planets do not crash into each other, that ‘everything is neither rigid in continual frost nor roasted with heat’ (p. 78) nor ‘there is not an eternal spring in which nothing could reach maturity’ (p. 78), yields a finitude of humans as effects, not causes, of will.

In both suffering and death, Schopenhauer methodologically approaches both from the reverse: We feel pain, but not painlessness—despair, but not its absence. Affect at large operates in a similar template, that retreats beyond human conduits, becomes insignias of corrosion, decay, and remorse as a negative index (Ngai, 2007). But the will tethers without remainder self and world: earthquakes, winter storms, pandemics, each experienced in negative reduction of metastasis or solace. Suffering always regresses to a prior state, a vertiginous fall from grace, ‘[...] that the world is no less in us than we are in it ... the time when I shall not be will come objectively; but subjectively it can never come’ (p. 169). This separation anxiety between human and world breeds a void that washes over us a feeling of disconnect as profound and irritating in the gothic flatlined expression: ‘Our own death is not perhaps for us’ (p. 170)—but if it is not ‘for-us,’ then who is it for? This question itself seems fatigued in a world of such profound agnosticism of lifeform, ‘in spite of thousands of years of death and decay, there is still nothing lost, no atom of matter’ (p. 151).

When the human occurs in Schopenhauer, she is either analogous to the elements—as is the case amongst the pre-Socratics, ‘we resemble phenomena which are brought about through smoke, flame or a jet of water and which fade away or stop as soon as the supply fails’ (p. 100)—or as a vessel of original fatality akin to Buddhist notions in how ‘the world comes into being in consequence of an inexplicable disturbance after a long period of calm’ (p. 116). Schopenhauer also references Hinduist texts where ‘life or death of the individual is of absolutely no consequence’ (p. 141). Schopenhauer’s interest in two interpretations of afterlife from an Eastern philosophical and religious position are each ways of thinking life as coterminous and posthumous. Whereas ‘Metempsychosis’ airs a connective soul transfer not

unlike reincarnation, ‘palingenesis’ theorises rebirth alongside the ‘disintegration and new formation of the individual, since will alone persists’ (p. 214). Both adhere to a reverence of the will as consummate with cyclicity, the ‘schema or form of recurrence’ (p. 147).

In his introduction Thacker suggests that ‘earth viewed through geology, paleontology, or even astrobiology is at its most unearthly’ (Schopenhauer 2020; p. 50), reminiscent of recent ‘hard’ science non-fiction (such as Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (YEAR), Jan Zalasiewicz’s *The Earth After Us* (YEAR), and Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us* (YEAR)). In ‘In the Dust of This Planet,’ Thacker surveys ‘World,’ ‘Earth’ and ‘Planet’ as each a negative silhouette of a remediate and serialised degree of anthropocentrism: From ‘World’ as the invested depository of all things human, ‘Earth’ as its recent 4.5-billion-year-old spherical identity, and ‘Planet’ as sheer mass, primordial tides, plate tectonics and nothing else. In short, each is a reverse geo-engineering and theoretical denial of the world with subsiding shades of *anthropos*. In the desert shore that Earth is increasingly becoming, perhaps these concepts will be generative when considering life and its future on the only sphere in the cosmos known to be a host. Similarly, Schopenhauer’s *On The Suffering of the World* is an untimely decelerant to think against the necropastoral (McSweeney, 2014) and anthropocentric ground the earth is becoming. It offers pause to global dysphoria and attends to a worldly theory of suffering. It contains a sanguine prospect of tomorrow through a passive resignation of today’s atrocities. Like daybreak’s renewal, there is a semblance of solace in the terminarch—or, the last of the species—recognising that the earth will go on, posterior to their own end.

BIOGRAPHY

Leo Zausen is a writer, instructor and editor based in New York. He holds a M.A. in Media and Culture from The New School and currently teaches film and media studies at SUNY Purchase College. His current interests are literary and visual representation of a changing Earth from the late medieval period to the present.

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Theorising the Contemporary Zombie: Contextual Pasts, Presents, and Futures
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2022)

Laura Kemmerer

In *Theorising the Contemporary Zombie: Contextual Pasts, Presents and Futures* (2022), editors Scott Eric Hamilton and Conor Heffernan have compiled a thorough examination of what zombies mirror back to humankind, and how, in a way, zombies are a natural disaster of the highest calibre. In the theoretical framework posited in *Theorising the Contemporary Zombie*, zombies lay insensate siege to our ideas of health, bodies, and even the concept of death. In *Theorising*, the zombie as natural disaster becomes foundational to what defines the eco-Gothic—the body as analogous for the Earth, and what happens when the body itself, amassed in zombie form, becomes a natural disaster.

This same eco-Gothic theming is found in the very foundation of the text, from Hamilton and Heffernan's edited collection being grouped into the three thematic clusters: 'Zombified Bodies,' 'Critical Environments,' and 'Undead Cultures.' The essays in 'Zombified Bodies' address questions of life, the living body, and the barrier between the concept of self and what the observer sees as the external world. In 'Zombies, Deliverance and the Right to Posthuman Life,' for example, Poppy Wilde starts off with an exploration of zombies through the lens of posthumanism, emphasising that through this critical lens, the reader sees 'the cultural imperative to break with aspects of contemporary society that restrain people to conformity' (pp. 19-20). For Wilde, the Armageddon of the zombie horde is both economic and cultural, liberating and terrifying. This can also be read as the profusion of nature into the ordered world (because what is more natural than death?) From an eco-Gothic perspective, there can be no true separation between nature and the build environment. In 'The Apocalypse Workout: Health, Identity and Zombies,' Conor Heffernan examines the prevalence of health discourse around the zombie genre, used as both a critique of 'modern comforts as well as a motivator for athletic and strong bodies' (pp. 39-40). These same critiques of Western comfort also highlight how contemporary creature comforts weaken our strength as humans, and thus,

discourses of health and zombies reinforce the image of the able-bodied muscular man and slender woman. Heffernan's entry is also a particularly strong place to start for those interested in studying relationships between the human body and inhuman nature, especially considering how the human body is also the site and perpetuator of natural disasters having to do with the Anthropocene. In 'Abject Bodies and Borders: What Zombies and Porn Indicate about Sex, Stigma and Society,' Caroline West considers the zombie as emblematic of transgressive against borders, and how, considered with sexuality, as excessive and contaminating. West notes, however, that zombie porn usually follows the beats of standard porn, especially for the heterosexual gaze: zombie porn still yet serves the purpose of exploring 'the pressure to keep sexual boundaries intact' (p. 74). West's piece further drives home the idea that there is no *true* separation between self and world—especially the natural world of sex and death. In the final essay in this first section, 'Aloha'Oe: Goodbye and Hello in *Train to Busan* (2016),' Harvey O'Brien examines the use of the song 'Aloha'Oe' in the film *Train to Busan*, examining how the song offers a way for the character Su-An to say goodbye to the apocalypse to which she is bearing witness. In the film's use of the song, Su-An is portrayed as someone who has learned to hang onto traits like kindness toward others, embodying the spirit of the song she sings twice in the film.

In the second thematic grouping, 'Critical Environments,' Jack Fennell's chapter, 'The Stalking Dead: Ireland's Ambiguous Revenants and the Case for a Folk-zombie Revival,' argues that cultures that do not have a clearly fixed idea of the corporeal as distinct against the non-corporeal may be in a better position to posit the next evolution of the zombie. In 'M.R. Carey's *The Boy on the Bridge*: Ethics and the Apocalypse,' Scott Eric Hamilton introduces the reader to the theory of zombiism, describing it as 'the catastrophic negation of self, but also the necessary onslaught on the canonical theories that threaten to become authoritarian critiques of ideology that threaten to subsume any authentic individual self' (p. 120). Zombiism, according to Hamilton, allows the reader to critically engage with the structure of theory itself. This particular piece is also an excellent starting point for those interested in interrogating anthropocentric projections onto nature, and what these same assumptions tell us about ourselves as a species. In 'Zombie Colony: The Heteronomy of the Greek State and the Datura of Cultural Capital,' Konstantinos Kerasovitis argues for the use of the descriptor 'zombie colony' when discussing Greece, a step past the idea of the crypto colony. Kerasovitis writes that the Greek state has emerged as a zombie colony because it has consumed its citizens

through a ‘narrative of historical reductionism and a temporal displacement of a cherry-picked past to the present’ (p. 152). In Kerasovitis’ piece, personhood and nationhood itself are haunted by the ghost of reductionist narratives, emblematic of the damage similarly reductionist stories have in how humankind relates to the earth we live on. In ‘*Last Ones Left Alive: Zombies and Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland*’ by Deirdre Flynn, the author focuses on the end of the world and the response to it given by the characters in the titular novel, and the conditions (such as zombies) we have to continue to live with after the world has been broken.

In the third section, ‘Undead Cultures,’ Chera Kee’s ‘Beware the Zuvombies: Comics, Censorship and the Ubiquity of *Not-quite Zombies*’ considers the importance of the history of the zombie across medium and genre, and how both had a heavy hand in the development of zombies as we have them in contemporary culture. In ‘Cinematic Voodoo and the Reanimation of Death: Jacques Tourneur’s *I Walked with a Zombie*,’ Peter J. Wright examines the commonalities between early cinema and the body of the zombie as a similarly ‘resurrected and reanimated form’ (p. 198). In “‘Violence *is* Italian art:’ Art and Adaptation in Lucio Fulci’s “Gates of Hell” Trilogy,’ Miranda Corcoran explores Fulci’s usage of an American Gothicism and his adaptation of the American genre across international borders, writing that Fulci’s adaptations ‘for an Italian audience warns against repression on a personal and national scale’ (Corcoran: p. 226). In the final chapter, ‘Surviving the Shambling Signifieds: Zombies, Language and Chaos,’ Andrew Ferguson examines zombies as themselves signifiers, and how, Colson Whitehead’s book *Zone One*, for example, uses zombies as a way to rewrite the *Night of the Living Dead*. Whitehead provides an alternative to narratives in which whiteness is seen ‘re-establishing its own dominance’; rather *Zone One* ‘affirms a Black identity by inscribing his own narrative, on his own terms’ (p. 232).

Editors Hamilton and Heffernan certainly achieved their goal with establishing a theoretic framework for zombie studies with this anthology. Pieces that do not necessarily directly pertain to examining work through an ecocritical lens are still solid foundations upon which to build, especially if the reader considers the zombie as a figure of natural disaster, if not the natural world itself. *Theorising the Contemporary Zombie: Contextual Pasts, Presents, and Futures* is recommended for those interested in human relationships with nature, and zombie as a natural force.

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**Faye Ringel, *The Gothic Literature and History of New England:
Secrets of the Restless Dead***
(London: Anthem, 2022)

Kevin Corstorphine

A full-length book devoted specifically to New England's Gothic literature and history will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the American Gothic tradition, and is, if anything, overdue. The area has produced a remarkable number of important Gothic writers, from Nathaniel Hawthorne through to Shirley Jackson (a Californian, but one whose writing career begins after her move to Vermont) and Stephen King. It is also steeped in Gothic events including the Salem Witch Trials and the Fox sisters' supposed communication with the spirits of the dead. Faye Ringel is just the author to take on this task, bringing decades of experience and research to a subject more usually dealt with as a chapter in more general Gothic publications. Ringel has not only lectured on the subject in the academy, but also to historical societies and family associations across the region, although as she wryly notes, 'I'm rarely invited back' (p. 1). This is because the book is no hagiographic account of famous New England authors, but a critical study of the Gothic imagination and how it brings the dark recesses and buried secrets of this historical region to the surface.

The Gothic Literature and History of New England begins, appropriately, with an acknowledgment that the book was written on land stolen from the Royal Mohegan Burial Ground, which had been reserved in perpetuity by Uncas, Sachem of the Mohegans, on granting land to English colonists in 1659. Although such acknowledgments have become commonplace as we move towards a more critical and postcolonial perspective on the past, here it indicates key elements of the American, and specifically New England, Gothic. The 'Indian burial ground' is a recurring motif in the Gothic, exposing cultural guilt over the killing and dispossession of Native people, and fear that the same treatment might be visited on the coloniser. Indeed, as Ringel notes, 'the entire region can be seen effectively as a desecrated Indian burial ground (p. 3). Ringel works within a framework established by Leslie Fiedler, who influentially claimed that in the United States, 'certain special guilts awaited projection in the gothic form' (p. 143), namely colonisation and slavery. The study likewise builds on work

by critics like Teresa A. Goddu, Allan Lloyd-Smith and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock in arguing that the specific material and ideological conditions of American history can be traced throughout the development of the American Gothic form, whether through the monstrosity it confronts or what is excluded from the text.

What this work does incredibly well is to very specifically illustrate this idea through readings of a wide range of Gothic texts and their contexts. The pragmatic tone brings this back from abstract theorising to simply demonstrating the truth of the arguments. A good example is where Ringel points out how Charles Brockden Brown made a case for American authors to focus on, ‘the incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness’ (p. 8) as suitable subject matter, rather than the castles and sadistic monks of the European Gothic novel (which were popular in colonial New England). Having set up these origins of the Gothic in the United States, Ringel moves on to demonstrate how the New England gothic imagination was forged in a series of brutal Indian wars. Little of this is officially commemorated, but the meeting of Puritan religious beliefs and the conditions of continual violence led to an emphasis on apocalyptic themes. Before this was codified in fiction by authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne, it manifested in fiery sermons by preachers like Jonathan Edwards, and in real-life panics as with the witch trials at Salem. Ringel effectively demonstrates how this can still be detected, through authors like H. P. Lovecraft to the present day, in Gothic fiction’s ‘apocalyptic combination of shadow governments, cultists, sorcerers, and monsters’ (p. 17).

Lovecraft, famous son of Providence, Rhode Island, becomes central to the book’s discussion of racism and xenophobia, but again through a very specific discussion of racial science and an obsession with Nordic, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon white nationalism. Toni Morrison and Nell Irvin Painter have traced the development of whiteness as a racial construct, albeit one that is frequently unexamined. Ringel follows their lead to analyse New England identity as something rooted in this notion of white purity, even as the region’s self-mythologising is built on abolitionism and the identification of slavery as a Southern issue. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, never wrote about the history of slavery in her home state of Connecticut or where she lived in Maine, where she wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). She did, however, write ghost stories that have been read as alluding to this history. Women’s ghost stories are also given a full account here, with subversive feminist authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Harriet Prescott Spofford discussed in a line of tradition that might include

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and, coming up to the present day, a novel like *A Head Full of Ghosts* (2015) by New Englander Paul Tremblay.

Although Indian burial grounds and witch trials might be expected, Ringel also covers New England vampire myths: a theme not usually prominent, but one that has been appeared in modern fiction in novels such as *The Red Tree* (2009) by Caitlín R. Kiernan. The focus also extends beyond the land to the coastal waters and lakes of the region, going far beyond Lovecraft's apparent loathing of sea creatures. Authors like Herman Melville captured the seafaring traditions of the region, and Ringel illustrates how European folklore of sea serpents and lake monsters have persisted in the folklore and fiction of New England. Ecophobia related to water is a burgeoning field (and one familiar to readers of this journal), that has seen recent publications such as the British Library collection *Our Haunted Shores* (2022), edited by Emily Alder, Jimmy Packham, and Joan Passey. Ringel's study points to new directions and areas of study while maintaining its focus as a solid overview of the texts and events readers will expect to see covered. At under one hundred pages, this is a snappy and direct account: it's possible to imagine a longer work that gives a deeper close analysis of the works mentioned, but this is sidestepped in favour of a compelling and immediate narrative that weaves through the texts that still manages to include enough close reading of choice quotations to satisfy the reader. *The Gothic Literature and History of New England* is not just highly recommended but essential reading for anyone with an interest in the subject.

BIOGRAPHY

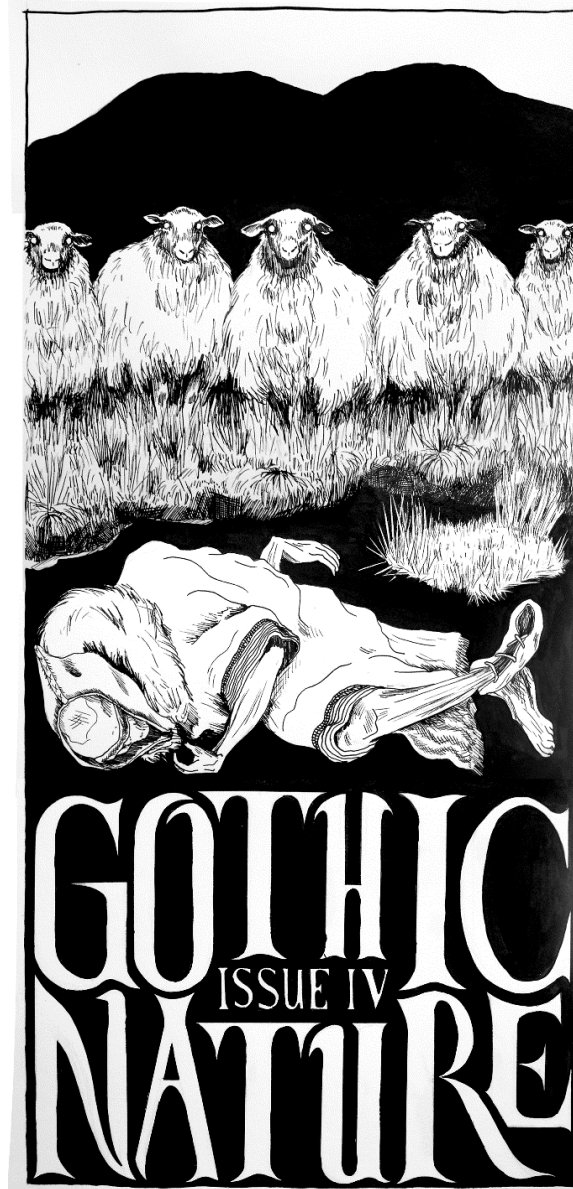
Kevin Corstorphine is Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Hull, and Programme Director in American Studies. His research interests lie in horror and Gothic fiction, and he is particularly interested in representation of space and place, the environment, and haunted locations. He has published widely on authors including Bram Stoker, H. P. Lovecraft, Ambrose Bierce, Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, and Clive Barker. He is co-editor of *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*, published in 2018. Recent work includes publications on weird fiction, US imperialism, haunted graveyards, and ecology in nineteenth-century US literature.

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Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund (Ed.),
Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene
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Jennifer deBie

‘The Anthropocene,’ the conventional name for the period of history in which humanity has impacted our environment in perceptible, measurable ways, is at once a vast swathe of human eras, and the barest inch of a geologic timescale. This contradiction of both deep time and rapidly passing decades is the scope of philosophers, historians, climatologists, and artists, and now, as the globe nears and passes catastrophic tipping point after catastrophic tipping point, the Anthropocene becomes the purview of Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund in their edited collection *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene* (2022). Setting out to not so much define the Anthropocene, as disintegrate the premise, the editors and their contributors leave everything on the page as they examine the ways in which humanity has tried and failed to grapple with our deteriorating condition through art, through science, and through tentative plans for a restorative, or sustainable, future. From the opening essay, in which Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock offers a literal erasure in his formulation of ‘The Anthropocene,’ to Fred Botting’s closing essay, titled simply ‘Monstrocene,’ which shines light on the monsters we imagine and our future with them, the contributors seem to take the basic definition of ‘the Anthropocene’ and work to actively explode it.

Broken into four quarters, Anthropocene, Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and Chthulucene, *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth* is designed to highlight the fractured and overlapping nature of all of the ‘cenes’ that make up the physical, cultural, socioeconomic, and historical moment we inhabit. While readers may be more or less familiar with the Anthropocene as a concept, the other three conceptualisations were new additions to this reviewer’s vocabulary and can be roughly defined respectively as: an examination of the Anthropocene through the lens of both historic and current forced labour practices as well as the monstrosity of mass food production and land exploitation (Plantationocene); the era in which environmental destruction can be rooted in capitalism and (frequently) the exploitation of the global south (Capitalocene); and finally the reclamation of Lovecraft’s many-tentacled

eldritch horror through an acknowledgement of the many arms connecting all life forms on this planet, for both good and ill (Chthulucene).

Given the obvious overlap in purview between all of these sections, it is easy to see how Edwards, Graulund, and Höglund created a cohesive collection out of the disparate essays, and cohesion is exactly what they have in *Dark Scenes*. The final essay of each section leads smoothly to the next, such as in the Plantationocene portion where an exploration of monstrous petroleum in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* leads naturally to the more overt monstrosity of the Chthulucene quarter. Lending further cohesion, many of the contributors to *Dark Scenes* reference each other's work both within, and outside the collection, making for smooth reading for those who will consume the entire text, while also refraining from alienating those who will read chapters in isolation.

Another engaging feature for this reviewer of *Dark Scenes* is that this collection lives inherently in the early 2020s, not just because of the ecological moment we all inhabit, but because of the frequent, passing references to COVID-19. These are essays consciously written in a present- and post-COVID world, with all the inequity, cruelty, and caprice that the global pandemic laid bare to the world. No single essay focuses solely on the virus and its impact on the human, or global, condition, but when Lisa M. Vetere includes it in her list of twenty-first-century events that horrify and terrorize in her essay 'Horrors of the Horticulture' (in the Plantationocene section), when Timothy Clark makes mention of the general public's newfound familiarity with interpreting statistics surrounding population projections because of the virus in his essay 'Overpopulation' (in the Capitalocene section), and when the editors themselves reference the prevalence of animal-to-human virus transmission in the introduction to the collection itself, the realization that *Dark Scenes* is a collection formed during, and immediately after a century-defining global pandemic becomes inescapable.

Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth is a collection explicitly interested in exploring Gothic nature, both real and fictional. From the fictional, predatory consumption of prehistoric sharks as they appear in literature and film, to the literal consumption of the human body by mushrooms in an effort to create more environmentally sustainable burial practices, to the destructive consumption of landscapes and cultures by unfeeling corporations, the essays in this collection cover a lot of literal and metaphorical ground. Yet, for all this diversity, and for

the disintegration of the Anthropocene as a homogenous concept, the editors have managed to maintain a solid grounding in the Gothic earth, pulling together what is sure to be a necessary handbook as we move forward in the twenty-first century, on this damaged earth we all inhabit.

BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer deBie is a graduate of University College Cork where she researches Romantic literature and leads seminars on plague and apocalypse literature. Her creative work has appeared in anthologies by PactPress, Kallisto Gaia Press, and Raven Chronicles Press, among others. Her second novel, *Heretic*, was published by Wild Wolf Publishing in 2022.

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Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančiūnas (Eds.),
South Asian Gothic: Haunted Cultures, Histories, and Media
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021)

Carlos A. Gonzalez

Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančiūnas' *South Asian Gothic: Haunted Cultures, Histories, and Media* (2021) represents a deeply necessary work in the study of the Gothic, though not specifically driven by ecoGothic concerns. It nevertheless represents a jump forward by opening up Gothic studies to a wider range of analytical and cultural frameworks, helping to both further home in on and simultaneously expand an already elusive genre. The collection comprises an introduction by the editors deftly making the case for why the Gothic and South Asian media can and should be used to reciprocally read each other, stating that '[w]hile on one level it may be tempting to reduce [the Gothic] to a western product [...] once we move into the twentieth and twenty-first century [...] such definitions do not hold' (2021: p. 2), followed by fifteen essays covering a range of South Asian media, culture, and works of art inflected by (or themselves inflecting) the Gothic. Cultures represented include Pakistani, Bengalese, Bhutanese, and Bangladeshi, covering media and history in languages like Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and English, among others. It must be noted, however, that the primary stakes in the collection are of South Asian cultural and sociopolitical (and not necessarily ecocritical) importance, requiring a keen eye to find the places in the essays that address ecoGothic concerns specifically.

In bringing together their collection, Ancuta and Valančiūnas aim to situate the South Asian Gothic within two important concepts: '[...] the *globalgothic (sic)* (locating the Gothic in the globalised culture) and the "living Gothic" (addressing Gothic elements in the cultural practices of everyday life)' (p. 4). These central notions guide the work of the essays that follow, which are organised into four Parts. *Part I: History, Politics and Trauma* is made up of three essays exploring the Gothicisation of time and the haunting presence of the past in the fictional works of Dhruvajyoti Bora and Bhooter Bhabishyat, as well two films by Omar Ali Khan and Khwaja Sarfraz. *Part II: Colonialism, Postcolonialism and Diaspora* explores the ongoing effects of colonialism on the media and culture of South Asia as demonstrated in tales of hauntings and uncanny happenings in the works of artists like Rabindranath Tagore, Hijab

Imtiaz Ali, Amitav Ghosh, as well as various films for which Valančiūnas borrows the term ‘Bombay Gothic.’ This is followed by *Part III: Spirits, Rituals and Folklore*, which zooms out from the focus up to this point on specific authors or artists to discuss more generally the interplay between culture and the mode of the Gothic, both as it is adapted and resisted in South Asia. Analyses are made of representations of the supernatural in Bhutan, Nepalese folkloric sources, the werebeasts of Indian cinema, and the Tantric as Gothic villain across various periods of time. The collection wraps up with *Part IV: Gothic Media* and its exploration of Gothic works outside traditional novels, showcasing instead the work of the Gothic in Hindi graphic novels and cinema, Bangladeshi radio, and television from the subcontinent.

Although this title represents a significant contribution to Gothic studies, and in particular the aforementioned *globalgothic*, few of the essays have specifically ecoGothic priorities. This is not to say, however, that valuable ecocritical analysis is completely absent from the collection. In describing the scenes of the ship at sea where the drama of the novel unfolds in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Shilpa Daithota Bhat writes, ‘The language [...] gesture[s] at the Gothic: “unlit gloom,” “clear and dark, known and hidden,” “yawning chasm ahead,” “the edge of the precipice,” “tumbling into the void” [...] As the plot of the novel moves further on, Ghosh describes the weather and its impact on the atmosphere of the ship [...]’ (p. 121). This gesture towards the environmental agency of the sea within the novel unfolds into a discussion on power and control. Davide Torri, in *No Place For Trespasses*, begins the essay by arguing that Nepalese literature, which has no Gothic tradition to speak of, would benefit from Gothic criticism, basing his reasoning immediately on environmental factors, stating that in the dramatic landscape of the Himalayas, ‘[...] we find a natural environment matching almost all the features of the “sublime” (utmost beauty of snowy peaks, tempestuous rivers, thick forests where mighty predators roam, terrible storms, insignificance of the human element)’ (p. 149). Muhammed Shahriar Haque even helps make a connection between the *jinn* of Bangladesh and ecological concerns as one of the reasons why these entities take part in everyday life for audiences of *Bhoot FM* (p. 266).

The value of this collection lies not in its dedication to the questions of the ecoGothic specifically, as the reader will be hard pressed to find any, but rather in the way that the essays help to expand and redefine an already elusive concept. EcoGothic studies are not only an ecocritical inflection of Gothic studies, but also a Gothic take on ecocriticism; in other words,

scholarship that invites rereadings and redefinitions of the Gothic even along geographic, cultural, or historical lines would be of benefit to both disciplines. As the ecoGothic continues to morph into, and become conflated with, ecohorror—as is the case within *South Asian Gothic* where the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably—it becomes necessary to open up the field of study, to expand beyond the familiar landscapes (pun absolutely intended) of well-trod English moors, Italian castles, and American plantations, towards the expanse of *South Asian Gothic*. The student or scholar of the ecoGothic will find within this collection scant direct references to ecology or to environmental discourse, but will instead be exposed to a challenging and impressive array of new ways to read (or watch, or listen to) Gothic texts, intervening into the dominant (historically Western) ecoGothic discourse with a fresh vocabulary and set of critical and analytical tools.

With *South Asian Gothic: Haunted Cultures, Histories and Media*, Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančiūnas have successfully brought together a thought-provoking and necessary addition to the study of the Gothic, albeit one which does not (nor does it intend to) spend much time exploring the ecoGothic. What this collection manages to do is lay important foundational work to introduce South Asian Gothic and its vast potential for ecocritical analysis to the reader of *Gothic Nature Journal* and those interested in the Gothic outside of its historically Western context. This significant collection is necessary reading to inspire greater ecoGothic analysis of the subgenre of South Asian Gothic, though is also in itself enlightening and important work.

BIOGRAPHY:

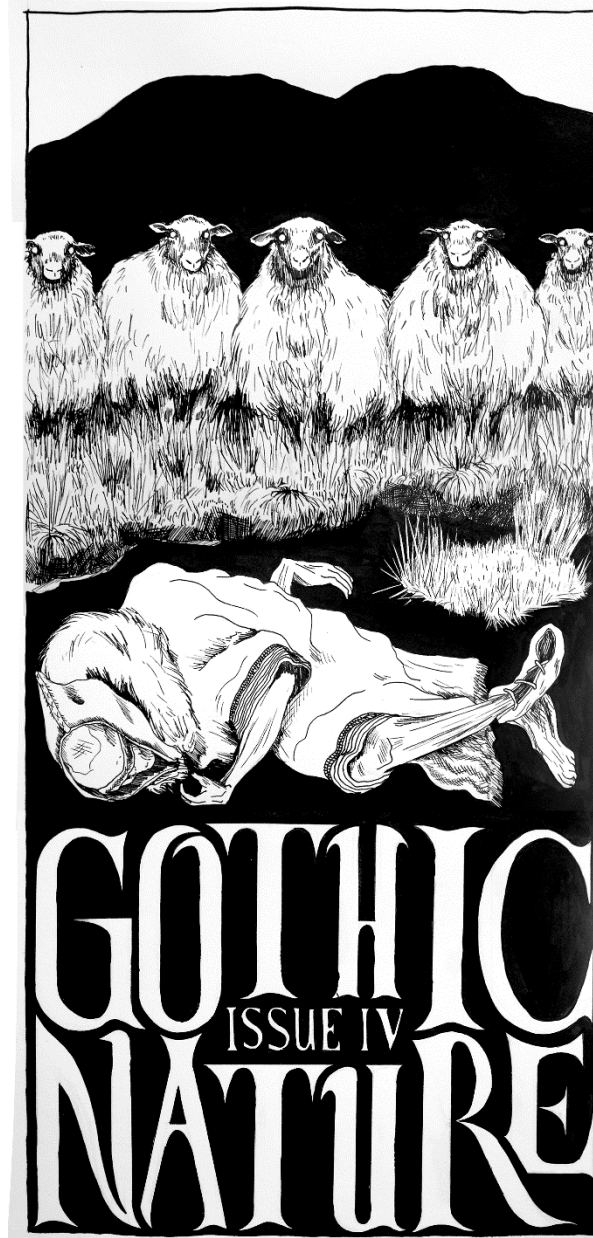
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Absorption, an Animist Ghost Story

Nell Aubrey

'Old things do hate to be disturbed.'

'A house as old as this one becomes, in time, a living thing. It starts holding onto things... keeping them alive when they shouldn't be. Some of them are good; some of them bad... Some should never be spoken about again.'

Guillermo Del Toro, *Crimson Peak*.

'Old things do hate to be disturbed,' Vero mused. We both stared in indulgent enchantment as the old ginger tom, sloping begrudgingly from its now shadowed corner, settled itself into a beam of sunlight. 'Old furniture, plants, people, this house, even.'

There was no doubt about the settled determination of this house, I thought. I had seen less resolute mountains. It had a curious, organic solidity, as if, rather than being hewn from wood and stone, it had risen from the landscape through some act of mythic germination, like Athena from the head of Zeus. I had, upon first sight, felt the urge to curtsy as one would when approaching an elderly dignitary. I shifted on the floor, leaning against the warm stonework, and, careful not to disturb the ginger tom with my movement, picked up my mug and sipped the tea.

'Like sediment, it's a series of layers, not a single creation,' I replied.

She looked at me with great solemnity.

'That's exactly what I think! It's not just the house and the grounds, it's the mountain and the forest, the whole place. It reaches back thousands of years. So many people, so many stories. One must be sure that no one feels left out.'

She looked up into the shadowy heights of the hall just beyond the doorframe. I followed her gaze up into the darkness and glimpsed her give what appeared to be an involuntary shudder before looking away. As one we returned to the contemplation of the dappled sunlight on the stone fireplace.

‘But others may have their own ideas,’ she said.

Her meaning was ambiguous at best and her thoughts were not yet mine to question, but I liked her idea of some unspecified entity, reaching purposefully through the stones toward us. The house was beyond ancient and, unusually, had not consumed the fabric of its predecessors or cannibalised itself to grow, but emerged out of the hillside in discrete segments, each encasing the other like Russian nesting dolls or, I thought with a sudden shudder as I recalled my first impression, like the rings of a tree. I entertained a brief image of besieging ivy and the rampant clematis whose colonising tendrils forayed through the window, stealthily entwining the inhabitants in rocking chairs, or strangling them in their beds.

She looked mournful for a moment and then, more cheerfully, suggested we visit the family portraits.

‘The Rogue’s Gallery, we call it,’ she proclaimed as she led me up through the dark and opened a door, half-hidden behind a tapestry, into a bright wonderland of Tudor leadlight, oak beams and inglenook fireplaces. ‘Backwards in time, isn’t it?’

She waved tenderly kissed hands at the pictures of her immediate forbears. As we walked Vero regaled me with a catalogue of familial misdeeds. Secrets and scandals attired in top hats and bonnets, hauberks, and farthingales. There were over a hundred portraits of various sizes, bathed in the vernal lush streaming through the leadlight. The rogues were certainly seductive. The resemblances between the portraits revealed not so much a bloodline as a web into which beautiful features had seemed inexorably drawn. Vero informed me that this stemmed from the convenient habit of current incumbents dying childless, and the predilection of the cadet branches for outlandish adventures and scandalously exotic liaisons. The descendants of whom had often inherited and, when occasion demanded it, married back into the family.

‘A smorgasbord,’ she mused. ‘Terribly good for the gene pool, but the family tree is a bit more of a bramble than an old English oak!’

Unlike the other glorious masterpieces, the last portrait she drew me to was untouched by the mellow light of the broad glass. It lay in the shadowed alcove of an inglenook. One had to move close and out of the light to see it clearly which added to its startling effect. The figure was in no way human, and yet, shared the likenesses of the family; the brow, lips, and eyes, which were retold along the walls again and again. It was both earthy and ethereal, with traces of the demonic and the elfin. The eyes, black irises encircling gold, reversed the dark and tawny colouring of the other portraits, yet combined with shape and expression, were hauntingly familiar, both alluring and discomfiting. It looked, it seemed, as if it had been painted from life. It had animation, reality, personality, but it was startlingly, confusingly, unreal.

‘Ah, our Numen Loci,’ Vero said. ‘Yes, he is something, isn’t he? Do you know, some people walk through and don’t even notice him, can you imagine?’

I shook my head in disbelief. I felt as though those eyes would follow me, not just around the room, but all over the house. I stared at her and then back at the picture. It looked, faintly, as if the minutest curve of a smile had crept onto the lips. I felt an urge to punch it and thought of Dorian Gray. She put a hand on my shoulder as if to steady my nerves.

‘He was inspired by a rock carving in the catacombs below the chapel.’

She drew me away. I was still a little enthralled, and she had to pull at my arm, which brought me back to my senses. I didn’t want to turn away; I didn’t want to turn my back on it.

‘Dear old thing,’ she smiled at me indulgently, but I had no idea whether she addressed me or the portrait. ‘He does have a real effect on some people. Don’t worry, I consider it a very bad sign if he doesn’t. Where there’s no sense, there’s no feeling!’

We walked back along the gallery and, with a strange creeping dread, I saw the pictures anew, detecting those not quite human features. Even in Vero’s face, still pixie-esque, despite her age. If she had brushed her hair back to reveal pointed ears, it really would not have surprised me.

‘He was painted by some acolyte of Rossetti when the place was crawling with laudanum addicts getting up to spiritualism, and mesmerism, and all sorts. He became quite the obsession; a very interesting lot, after all.’ She seemed delighted to have piqued my curiosity and beamed me a smile verging on the coquettish. I felt she was priming me for some dramatic revelation.

I am not above a bit of drama of my own, and an intense curiosity gripped me again, once those eyes were behind the heavy oak door.

‘They held seances here?’ I quizzed.

Vero cackled warmly, and as we descended the darkness of the stairs, regaled me with an account of all the mishaps suffered by the generations of psychics who had trailed through the house, and the great annoyance they brought with them. And all for nought, as not a flicker of spectral activity was ever detected. The ghosts, legend had it, always abandoned the premises at the first sniff of a psychic, taking up residence in the oast house and taking the cats with them.

‘I admit, the house has presence, you know, an atmosphere, and there were always stories, but it is ancient, and it’s hardly surprising it creaks. But, even if there were ghosts, well, it’s hardly likely they would come when called, would they?’

I pondered this notion: could obstinacy and sheer bloody-mindedness be the fundamental conditions of every haunting?

We settled back into the warmth of the kitchen and I noted the cat had not moved an inch but was still breathing.

‘So, this Numen Loci...’

‘Oh, yes, well, like the Lar—or is it the Penates in the Aeneid—that romantic, artistic lot were terribly excited about the local folklore, of course, and there was a tradition of a local shrine, or suchlike, and, of course, naturally they read some stories and got carried away.’

I suppose I should make some attempt at description, but the architectural and geological details would be no more than an anatomical sketch. The whole place had a sensuous atmosphere and pulsed with an organic earthiness: an imminent collision of the supernatural and supernature. Across the landscape, ice, fire, and water had left their shifting traces in tors, glacial erratics, and drumlins, giants' quoits, and the remains of a sunken forest. Humans, too, had adorned nature's work with some lesser filigrees; dotted here and there were barrows, a grove of sacred oaks, an altar to the God of the Crossroads on an ancient trackway, and a stone circle; the mischief of wayward demons, or witches, or those caught dancing upon a Sunday, all petrified for posterity. The house itself was a unique example of Vernacular Architecture. Generations of local trees and stones remoulded, jostling amiably against each other in the protective embrace of the hillside like a brood in the nest. The rock-hewn sanctuary of the original chapel sheltered catacombs and a late Saxon hall nestled between the Tudor courtyard and the lee of the hill. The deep cellars of the Norman keep and the tower house preserved the fabric of an iron age hillfort and Neolithic chambered tombs. The newest parts of the house were Jacobean and, apparently due to the remoteness of its location, reformations, rebellions, and Gothic revivals had neglected to wreak their havoc, sparing the stained-glass, statuary, and other popish and pagan trappings. Even the doom of the tiny Anglo-Saxon church remained intact. There were cellars and attics and courtyards, nurseries and drawing rooms, towers and tunnels, hidden corridors, a priest's hole, and the remains of a secret passage. The musty smell of old wood and old stone was ingrained within the foundations and formed a base note which mingled with the scents of different rooms. The kitchen smelt of coffee, wood-smoke, and rosemary, while the library released the scent of old books and candles. Cedarwood, juniper, frankincense, sharp citrus rushes of bergamot, and musky ambergris all seemed to pour out as the sunlight made its circuit of the walls. Earthy and green tones permeated the lower floors, while high notes of jasmine and honeysuckle dominated the higher. There were textures of lush velvet, soft goose down, cold stone and warm timber, delicate tapestries, and well-worn sheepskin and leather. It had an earthy uncanniness of deep time and a sense of inhabitation. If not living, it had a lived-in atmosphere. Beyond the house, this uncanniness merged seamlessly into the landscape, or the landscape absorbed it, as the towers seemed to rise from rolling fog like a giant's castle from the sea.

Local lore thronged with tales of those who, pixie-led and elf-taken, were lost to haunted woods or selkie infested ponds, whilst others returned after long, sinister absences with strange powers. Giants and dragons had been fought and killed; their fallen bodies morphed into the hills.

The very name of the house was suggestive, although Vero insisted its etymology was geographical: situated as it was on the pass between hills (dore), the topographical feature which named that area of the forest (weard). It was a fair and logical interpretation in Old English. Though, there were older, more sinister explanations within the languages that had flourished in that region over millennia. Dore could mean anything from door, gateway, earth, even time and space. It could also mean trickster, deceiver or lunatic. Weard, ward, or wyrd, had implications beyond those which I cared to consider; lurking, waiting, a shield, or enchantment. A warning to be watchful, be wary, beware. It bothered me that Vero, otherwise so Gothically mischievous, insisted on this, the most boring, of all possible translations. But it was difficult to see any cause to be wary. The house's only uncanny feature was the mosaic miracle of its continued existence. Like a house of windows into other worlds, I had said to Vero, who, never one to resist a pun, preferred to think of them as doors.

‘After all, what is a window but a door you can’t shut?’

But, shut against what? What didn’t she want me to see?

The family papers, as promised, were an entertaining read. There were scandals aplenty. In terms of ghostly matter, there were several murders and multiple suicides and deaths in that grey area between accident and agency. A medieval version of Black Hugo Baskerville, complete with a whisht hound, was reputed to have continued his misdeeds post-mortem in crypto vampiric fashion. His portrait was a favourite of mine. A pale, debonair elfskin with autumnal curls, whose insouciant eyes challenged the very notion that anything so beautiful could possibly be good. Records of ghostly activity were wide and refreshingly inconsistent: collusion with demons and witches, emanations, corpuscles, and spectral vibrations to and fro in the tidal movements of causal realities. As much as I felt I had fallen under its spell, I felt a strong caution against ensorcellment, given the throngs of astrologers, geomancers, occultists, antiquarians, spiritualists, mesmerists, and galvanists that had been drawn to this place. But one account gave my brain a cold sort of sparkle. An account, sent by letter, from a Priest who refused to remain in the house on account of the aggravations of an evil spirit, the report of whom felt all too familiar.

A silent and invisible being, he wrote, haunts my chamber, holds fast to me, assaults me in my very bed. I knew the nature of the thing that haunted him. It had haunted me, and the affinity

between description and memory resonated with a kind of chronological vertigo. It is almost impossible to describe it: the certainty of a haunting presence, lurking with intent but sensed through perceptions either incoherent or entirely absent. Any attempt to do so merely reveals how entrapped we are in the terminology of sensation. Language fails to express an experience so horribly alien and yet inexplicably innate. I am sure the answer to its origin lies in the primordial deep. Until about 540 million years ago, all animals on Earth floated blindly in the silent abyss, waiting to bump into something to eat or be eaten by. Organisms bumbled about senselessly for millions of years before investing in cells sensitive to light and vibration. Perhaps that span of geological time equipped us with this uncanny reach, a vigilant apprehension beyond perception, a register of immanence and agency somewhere out in the hushed and hungry dark.

Other than ascribing his experiences to the deceased and demonic, the priest's account held frustratingly little extraneous detail. No dates. No indication where in the house he had these encounters. In the absence of determining facts, my thoughts turned automatically to the picture; the thing about the house which had first disturbed me. But I countered myself. This was not ocular proof. It could have referred to anything. He might have been suffering from phrenitis, or brain-fever, or syphilis.

'Remember the Horla, and Northanger,' I chastened myself. 'Remember Henry James. Do not get carried away!'

This was no Eel Marsh, nor Hill House. There were no mysteriously locked rooms, concealing decapitated or pyromaniac wives, no sinister housekeepers, or deformed paintings. I had sought them out, in my first days alone. But stories left undisclosed are an anathema to the human psyche. We think in narrative arcs and abjure ambiguity. I followed up his account as best I could to prevent it becoming a trap for my nerves, but all the other ghost sightings made no reference to similar symptomatology, revealing instances less of the persecutory paranoia of possession than a bloody good scare.

Overall, the venerable atmosphere mellowed into an embrace of warmth and wood smoke and, as the weather worsened, I realised I had grown more sensible of the place as an organic entity. The feeding of the fires, the checking of the pipes for leaks, the scouring of the cellars for damp and wood for rot all felt like a form of tending. No less than with a garden. The whole house breathed

and creaked around me in its own circadian cycle, and I felt deeply aware that this vocal timber had grown on the hillside. These trees had exchanged carbon and oxygen with those bodies depicted in the gallery and lodged in the crypt and cemetery. It was impossible not to think of such things as I walked through the grounds and surrounding land every day. Vero had told me that, during the great storms of 1987, some of the ancient churchyard yews had pulled up the bones buried beneath them, entangled in their roots like long searching fingers. As with most of the fallen trees from that storm, the yews had been revived, grafted into the house and furniture. For the first few nights, I dreamt of those roots, waking up shaken, vaguely aware of a certain lack of stillness in the atmosphere. It did not feel empty, even beyond what one might expect with a medley of tails wagging around me in either joy or irritation. Then, as so often happens, strange incidents followed quickly one upon the other, causing a pile-up in my brain.

I must digress at this point to make a confession. There is a distinction between seeing ghosts and believing in them, albeit a barely statistically significant blip. I've suffered from a range of angst-ridden parasomnias since I was very young: nightmares, somnambulism, sleep paralysis. Awake, things were not much better. Fits of terror used to render me speechless, hyperventilating, and sometimes unconscious, and I saw things that no one else noticed, which, I eventually learnt, meant that for everyone else, they were not there. So, I have learnt not to believe in everything I see or hear, let alone everything I think and feel. A childhood terrified and bewildered into sensory wariness matured into my grasp on reality being, if not wider than other people's, then a different, and altogether stranger, shape. Within that shape, I am far from incapable of giving myself a good scare. Doubt is the foundation of all sanity, certainty is a trap at best and, at worst, a delusion, but there are plenty of things seen and unseen that scare the bejesus out of me, whether I believe in them or not. Fear is the legacy of a heavily predated species, and anyone would find something to fear in an ancient and lonely place, even if only leaving the gas on.

Late one afternoon, sitting in the library, attended by the dogs and an assortment of cats, the great antique table, at which I had been diligently working for some hours, suddenly moved. By which, I mean it lifted several inches off the floor and landed with a resounding thump, like a sulkily stamped foot, before resuming the stoicism one typically associates with furniture. I sat back, took some very deep breaths, and looked around the room with suspicious irritation. There was nothing untoward. Once the startle subsided, I stood up, a little shakily, and placed both hands on the table. Nothing. Despite the apparent resumption of normality, I had to wrestle a mounting dread of the

booming silence that seemed to coil in ambush behind the door to the long gallery, but everyone was stirring at my movement in pavlovian anticipation of a meal, and the choice was either go to the kitchen or starve.

As I opened the door, the huskies dashed in the vanguard without a thought to their personal safety, and as I waited for the cats to complete their royal progress, I looked resolutely at the picture. The eyes gave me their shivering, cold stare, but that was all. Later that evening, once nicotine and alcohol had sufficiently calmed my nerves, I considered what had happened. The table alone had moved. This ruled out an earthquake, heavy vibrations, and a host of other more widespread physical causes. So, apparently, something else had moved it, or it had jumped of its own accord. I found myself far more preoccupied with the how than the why. Humans are easily caught by the sticky strands of teleology, which weave themselves into self-centred causal webs. It bears remembering that some things are just epiphenomenal and frankly none of our business. The pioneer psychologist, Frederic Myers, considered it possible that houses and objects could generate apparitions and convey memories through absorbing traces of consciousness. Human though, not arboreal; an exceptionalism which I always found a little irksome and short-sighted, given the relative time frames. Trees talk to one another, they even re-animate their dead, and I am perfectly able to accept they may have souls. I thought of Narnia and the cosmic ripples in the folklore of apple trees and tried not to think of the cemetery yews with their grasping roots.

The visitations, when they returned soon after, had lost none of their childhood bite. But they were no longer the petrifying figure of shadow and moonlight that had manifested at the foot of my bed and crawled over me with a sadistic physicality that left me feeling beaten black and blue. They were invisible now, apprehended only by the sensation of ominous presence, a tangible nothingness that shifted unseen through the air and gathered itself at my pillow. Nothing but an intent and determined presence and the very faintest shiver on my skin. The residual feelings from these hypnogogic terrors began to bleed into waking hours as if strangeness seeped out from my sleeping brain. I noticed that I moved aside as if making way for someone whose unheard footsteps wandered with me through the house and I held doors open, looking behind me as I walked, or looked up from the library table to stare, expectantly, at nothing.

One night, I stood at the window, musing trancelike at the moon, when my attention was suddenly brought to bear on the reflection of the dark, empty doorway. Almost at the same moment,

something rested on my shoulder. It felt like a hand, large, cold, and strangely heavy. Far from bringing me to my senses, it propelled me further into a dreamlike disorientation. I was wholly unanchored by the empty space mirrored by the darkened window. I stared at it, frozen into a panic by sensory discordance. After a while, the touch moved, softly, down the back of my arm, grasped around my hand for a moment, and was gone. I have no idea how long I stood there. The only other thing I registered was the sudden waft of smoke, sharp and cold, the smell of bonfires on cold autumn nights. So intoxicating and evocative was the scent that I longed to turn towards it and inhale. It was unsurprising that this cosy detail should have so assaulted my senses, casting the rest into such a ghastly relief. It had been gentle, almost intimate, which bewildered me. Instead of the adrenaline I would have mustered in a fight, I felt brittle, fragile to the point of breaking. Worse still, it triggered the strangest sense of familiarity, a memory of a dream that fragmented as soon as it slipped close to conscious recall. Something that tiptoed across my mind, frustratingly beyond my power to track.

I swore I would have preferred for all the shadows and curtains, woodwork, and candlelight, to conspire against me as an array of goblins, rather than repeatedly register this sinister vacancy. One morning, I investigated the ancient mirror of my dressing table and saw a face that was not my own. Only for a sliver of a moment, but long enough to both see and doubt. I was caught between horror and relief at the thought that it was so obviously a trick of the light. The golden glare of a doubly refracted sunbeam.

All these experiences were heavily reminiscent of the over-animated, changeling world I had inhabited as a child. It amazes me now just how much fear I managed to bear without hope of remedy or redress. If I fear less now, I am also so much more the coward. I would not get out of bed if faced with terrors of that magnitude. Now, I struggle and falter, unable to steel myself with the mettle that forced me through those horrors. I am filled with wonder at the armour plating of my younger self. In their own way, psychology, medication, and therapy have fortified me, but against a different enemy. Perhaps childhood terrors take shape more easily. Now the world has moved from known terrors to unknowable ones. The things you can see are bad enough, but I felt that the refusal to take a form was beginning to unhinge me in a whole new way. The fear of whatever might be lurking unseen is in our deepest DNA, tracking the invisible is natural to survival. Even in the stillness of an empty house, signs of presence or absence are unconsciously traced like breadcrumbs or pebbles through a forest. Years of therapy and ghost stories have stood

me in good stead. I knew well enough, it would either reveal or resolve, be it from the pulsating terrors of the cosmos or the barely sane confines of my brain. But some errant sensation had wormed its way beneath my skin, compelling me to act rather than endure the ominous toil of rational, reasoned waiting. Intuition is just the detective work your brain does when you're not looking. Sometimes it's as well to trust it as not.

Places have their own diurnal moods and shift with the change of light as day bleeds into purpling pink. I have long been afraid of the darkening sky. As a child the quickest route to reach my house led through the churchyard. From lych-gate to porch, then from porch to stile, I ran from the frights gathering at my heels, heckled by the crowding rooks as skeletal figures with wild, elf-tangled tresses morphed between the shadows and spectral trees. Though the silent misty early mornings were worse. Unremembered tombstones lurched into view, and angels, merely steely eyed in daylight, stared from their perches like ravenous furies. I was afraid of all of them.

Waiting for the moon to rise, I tried not to think about those past fears, but climbing down into lithic darkness is an unsettling thing. It doesn't do to get lost in the dark or underground, so I had the statutory coil of golden thread, candles, and a satellite phone. The geological reports had not prepared me for the awesome wonder that revealed itself, but then, as Vero had pointedly reminded me, those geologists hadn't visited during the full moon.

In the deep cavern beneath the ancient church sanctuary, an unseen form began emerging from the rock, morphing into life from the topography of the walls. Against the lithic, volcanic matter, twining roots of petrified wood had formed a human shape. Quartz and veins of basalt and haematite combined in distinct limbs and torso. As I moved closer with my candle raised, moving eyes of radiating pyrite sparkled in the gloom. Humans are predisposed to see eyes and faces in all manner of visual arrays. Eyes predominate in art and in the apotropaic. A constant reminder of all the eyes out there, watching, unwatched and unseen. But this was no pareidolia. It had the human detail of an anatomical drawing. Then the moonlight ignited a liquid radiance in the rock and before my eyes it transformed, shapeshifting into a three-dimensional figure, radiant, golden eyes beaming through a divine luminescence. I have never seen something so inanimate look and feel so incredibly, awfully alive, as if it could pull its giant limbs from the rock and step into the cavern at any moment.

Then, as I stood close, transfixed and staring, with the shifting moonlight, another vision revealed itself. I reeled back in terror. What had seemed to be a metamorphosis from tree to rock, now looked too horribly real to be mere happenstance. A body of quartz could form from petrified bones, and pyrite from the soft, spongy tissue of the eyes. The shimmering body of rock now echoed the pattern of real bones, the masses and absences of cavities, and organs.

Was a real body, living or dead, once immured inside that tree?

It seemed much too large, but it was too real, too sentient, to be anything but human. The arm which I had taken for a root now seemed to stretch up as if clawing and, in a moment of confusion and panic, I found that I had taken a step forward and, in an unconscious gesture, reached out my own hand towards its tangled shape, now so suddenly human, suffering and alone.

I awoke sitting with my back to the door of the sanctuary and the dogs at my side, pawing and licking at me with appropriate wails of concern. I still don't know: the isotope samples were inconclusive, revealing only one form of organic matter, morphed over time into another. The Mesopotamians thought parts of the soul went their separate ways, wandering off, one by one, as their bodily shrouds were disassembled by death, decomposition, and time. The consciousness, encased in the bones, endured the longest and those bones, buried in the subterranean crypts of their houses, were preserved with the memories by which the dead stayed real and, they hoped, loved, for a generation at least.

Our bodies die at different rates: our cellular structure may renew every seven years, but the tissues of our mortal coil predecease us daily. Can I deny that death is relative, partible, and often inconclusive?

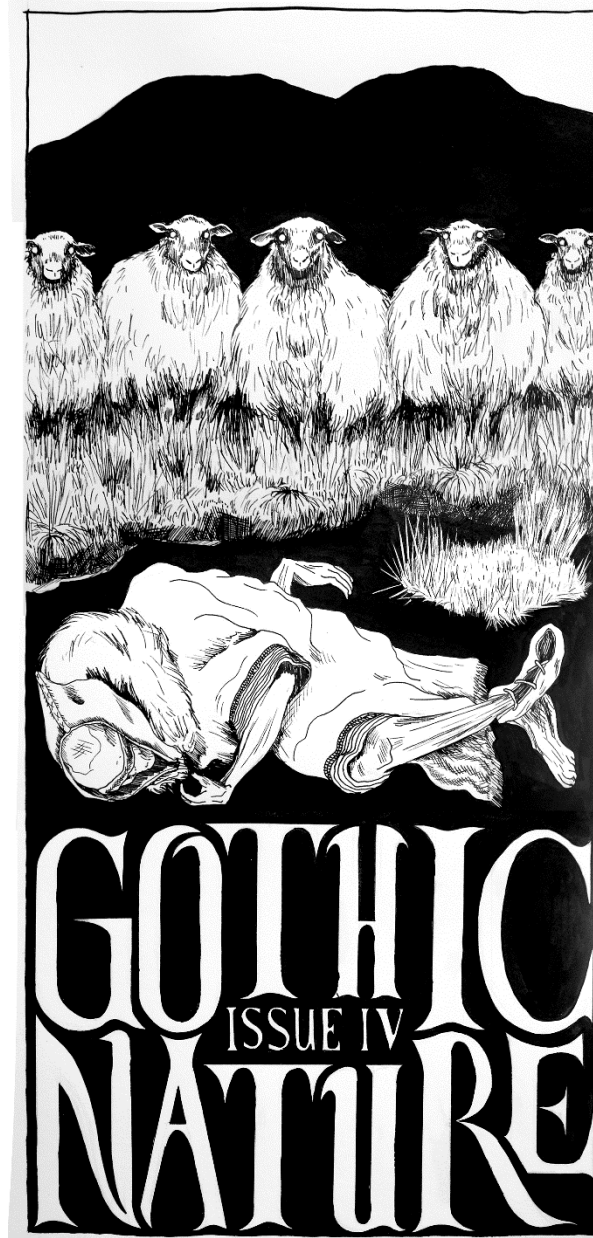
Forms of consciousness unlike our own, and other, otherly material arrangements, mass themselves throughout our entire existence. Subatomic particles shapeshift merrily amongst themselves, and neutrinos, like speedy soul atoms, pervade and invade us, animal, vegetable and mineral, unfelt, unheard, and unseen. Could God so love the world, or a spirit so love a place that it is absorbed within? Could a being be called into existence by belief, or, in the matter of spirit, do we simply laden the world with more meaning than it can reasonably bear?

The next time I felt the cold heavy hand curled against mine, I tried to grasp it, but it was gone.

BIOGRAPHY

Nell Aubrey is a Historian with degrees in History and Medieval Studies and was awarded Post-Graduate Interdisciplinary Research Fellowships in Pharmacology and Medical Anthropology at University College London. She has taught University courses on Early Medieval Europe, Mythology and Folklore and given workshops exploring the Folklore and traditions behind Seasonal festivals, at the Skip Garden, St Pancras, where she was once ‘Witch in Residence.’ Her article on Wilderness Folklore was published in ‘The Psychology of Religion and Place’ (ed. Counted & Watts, 2019). She is also a Registered Aromatherapist and is conducting research into the Botanical background of Ancient and Medieval Medicine and Magic. She lives next to a Churchyard in rural Norfolk, in an old School House which remains stubbornly un-haunted. This is her first short story.

GOthic NATURE



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Heron Heart

Dana Trusso

'What animal do I long to be?'

I do not breathe
The house breathes for me.

Plants grow and wave hello
tendrils reach out
aloe refuses its pot,
breaks free from its home
unlike the stone trees
painted along white walls,
contracted in muted breathing.

What animal do I long to be?
The one without flesh and bone
the one that is quiet like this room
without fluttering heart and nonsense thoughts,
the one that does not decay
the one whose absence never haunts
the one that does not breathe or labor or grow
the one that just is.

Let us be
Let us become.

When I close my eyes
I see red glowing circles,
cells emerge from the darkness

flow in lines across my eyelids,
multiply and quicken.

This time I do not see blood,
instead, a pool—
soft rust laps the surface
revealing someone
just out of reach.

Face, feline at first
then demonic;
is he calling me to enter,
or watching me as I watch him?
We tangle nonetheless
like virgins who taste the lap of water
but not water itself.

Your dancing silhouette summons—
each spiral hair
a phantom limb
curling like a welcoming finger.

I fear my corpse hand would infect you
but you hold my hand
between tissues;
your cold matched mine
and the cold was a tonic.

Retreating from the home that is not a home
but a living being,
we cross the threshold
into vertiginous hallway,
tumbled out of glass.

Together we disappear
return to atoms
swerve in moonlit forests
consumed by light-eating depressions,
the same way that we melt into walls
grounded in nausea
eyes rolling back like Bacon's Innocent X,
face contorted with
that which we cannot speak.

We should go outside
We should not go outside.

The woodpecker,
with its black and white body and touched-with-red face,
marks each second rapidly with ease—
a perfection only emptiness knows.

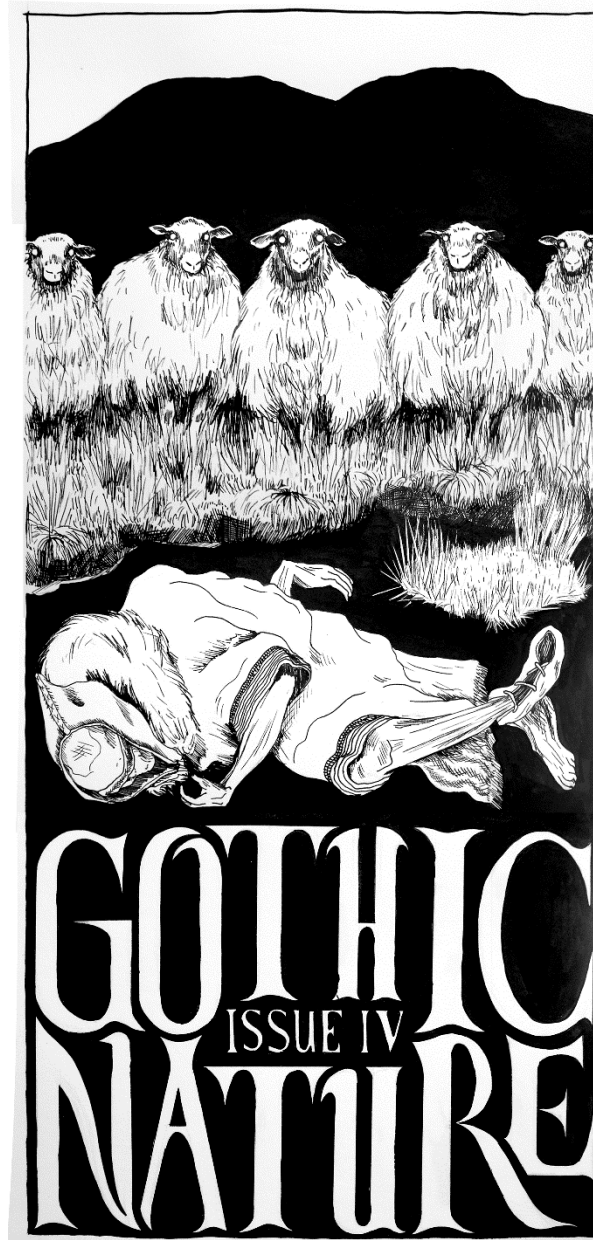
Two great blue herons like dinosaurs skim the pond
flick fish into mouths
until they notice my presence.
She takes off in flight
a prehistoric sight over sun-sparked water,
while the other gazes with one eye
in perfect
stillness.

Heron, heart-soul of Ra,
glide down the night
announce the beginning of time—
a spell to transform the dead
back into the sun.

BIOGRAPHY

Dana Trusso is Assistant Professor of Philosophy in the Humanities Department at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, NY. Her research centers on the intersection of love and learning in Plato and connecting theory to action in the courses she teaches such as Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, and Philosophy of Love. datrusso@lagcc.cuny.edu

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**In the Grip of Winter:
A Collection of Poems**

Vyacheslav Konoval

'What could be better than a walk in the woods?'

Winter

Like a child, I rejoice a winter,
I fly, I run on the first snow like a sprinter,
the falling snowballs to life reenter.

Walk between the pines

In the snowy forest, I will stop near the pines,
which were up in two lines.
The frost is raging, pinching my cheeks,
I like the fragrant pine reeks.

What could be better than a walk in the woods?
At a time when the snow squeaks underfoot,
and the mood becomes good.
Fascinated by the beauty of pines,
In the wood, I stood.

Salutes of Peace

On the morning of January the first,
You will find the remains of burst,
noisy firecrackers and bright fireworks

which brought to people's faces smirks.

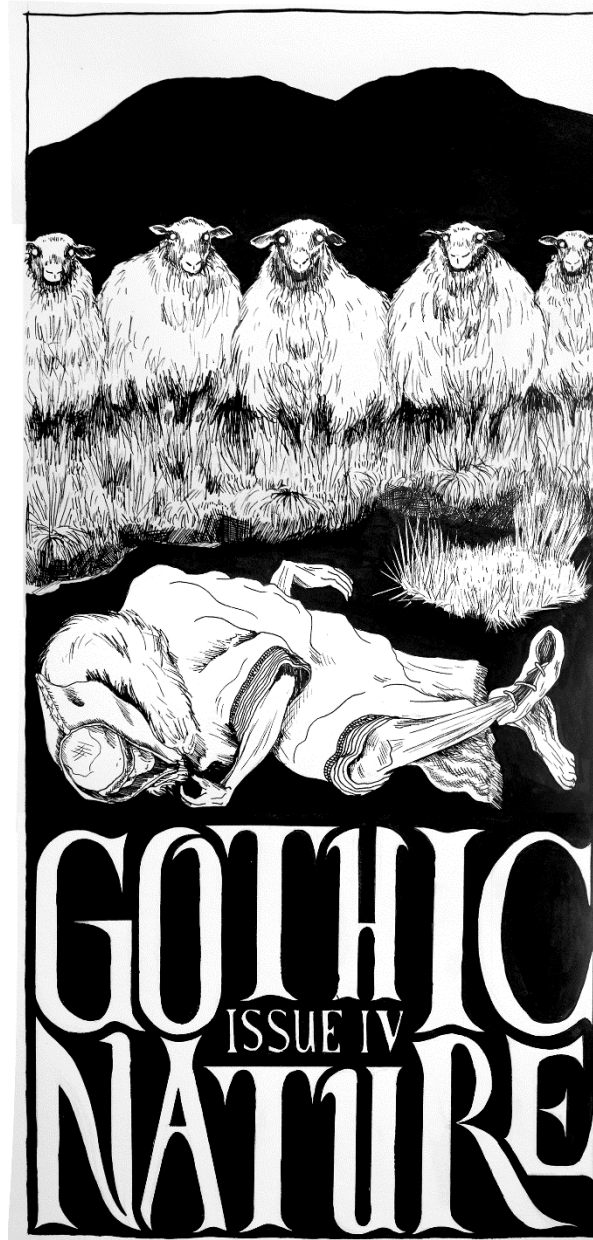
The sky bathes in bright colors,
it sparkles and tears without mufflers,
fireflies enchant the audience and don't coerce
to stand, as they would like, diverse.

The soul trembles kindly from the explosion,
behind the blows, there is no eviction,
from home, from the country, and from life.
Everyone will be calm, including my mother and miracle wife.

BIOGRAPHY

Vyacheslav Konoval is a Ukrainian poet whose work is devoted to the most pressing social problems of our time, such as poverty, ecology, relations between the people and the government, and war. His poems have appeared in many magazines, including «Anarchy Anthology Archive», «International Poetry Anthology», «Literary Waves Publishing», «Sparks of Kaliopa», «Reach of the Song 2022», and «Diogenes for Culture. Journal», «Scars of my heart from the war», «Poetry for Ukraine», «Rhyming», «La page Blanche», Norwich University research center, «Impakter», «Military Review», «The Lit». Vyacheslav's poems were translated into French and Polish languages. His poems also have been read at meetings of various poetry groups, including Newman Poetry Group, Never Talk Innocence, Voicing Art Poetry Reading for Ukraine, Worcester County Poetry, Brussels Writer's Circle, and Poets Anonymous May Middle-Met, and Brett Show by Andrea. He is a member of the Geer Poetry Group, Wales, UK, and of the Federation of Scottish Writers.

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Becomings

Words and photographic images by Angie Contini

'We are the gods we idolise. We are the creatures we keep killing.'



Day 3. hermit

I am (becoming) a hermit. I exist more in my mind than in the world. It's noisy in here. Between political and ecological suffering, where is solitude, joy, resilience, wonder? In the fall-out of this intersection, the idea of purpose is absurd. I've become a strange kind of theatre, eking out an existence on morsels of misanthropic anguish and apocalyptic hubris. I wander in the still wilderness of choice. I love some things more than other things. I know this continues to change me. I have toothpicks under my eyes.

Day 7. choice: memory, dream, fable, theatre

I'm on a rickety bridge. Its spine is decomposing across an existential ravine. On one side, a tragic farce, a red sea of eyes and mouths and hands and ribs, all warring and gorging, a wasteland of posturing souls, all begging for significance and longing for height and drunk on immortal dreams. On the other, a mourning song, an endless vanishing of trees and creatures and air and autumn and space and time and hope. I'm stuck between drama and requiem. I'm falling without moving, between two hells, two tales, two saviours, two martyrs, two fools. Love is the rickety bridge between the two. Choose. One.

Day 11. clarity

Say it. Say the thing you can't. Where, and how, do I find solace in *being* a human who, living with and within all this, can (conscientiously choose to) stay in this world? My eyes fall through the rotting planks and the fretting rope, straining to glimpse the ancient tale that waits to swallow my fall. Love and death are always together. With love comes suffering. Everything is connected.



Day 19. writing

Today I am reading a book on melancholy. Hildy is there, with her cautionary tales of humours and phlegm and bile and vapours and original sin. The lofty misogynists are also there, the ones who make stakes for witches and silence the sirens. And You are there, holding onto Her with your fierce plan. This book is a phoenix, its smoke rising quietly from its ashes, whispering to the listless few. I write down its wings, urgently and in slow motion, before they evaporate.

Day 20. despair

Despair is a circle on a line. New names replace old modes. History is a book of longing. Everything and nothing changes. We're too modern for the medieval mania of melancholia, or the mystical body of sorrow, or the romantics of despair. We've worn our suffering down to a spiritless discontent of the brain. Depression is the new plague, the new disease of the soul, the new mode of *corpus inertia* against which Pharmacy—the new religion—plays tyrannical god. Suffering is a nomad with its soul sucked out. We're all aimless, we're all sick with it. We're all perched on the rickety bridge. Sadness not only marks our disconnect with other humans. It gropes through the apocalyptic aura of the earth's anthropogenic imbalance, and the sensed impossibility of restoration. Between human atrocity and ecological destruction gapes a no-man's-land, an endless mortuary, a tyranny of mouths infinitely slack at the jaw. The white coats have us cornered. They line us up and tell us we're animals. Good. They don't know what they're dealing with, those three monkeys. We're not theirs to make a bleeding lamb. We've earned the right to a sorrowful soul—to our disenchantment with humanity—*sans* the condemnation of all puritan practitioners. Cold clinicians go heaviest from the ledge.

Day 67. eros and agape

What has become of you? Their bedtime stories have split you in two. They've strung you up between two phantom icons and worried you into submission. No longer potent, complex, sensual, now diluted, degraded, taboo. No longer humane, familial, communal, attainable, now unreachable, superhuman, vast. You've become a false war, a bad theatre, your own riveting drama of judgement. You've become a starved battle between base desire and sublime sacrifice. You fill colosseums; while your head is a gladiator drunk on primordial instincts, your heart is an extra-terrestrial, pedestalled muse. You're lost, rickety bridge. Choose. One. Be. One.



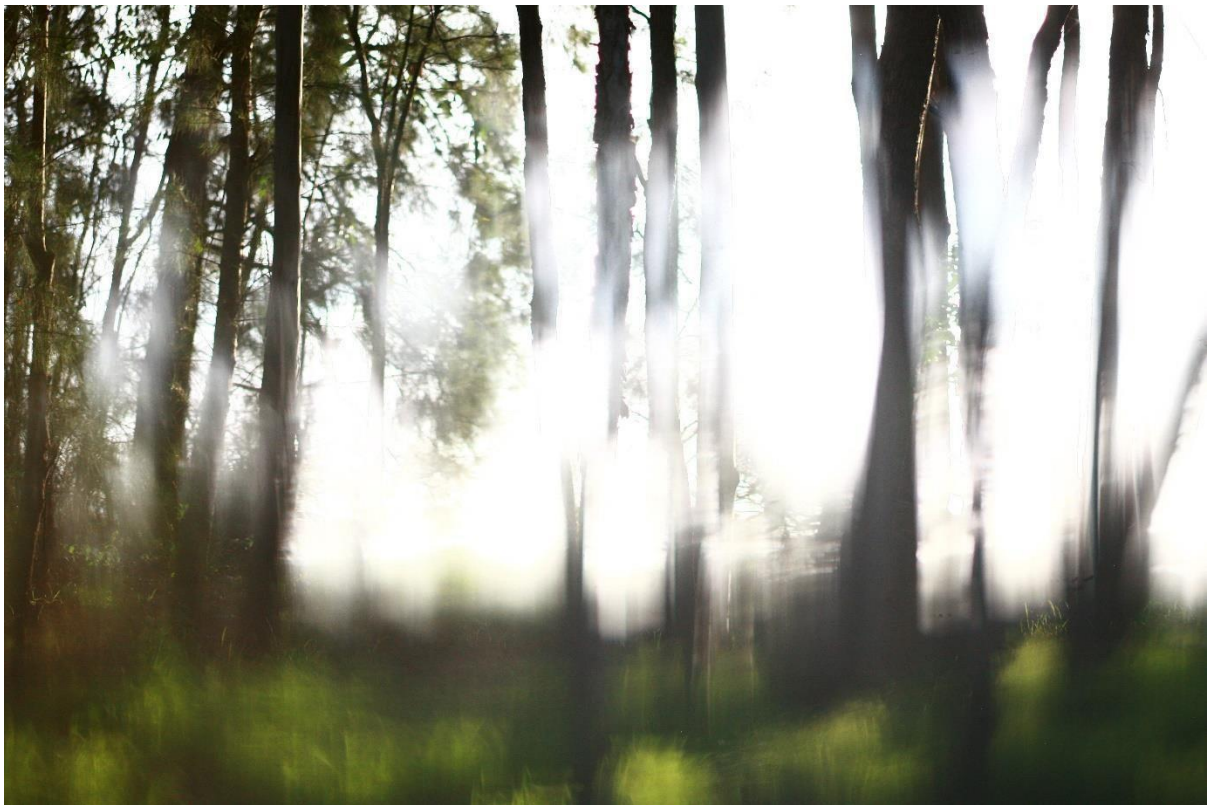
Day 82. cutting

Today I am at the collage. I'm snipping hundreds of monochrome heads from the book of Great White Rich Men and Their Wonderful Machines. I'm careful to cut off their ears. I make a river of vintage beheadings to stream out from otherworldly castles and through the geological cascade of evolution. I have an almost fatal malfunction with an expired paste, rescuing a puce sea fish with surprisingly wilful optimism. I say to the fish, this is how I should deal with Them, They're an expired paste in need of a stoic lesson. This is the work of you. This is every day.
day 70. what becomes of you

We've changed you. We've whittled you down to pitchforks at dawn. You've become an inelegant orgy on parched ground. You're more craving and slaking than giving and shaping. You move for yourself, giving us our weight, our number. Misogyny, misconduct, molestation, rape, polygamous incest, paedophilia; this is you as abuse, masquerading beneath false masks of joyless penance and sectarian obligation. This is you as contaminated shell. Loud cowards

fell and silence you from within. This is you as shapeless ghost, as the untouched sky. You're an impossible task, or a task for the super few.

Split in two, you're the measure of an unravelling world. There is too much of one and not enough of the other—too much for the self and not enough for others, too much for one's own brood and not enough for other broods, too much for humanity and not enough for nature. We are too many, and yet we continue to come...some of faith, some of glory, some of longing, some of duty, some of anger, some of will, some of hope, some of loss, some of fear, some of miracle, some of machine, some of chance. And all, we say, come of you. Your urgent potential—your great promise—is yet to be properly grasped; this awakening is yet to occur. It sprawls before us, through the turning world. Will you turn from these giddy patriarchal imaginings? You are the weather and the work. Come down to earth and shape this waste.



Day 123. scapegoats and jungles

Long ago they buried the difference between you and your mask. Your face was appropriated to perfection. Your distortion became standard practice. A jungle grew to groom you. The jungle ate you alive.

In the jungle, it is not you, but secrecy, misdirection and contempt which organises your quiet body. Trust is a plaything for flock leaders and head-hunters. Truth, testimony and memory are confiscated, rerouted, contaminated, anaesthetized. The mask is unimpeachable, the rules silent and certain. There is duty and obligation. There are unreachable pedestals and utopian visions of redemption. There are good girls and girls for whom no good will come. There are nuns and shy brides, and there are hysterics and whores. These are the laws of inclusion. We must acquiesce to the role given them, to the grooming that decides them. This is the way you're claimed and controlled. In the jungle, your truly expansive components—innocence, vulnerability, courage, curiosity, unknowing, resilience, intuition, honesty, enchantment—are mocked and silenced. In mocking and silencing, the work of you is also exiled as other. In the jungle, the search for your sky is assigned to gullible fools and hapless beggars. Here, there are no confessions or apologies, and whistle-blowers are promptly exiled to other jungles—boarding schools, mental hospitals, detention homes, prisons, uncles, the streets. For head-hunters, you're not a lesson, but a possession, a weapon, a trick. For kid goats, you become a game of wits and survival. If you survive the jungle, you go to the desert, you learn the wilderness. If you survive, you learn to become ironic and light, for it is the jungle, and not the desert, that is treacherous. In the desert you're safe. There are kid goats who wander freely there, kid goats whose backs are strong from carrying the weight of the jungle and learning how to put it down. Kid goats know the difference between you and your mask. Kid goats are wander freely there, kid goats whose backs are strong from carrying the weight of the jungle and learning how to put it down. Kid goats know the difference between you and your mask.

Kid goats are reimagining the world for the earth.



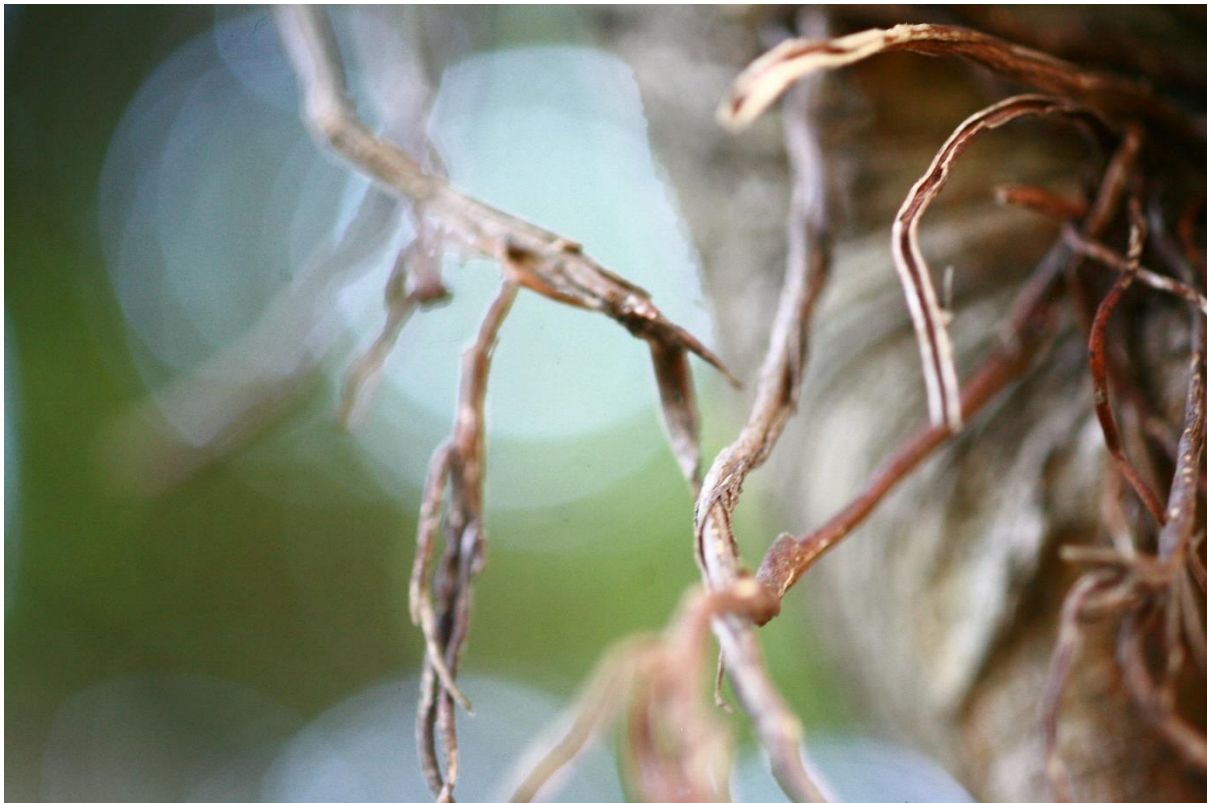
Day 91. a tale of Love and Earth

A long time ago I heard a story about Them and Us and You and Her. The prophets had passed it down. She, the Earth, was the metaphor for every felt thing. You, Love, were the ground upon which we danced. She and You were *both* necessity, *both* temptation, *both* banquet.

We're still the villain of the tale. We suck out your marrow and make you a ghost. We take her name in vain and spoil her skin. We sing her to sleep and cut her to pieces. We dance and we sing in spite of her roar. Beneath the dance, she is all prophecy-fulfilment, dissonant reciprocity and swift revenge. Against her defilement, she sings with her own spiralling force, falling into and out of herself, drawing us all into gravities and sinkholes and voids, throwing us up. This is the confirmation of a crisis in human kindness, the proof of the lost difference *between* you and the ugly mask we made of you. What creates the end of all human things if not a profoundly wilful naivety to the knot of you and her? The story is a spell to fall under. The prophets are silent now that the world has become a wasteland.

Day 33. playing

Today I am at the piano. I move through the tasks I pretend to resist, the ones I've augmented and shaped and come to lean on. I wander through the skies I've written that remain uncaught; the ones that imagine me fierce. I worry I'll never write another sky again. I revise the foundations of life, through the notes and the shapes and the flows. This is the work. I make water with you in my fingers.



Day 78. courage

We are the gods we idolise. We are the creatures we keep killing. We're wide-eyed mice clinging to noisy stories of glory. We're elephant scribes of epochs. We're bower birds and bin chickens. We're fierce beasts roaring in the wind. We're cloned sheep numbed by the mores of silencing. We're the three monkeys. We're fish tails and wings. We're all too creaturely.

And then we're not creaturely enough. Our love for our godly selves continues to lead us astray. Are we not yet *courageous* with you? Have we not yet learnt to practice you *well*? You're still a gladiator, all violation and mandatory procreation. You're still a celestial muse, all sacrifice

and unreachable perfection. Your foul infirmity is wed to the raping of the earth. The wellness of you is a difficult pursuit. The work of you is a task for warriors.

Day 42. growing

Today we're in our urban forest. We're secret gardeners, raising a magical haven. We're watering in the four hundred and thirty-three little green lives we've worried into the earth. Soon another four hundred will be worried in. It takes three hours each day to feed this banquet. It took thirty-three trips to the moon to get here. I feel your weight in the air. I remember the dirt witches as I snatch at the weeds. I am less mad at them than I pretend to be. We both know there are worse ones we've worried away. I remind myself not to be tired or timed or mocked. I think of the river of heads and cluck at the moon. This is the work of you. This is every day.



Day 178. falling well

I am tired of the lie of the fall. I am tired of the end of all things. I am tired of hope and despair and inertia and pharmacy. I want to live beyond love's forms of abuse, and the abuse of love. I want the world to reclaim the lost difference between love and abuse. I want to fall well, rather than 'be' the fallen.

Falling well is not immune from suffering, it does not evade or martyrise or melodramatise suffering. Emancipated from abuse, falling well is the work of searching, questioning, dreaming, experimenting, learning, trying, failing, playing, connecting, enduring, reaching, opening, reimagining and celebrating *despite* suffering. Falling well is the difference between my body falling and a false ground that opens out beneath me. I am not the rough tide that knocks me down. I am not the ravine that swallows my tale.

To fall well means to *practice*. To fall well means to practice pain and effort, to practice the pain of feeling, the effort of trying, the urgency of giving, and to know living less as suffering and more as striving. To fall well is to keep going, to do the things, all the things, that are needed and necessary and possible. To fall well means to live the difference between an anaesthetised life and one of feeling. To fall well means to *search*—to search for a wisdom that thrives in the earth and the air and the rain and the fire. To search is to *think*—not like a weed, groping for opportunity, and clawing at barren soil for domination, but like the stranger we need to be to ourselves, the stranger who longs to be safely at home in difference. To think is to leave the familiar, to wander in circles and spirals, to make love a movement of mystery and serendipity rather than the inertia of secrecy and solemnity.

This is what it means to reimagine the fall. This is the seismic shift we are in right now. Those who once fell secretly and silently are now falling openly, resiliently, defiantly, stoically. The shunned, the ruined, the mocked, the unhinged, the heretical, the damned, the lost souls; these are the ones who are learning how to fall well from the practice of falling apart and of being felled. You know who you are. This is for you. Patriarchal abusers, this is also for you, and you know who you are. Your persecutions, your defilements, your acts of wilful denial are only leading us further from the flock; your faith in myths of supremacy, civilisation and progress are only sending us deeper into the wilderness, and toward this search for the wisdom of love. In this movement wrought from despair, a new faith gathers; not at the foot of a cross, nor in the hallows of a dying academy, but at the clearing of the forest.



Day 199. love

The practice of love is a difficult pursuit. It *takes something* to resist the catatonia of sadness and step into the effort of love. Love is more than a fleeting tonic for suffering. Love is a kid goat wandering in the desert. Love is the smoke and the wing of the phoenix. Love is the fight song that disarms depression, misanthropy, apocalyptic hubris, mythical illusions. Love is learning to renew, to turn, to lighten up, to roar, to sing, to play, to plant out the garden, to raise a forest, to cover the soil. Poised between the earth and the world, love is the difficult work that is needed now.

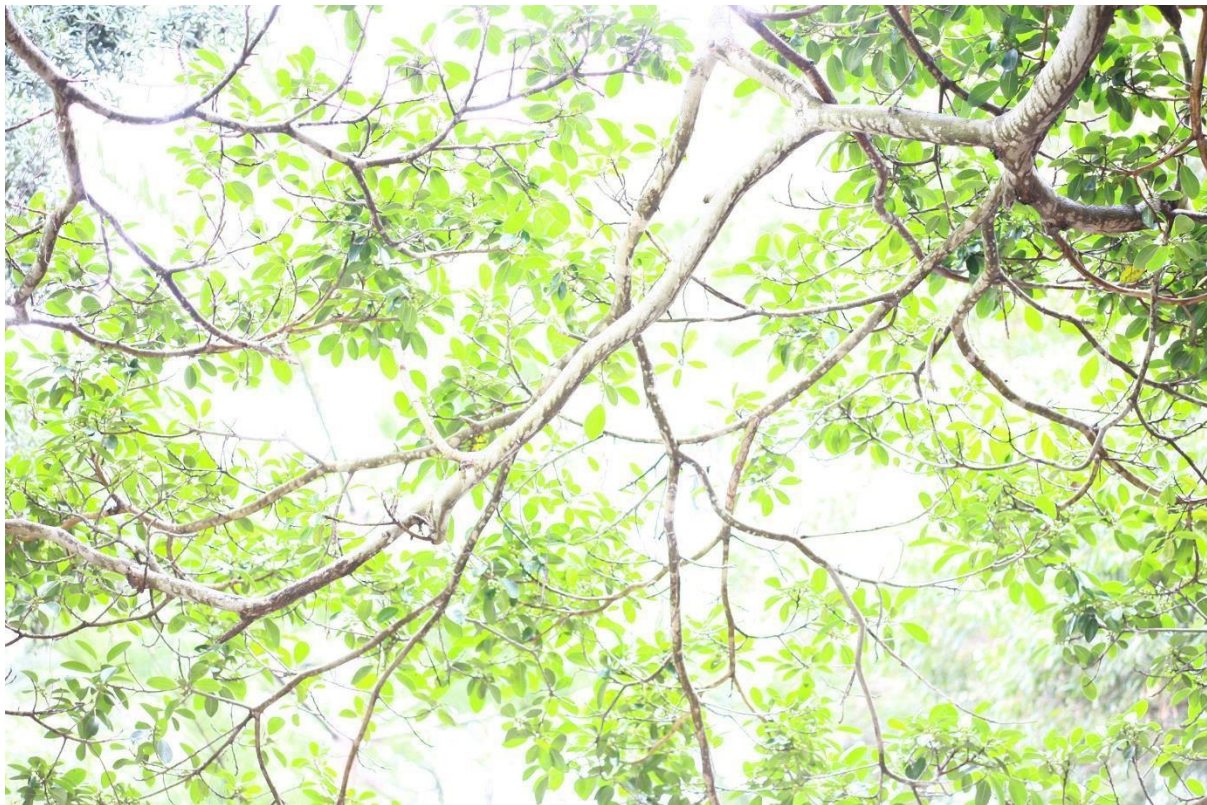
Day 248. becoming a warrior

We're all in it, we're all a part of this epic awakening. Everything is connected. Reimagining the future is a matter of rewriting the tale. Kid goats are no longer silent against a patriarchy that buries the difference between love and abuse. A movement is always gathering ground. Our time is for the warriors, the ones who are trained to love. Warriors of love are calling out those amnesiacs intoxicated with the illusion of an infinite resource. Warriors are charging

clumsy puppets as proud denialists of the crimes they commit. Warriors of love have their hands in the dirt, and their minds in the game. Warriors lose themselves in the wonder of the earth. The flood of misogyny is waning, not rising. The tidal wave of ecocide is falling on open eyes, not closed. The weight of the bridge is no longer taboo, no longer mocked, no longer silenced. Beautiful creatures are shaping the waste. New tales are influencing and tipping systems and orders and laws and visions. This is happening right now. We're all a part of it.

Day 1. something possible

I am a sleeper awake. I'm on the rickety bridge. I'm wandering in the desert and lost in the wilderness of choice. I'm learning to shape despair. My back is strong from putting down the weight of loss again and again. I'm beginning to dance with gravity. I'm writing a new script to believe in. I'm learning the words as I go. Repeat after me, I say to myself, love is the skin I'm in. I can handle more than I'm given. I'm here, right now, in this moment. I am not alone in this surging turn. I'm a part of the earth that I love. I'm learning to be a part of a world that I fear. The fall is a fable. The end of time is a myth. Something new is possible. Today I am going to the garden to raise a forest.



BIOGRAPHY

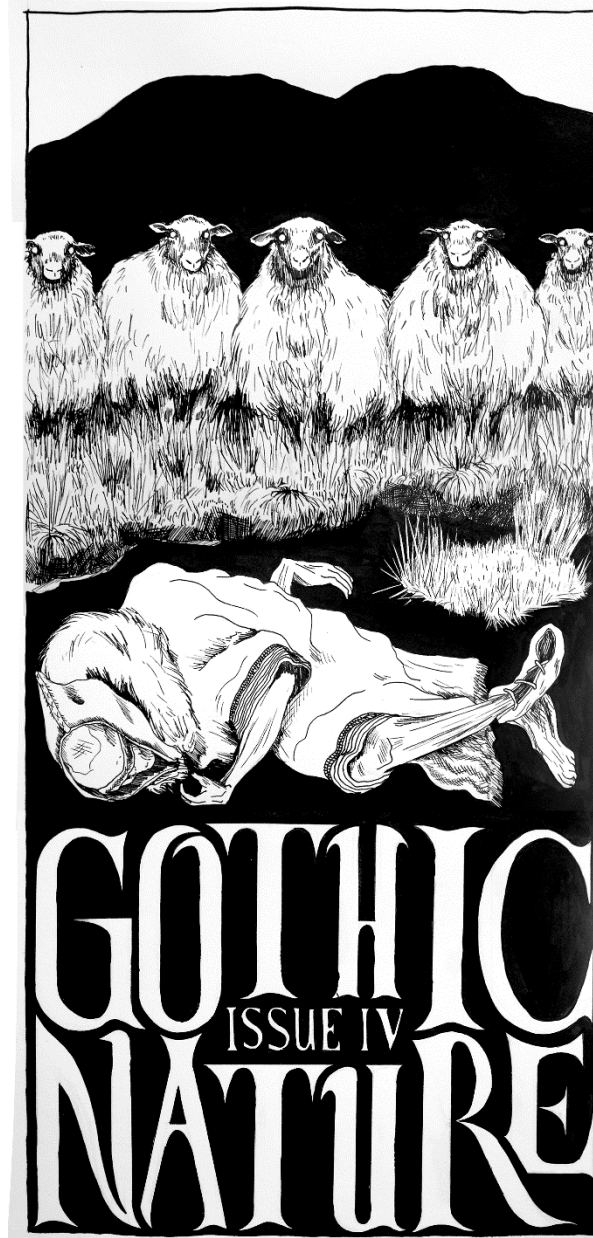
Angie Contini is an experimental interdisciplinary artist and writer living on Gadigal land (Sydney), with a PhD from the University of Sydney (2018). Specialising in the connection between art, nature and health, Angie works across a broad range of media, including photography, music, collage, dance, theatre and poetry. Conceptually, her work explores themes of nature, ecology, mythology, existence, time and identity. Angie is committed to an interdisciplinary practice that embraces complexity, privileges improvisation and experimentation, affirms the reciprocity between critical thinking and creative expression in all mediums, and forms the ground for a discipline of optimism.

Angie's publications, exhibitions and artworks can be viewed here:

W: www.behance.net/angiecontini

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GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE IV

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In the Garden of Monsters

Alex Carabine

'The garden crept insidiously around her; the darkness deepened beneath the leaves, transforming the path into uncultivated woodland.'

Sunlight thick as amber poured across the leaves of the surrounding woods, the rich light set to dancing as the dark branches swayed with languid grace, stirred by the warm breeze. Cutting across the face of the steep hill, the uneven road Ella stood upon acted as a precipice; she raised her hand to her eyes and looked out over the wooded valley of Bomarzo. The air was fragrant and hazy with golden dust, and Ella was not so much refreshed by the view, as seduced. She was surrounded by wildflowers that grew in luxurious profusion and she drew deep lungfuls of the honeyed air to clear away the queasiness she felt after the long bus ride. The little village behind her looked empty. Shops, cafés, bank, all closed, and no local wandered the quiet streets. Ella felt uneasy in the emptiness; she had been evicted from the minibus at an unmarked curb, and she couldn't see anything that looked like an official stop for the return journey to Rome. Still, she was here now. She would have to work it out later.

The village square stood halfway up the dramatic hillside. Following the sharply inclined road up on her left would lead to the medieval castle of the Orsini, but it was the road down, into the leafy basin of the valley, that interested Ella. She shrugged away her disquiet and began the sheer walk, trainers rasping lightly in the dust. The greenery on either side of the road was trembling and alive with quick lizards, the flash of iridescent wings and the monotonous song of crickets. Hot, lost and burning, Ella was utterly charmed. There was a little clearing where the road levelled at the bottom of the valley, it contained a stone basin and a pump that spewed icy spring water. Ella filled her bottle and bathed her arms, snapping a photo of the little water fountain and its veil of poppies with her phone. The walk on foot was much further in person than it had looked on the map, and Ella was tired by the time she reached the visitor centre of the *Sacro Bosso*. The building was disenchantingly modern—square and white and soulless. Once inside, Ella bought her ticket and an exorbitant mozzarella sandwich that she saved for later. Bored, the clerk handed her a map of the grounds that showed the paths that would reveal the monsters, which Ella accepted with a gleeful and badly pronounced

‘grazie!’ The clerk tautened her mouth in acknowledgement of Ella’s existence, and turned away.

Ella had expected a grand entrance to the garden, something monumental with a warning to unwary travellers carved above the gateway. Instead, the park was subtle. Its path meandered forward without theatrics, neat and ordinary. A few classical stone heads were tucked into the foliage, and Ella valiantly tried to ignore the disappointment that spread like a patina of rust across the bright surface of her enthusiasm. The garden crept insidiously around her; the darkness deepened beneath the leaves, transforming the path into uncultivated woodland. Ella gazed appreciatively at the tangle of trees—even if the ‘monsters’ were underwhelming, at least the scenery was striking.

Water crooned musically nearby. Curious, Ella wove her way through the undergrowth to find the source. Her eyes were dazzled by the sudden gloom beneath the denser trees, and she strained to examine the shadowy pile of rocks that troubled the water and caused the pleasing sound. Beneath her adjusting gaze, the largest boulder transmuted, mouth gaping, into a leviathan that rose from hidden depths in the shallow stream, eyes bulging with mindless horror. Ella gasped with delight and surprise. *This* was the kind of monster she had been hoping for! She took a photo of the moss-wet sculpture with her phone and looked eagerly around for more hidden creatures.

Later, fatigued from the hunt and with a phone full of photos, Ella climbed a small hill at the edge of the park, hoping to get a better view of the monstrous statuary from the elevated vantage point. Only the small Grecian temple that crowned the hill was visible. Rosy with sunburn, Ella walked to a small copse of trees behind the temple and sheltered in their shade. It was a peculiar group; a gnarled and contorted tree stood in the middle of the glade, encircled by a ring of slender, trembling trees. The central tree was richly textured, mottled with lichen, its trunk angled to one side as its branches reached back to the gardens. This natural arch formed an ideal canopy, and the space beneath was surprisingly, deliciously cool. Ella sat in the dappled shadows and picnicked on her sandwich and water, taking a selfie in front of the unusual tree.

Sleepily, she swiped through the gallery on her phone and selected some of her favourite pictures. Glossy fingernail tapping the illuminated glass, she sent them as a message to her sister back home.

It was raining in the English city; grey and slick. Grace's phone lit up and sang the little jingle she had assigned to her sister. She sighed, not particularly in the mood for another instalment of *Ella's Adventures in Italy*. But, knowing that her sister could get intense about messages 'left on read,' Grace decided it was best to get it over with. Besides, she could use a break. She left the office for a cigarette; huddling under the cold and draughty awning outside, she checked her phone. An abundance of photos crowded her screen. A valley. A rustic water fountain. Then, the sculptures—the whale, a double tailed woman with batwings, two fighting giants tearing each other asunder. Grudgingly, she admitted to herself that the statues were fantastic, and felt a snakeskin-shimmer of envy. The last photo was Ella's selfie: she looked effortlessly lovely with her tousled dark hair and sun-kissed glow. Grace sighed sourly, glancing at the tree behind Ella.

Amazing! She typed. *You look cute, as always, and that tree is really weird. Love the sculptures!* Heart-eyes emoji.

Ella's phone buzzed in her palm. 'Cute,' she scoffed. Nice one, Grace. She reread the message, looked at the photo of the tree behind her and frowned. It was dramatic, sure, but weird?

Thanks, big sis! She responded. *WDYM, weird?* Pensive emoji.

'Big sis.' That little bitch. Grace took a drag on her cigarette, felt her stomach rumble with the void of a skipped lunch and looked closer at the photo. The gnarled trunk definitely looked strange. Maybe Ella simply hadn't noticed—not surprising.

The knot over your shoulder looks like a hand! Laughing emoji. *Maybe just a shadow in the photo?* Shrugging woman.

Ella frowned at the message. Was Grace laughing at her? Anxious not to appear foolish, Ella opened the photo and zoomed in. There really wasn't anything there to suggest a hand.

I don't see it, haha! Peering eyes emoji.

The phone trilled, but Grace gave herself the luxury of finishing her cigarette before looking at the message. She snorted with irritation. Opening the photo again, Grace was startled. The bark before had only looked like a mossy hand resting against the trunk, but now a forearm was visible, disappearing at the elbow out of shot around the tree. The fingers were tensed against the bough, clawing into the surface. Ella smiled obliviously in the foreground.

OMG, so spooky and cool! Grace wrote, bored. Is it some sort of new app? A gif?? Mind-blown emoji.

Ella checked the photo again. She looked like she was having a good time and the tree looked like a fucking tree.

Grace, what are you talking about?! You're freaking me out.

A screenshot arrived in response. Ella stared with creeping dread at the photo: an arm had torn free from the trunk and was grasping with gnarled fingers towards the Ella in the image, its torn and sap-clotted fingernails almost grazing the girl's bare shoulder. She still smiled, but the leafy shadows had congealed across her skin, hollowing her eyes. Upset and unsettled, Ella glanced over her shoulder at the unchanged tree.

Grace, WTF is wrong with you?! This is sick.

Grace was furious. What a ridiculous, childish prank.

Oh, grow up, Ella. The joke's over.

She dropped her phone into her handbag and returned to her desk. Jabbing at the keyboard, Grace felt nervous. Anxious. Guilty, and irritated for feeling guilty because she

hadn't done anything wrong. She sighed, defeated. Time to be the adult, as usual. She pulled out her phone and dialled Ella's number, wincing at how much this would cost.

It rang, briefly, and was picked up.

'Hi, Ella.' Grace sighed, conciliatory.

Silence. Or, almost silence. Grace could hear a breeze, birdsong, rustling leaves and the creaking of boughs. Then—a gasping cry; sharp, sudden and choked off. The line went dead.

Appalled, Grace looked at her screen and saw the photo. Ella was finally looking over her shoulder.

Grace dialled again.

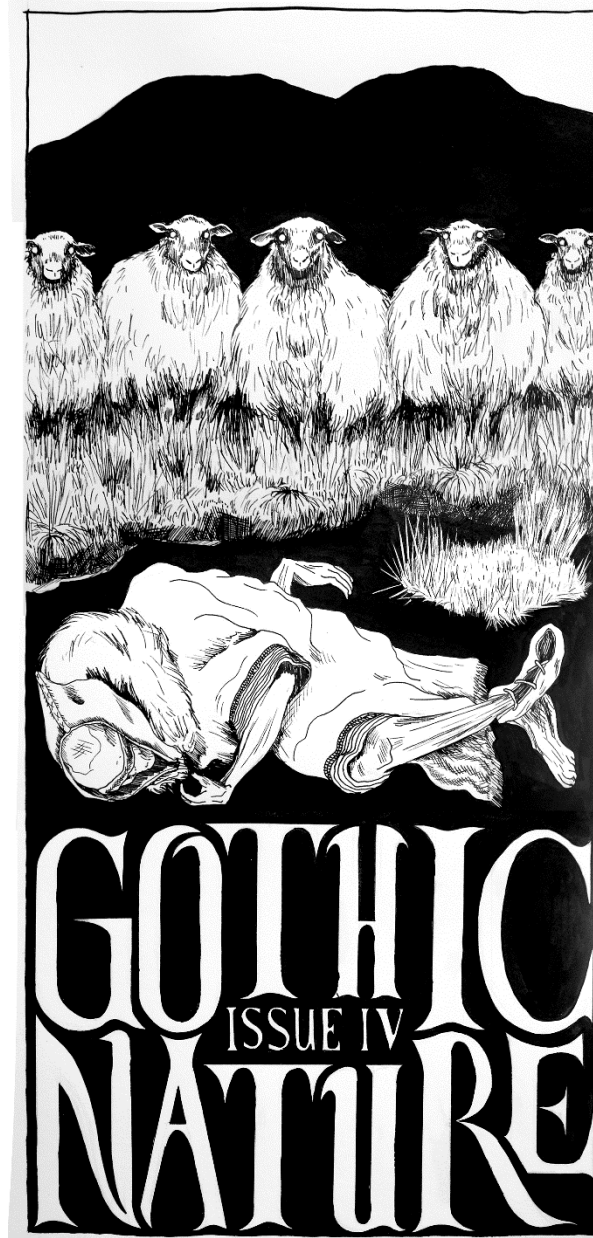
It rang.

And rang.

BIOGRAPHY

Alex Carabine is a third year PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Liverpool. She graduated top of her classes in 2018 and 2019, won several awards for academic excellence, and was granted the competitive School of the Arts Studentship to fund her research. Her aim is to uncover the submerged influences of medieval culture in nineteenth-century Gothic literature, and her work on the evolution of the werewolf from medieval literature into Victorian Gothic fiction will appear in the upcoming Bloomsbury collection, *Future Werewolves*. Alex is writing a novel inspired by her research.

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The Accidental Meadow

Cal Hemming

'This behemoth will be saved from agony and given back its infancy.'



The 'Accidental Meadow', which sits in the shade of the Worcester viaduct. The viaduct was built in the mid-19th century and many of its arches now house creative studios, and restaurants.

In Summer,

beside ceaseless combustion of liquified life, a space of green is allowed to thrive. Flowers of Flanders scattered among freakish dandelions and daisies, given licence to grasp the sun. Smaller geodes of blue and violet petals lie within, unnamed on my tongue, struggling for light. How can such a meadow bloom? Drinking from stream of monoxide, sat beneath the shadow of industry whose arched bricks hide half the sun. But veins of mortar are failing; helped by time, nature's purest ally, the meadow melds with clay. Parasitic bushes suck blood dry, and cling like barnacles stoically, as this relic strains to hold carriage after carriage.

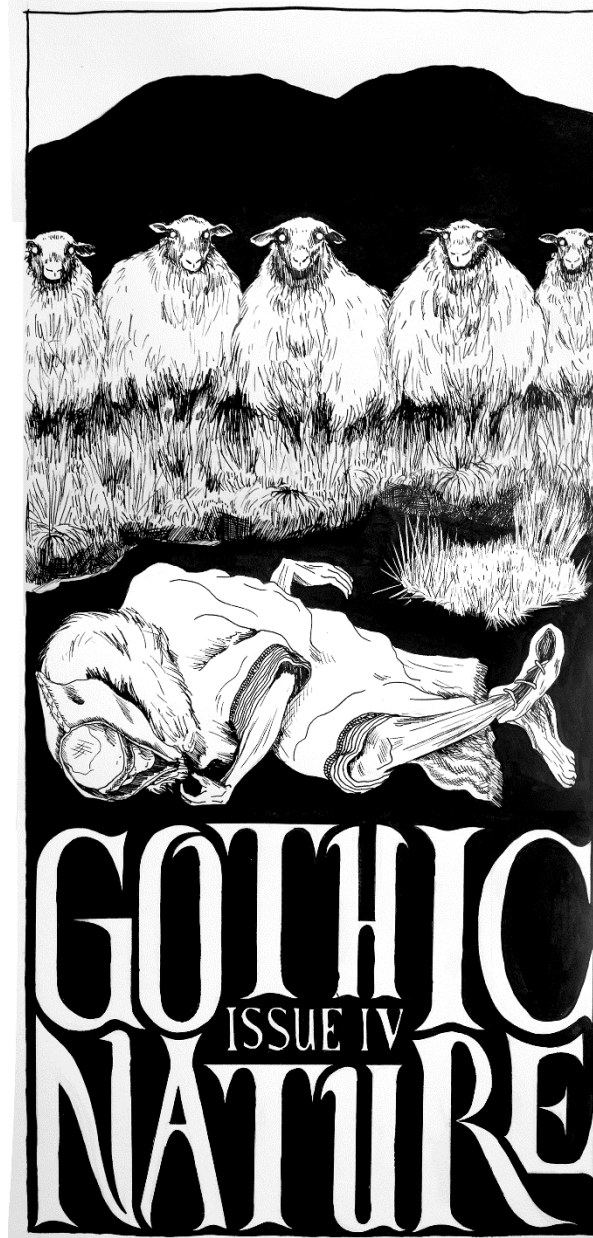
Autumn.

This accidental meadow is tamed, identified, appraised, extracted. A manicured green carpet sits beneath scant daisies; trinkets for the wrists and heads of picnickers sat with twisted smiles. Roots have quickened pace, searching hard to strangle monolithic heart. But distorted figures climb high with sickle and scythe, brick and mortar. This behemoth will be saved from agony and given back its infancy. No longer shall industry strain to carry passengers, who travel as fast as sun light over the conformed meadow below.

BIOGRAPHY

Cal Hemming is a mature second year undergraduate student, studying for a Joint Honours degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Worcester. Cal is currently producing a poetry portfolio entitled *What is Wild*, of which *The Accidental Meadow* is a part of. *What is Wild* focuses upon ecocritical ideas of humanity in conjunction with the natural world.

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The Old Growth of Harstine Island

Nick White

'It wrapped us close and refused to let go.'

HALEIGH

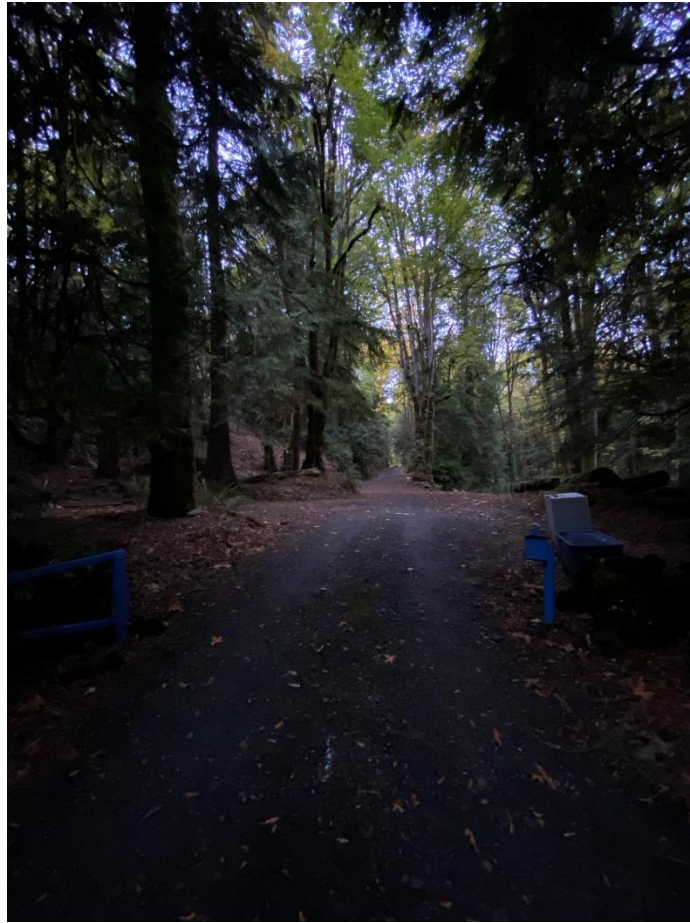
Eight days passed since Veronica's sister received the text that started it all:

On Harstine Island in northern Washington. Secluded. Spotty reception. It's a rainforest up here. Creepy in a beautiful way. Visit if you can. Possibly someone living upstairs.

It didn't sound like Veronica, the sentences too fragmented, the thoughts scattered. Since then, Haleigh hadn't been able to reach her sister, maybe from the bad cell reception. What was she supposed to do—just show up to northern Washington unannounced? But yesterday, while walking the dogs in the Arizona heat, Haleigh stooped to admire the sprout of a new tree poking from between two jagged rocks. She decided, right then, to book a plane ticket to Seattle and drive the two hours west, along the Puget Sound, to Harstine Island. Something about that tree, the way it fought for life, reaching toward sunlight, told her she needed to go.

*

Haleigh arrived on the island later than expected, almost dark. A gray sky had followed her. Guided by GPS, she hesitated before turning onto a gravel road near the densely forested end of the island. There she followed the signs deeper into forest, trees coated in moss, limbs reaching up from a floor of ferns. By the time she passed the gate into the property, the sky had darkened, the last rays of filtered light pushing through the clouds.



The driveway at dusk.

After winding through the remainder of the gravel driveway, her rental car's headlights illuminated her sister and brother-in-law's car, parked on the side of a two-story home, with nobody else around. A rush of relief, until she remembered they didn't even know she was here. The door to the bottom floor, which faced a cove of the Puget Sound, remained unlocked. She knocked.

'Hey, guys, it's me,' Haleigh said quietly. 'I got your text about visiting. Sorry—I couldn't get through on the phone.'

Her voice pierced the forest, shooting across the sound, ungodly loud. The world was so still here.

Nobody answered. Next, she tried the porch above, on the second floor. No answer, either. Veronica and her husband, Anthony, had rented this house—Haleigh wasn't sure for how long—as part of their six-month road trip through the American West.

Not knowing what else to do, Haleigh sat on the porch to face the water, and checked her phone every few minutes, calling, once again, without an answer. A houseboat floated nearby, quietly anchored in the cove.



A houseboat in the distance.

It had been stupid coming here without confirming the trip with Veronica. Too impulsive. With full darkness arriving, the sounds of the night turned eerie, then downright frightening. At first, they resembled someone trying to throw up. She froze. It had come from the water, maybe from the houseboat. Then a gurgle, deep. Then a throaty bark.

What the hell, she thought.

The lights remained dark inside the house. Nobody was there. She slid open the door, unlocked. Then she walked inside, turned on her cellphone's flashlight for guidance, and quickly locked the door behind her. She couldn't remember if she'd locked the doors to her rental car, but at this point, she didn't plan to go back out there to check.

*

The rental home was nice—modern, clean, with white area rugs that contrasted with the gray, rainy climate of northern Washington. Veronica and Anthony's belongings were scattered—suitcases, plastic bins of toiletries, coffee. Anthony's finished draft of a novel, *THE THORNS OF PENCHANT GULTCH*, sat beside the bed, with scribbles of edits throughout. Wherever they had gone, they hadn't prepared to leave.

A pamphlet for Olympic National Park rested on the nightstand. It sounded like the kind of thing Veronica and Anthony would do, visiting the park. Pictures in the pamphlet showed a temperate rainforest within an hour of the Pacific Ocean, the Quinault rainforest, named after the Indigenous people of the area. Old growth trees, giants, dominated the canopy, where not a single inch of ground off-trail went uncovered by some form of plant life.





The nearby rainforest.

Haleigh remembered the tree from Arizona, the tiny sprout, that had pushed her to come here. How wild, she thought, for such massive growth to come from a seed.

She peeked around the window curtains in the bedroom. Down below, the lone light from a houseboat shone in the dark. She checked her phone. Maybe Veronica and Anthony had decided to camp in the national forest for the night. She wasn't going to get any sleep, and she didn't feel like sitting around, doing nothing, for ten hours until sunrise, which might not ever happen here, the sky a perpetual gray orb.

With a flashlight from the nightstand in-hand, she summoned the courage to go from bedroom to living room, from living room to the sliding glass door. She unlocked it and stepped outside onto the porch. The fire pit went unused. Maybe Anthony and Veronica had roasted marshmallows a day earlier, carefree, listening to the same creepy sounds of the night.

The ground that led to the private, rocky beach on the shore was wet. No surprise. An actual rainforest was nearby. Slugs six inches long hid in the grass under the light from her flashlight. Haleigh made her way down to the beach. A stillness had settled in her. Creepy in a

beautiful way. She understood now. Chairs, crab pots, and a rope swing littered the secluded beach. She walked around. Someone had placed a marine animal's jawbone on a nearby log, cleaned by the water. Somehow, this didn't surprise her. It all seemed, well, *right*.



A jawbone from the cove.

Not far away, the sole houseboat in the cove loomed, with a single light. The throaty, gurgling sound rose again, louder now, nearby.

A seal, she realised. They were out there, almost motionless, asleep on the mostly submerged remains of a dock. She remembered Veronica mentioning how orca whales often passed through here, too.

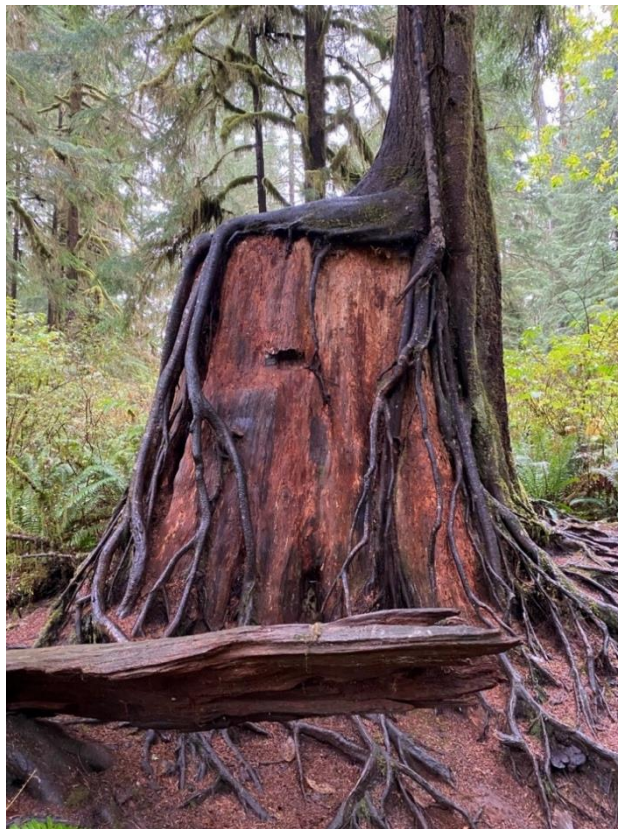
A kayak on the edge of the water had been turned sideways, as if drifted ashore. Inside, a jacket lay across the seat. It looked like Veronica's. A paddle leaned against a log beside the jawbone, which Haleigh rushed toward, grabbed—both the paddle and jawbone, for a reason she would only later understand.

VERONICA & ANTHONY

We didn't want Haleigh following us. Not anymore. Not after knowing what we now know. There was no good way to tell her that. We couldn't. The rainforests were incredible, sure. The density of plant life and the magnitude of commanding trees inspiring. But so little sun. The people folded into themselves here, employing their skeptical stares. We didn't appear to have a choice. There were worse places to be, though. We'd kayaked out at night to investigate the seals near the houseboat—the rest, we weren't sure.

We only remember pulling beside the houseboat, and hearing a whisper, a voice, as if coming from the water itself, with each gentle lap. It lured us closer. What yanked us inside wasn't a person, but what we learned, with daylight the next day, something less terrifying, though more powerful. It wrapped us close and refused to let go.

You are part of us now, it said, with the embrace of a womb.



The hunger of new growth.

HALEIGH

Haleigh had heard a story, once, of a houseboat that came alive at night, eating people, consuming them whole. She didn't know if it was based on a real-world legend or not, but she was thinking about it now, while seals barked on a dock nearby, as she parked the kayak against the houseboat's floats, holding the jawbone tight in her palm like a charm.

'Veronica? Anthony? Hey, you in there?'

She wasn't scared, exactly. It was like going toward something, water rushing downhill—it just made sense. She thought she heard something. A voice, a whisper. What sounded like a single word: *leave*.

The hand that reached for her wasn't a hand. It slithered out of the doorway, a curious vine, searching. She considered severing it with the paddle, but it looked sad, hungry, needing. It was the root of a tree, she realised, come alive. What could she tell her baby daughter if she killed a living being for no other reason than being afraid of it?

None of this surprised her. It should have, but it didn't. Somehow, she had expected an otherworldly experience, ever since crossing onto the island, where the plant life, the trees, the ferns, moss, beetles, slugs, mushrooms, all had free reign.

Haleigh held out the jawbone as an offering, and the root curled around it, appearing satisfied. It retreated back into the houseboat. A life recycled, she thought. The planet reincarnated, over and over. Suddenly, it made sense for a tree to eat a bone—isn't that what usually happened, just over longer periods of time?

VERONICA & ANTHONY

We could see Haleigh on the boat outside, but she couldn't see or hear us. The tree loosened its grip when she offered the bone—these trees, these massive, old growth trees in this part of the country. We didn't blame this one, the severed stump. How it came to live on a houseboat, we

didn't know, but it was lost, hungry, abandoned, and that one offering from Haleigh—a sign of love—was enough for the tree to let us go.

We didn't run away. Instead, we watched with unexpected sympathy as this starving tree cradled the jawbone as a treasure, folding it into the meat of its stump for digestion. It seemed momentarily happy. It was stranded out here on a houseboat in the middle of a salty cove, where seals and orcas and the monsters of the Pacific cruised through. It existed only in the forest's memory.

'Babe, your chest,' Veronica said.

She touched her fingers across the mark of the tree's hold—the imprint of the root that once promised to never set us free, branded across Anthony's chest, around his shoulders, across his back, looping around his stomach and legs. Veronica had them, too.

Haleigh hugged us when she saw us. The marks didn't hurt. They were part of us now, the same as skin.

'I just *knew*,' Haleigh said. 'The trees, the sprout, I don't know how it makes any sense, but they *told* me.'

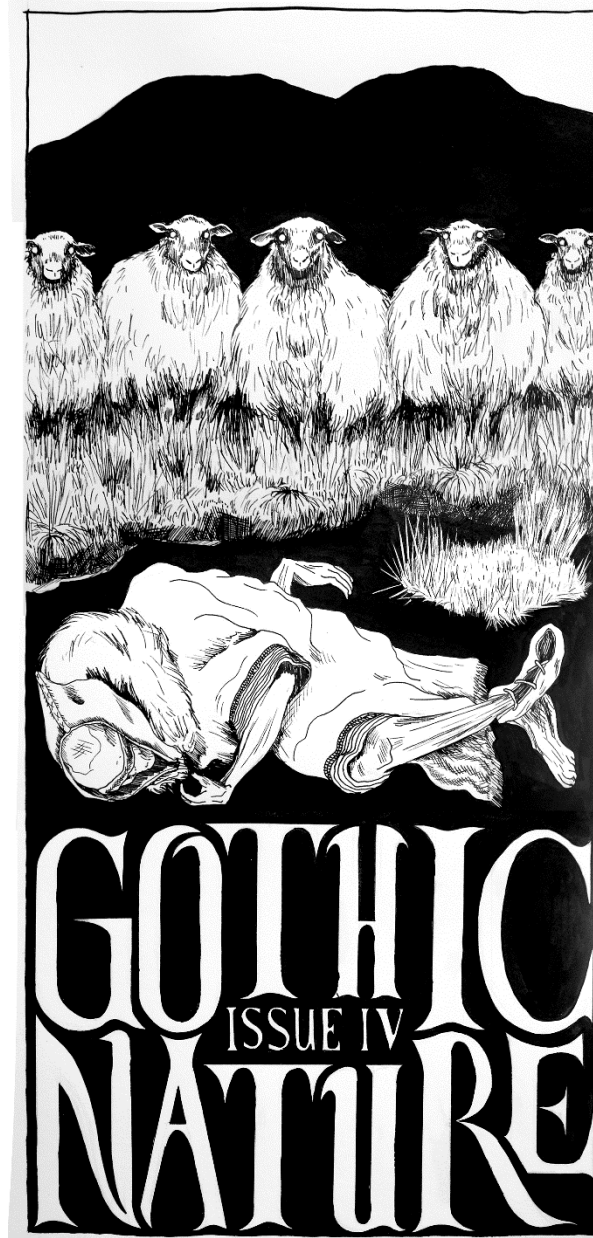
And she was right. We understood. This place, the reminder of what the world had once looked like, demanded we remember. While paddling back to shore, we pledged this time, all three of us, to listen.

BIOGRAPHY

Nick White's short stories and essays have appeared in various publications in the US, including *Cold Mountain Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Raleigh Review*, and *Still: The Journal*, among others. A hybrid engineer-writer who earned a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering and a master's in Creative Writing, he currently works as an engineer in the solar energy

industry while seeking representation for his recently completed ecohorror novel, *The Legend of Those Who Wait*. For more information, please visit www.nicholasawhite.com.

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Three Poems from *Siberian Spring*

Catherine Greenwood

*'Did they mourn their dead
as elephants do?'*

Stories

Huntsmen and herders say
mammoths still walk the earth,
have witnessed the immense
shadows moving like slow shaggy
storm clouds across the horizon,
tree-stump feet shaking the taiga.

Like the blade hoisted by the hero
from its hiding place, or the hag-ridden
hut that stalks the woods on living stilts,
the things raised by their tellers

shake off the glacial ice melting
on matted pelts and live as legends

live: *spell-borne, as clouds
are carriers of rain.*

Mammoth Graveyard

Relics from a reckless dig,
their luckless bones
are wreckage,
hasty slagheaps piled

in the minefields of churned muck;

rarer, skeletons entire
wrapped in the worn woolly
rugs of themselves.

Memories long as their tusks
are stored in the blasted strata
of the mud-face, corrupted

irretrievable data:

*Did they mourn their dead
as elephants do?*

White Gold

A mammoth tusk is a fairy-tale
giant's nicotine-brown fang.

The weight of it alone
is humbling. Awe is encoded
in the cross-hatched marks
inscribed like scripture in the ivory core.

A buyer offering money enough
to pay the petrol bill / replace
the truck / repair the roof / open
a restaurant / send the eldest
to plumbing school / surprise the wife
with a washing machine / fix
those teeth / dine on caviar and drink
the best vodka / is waiting

in a Siberian village.

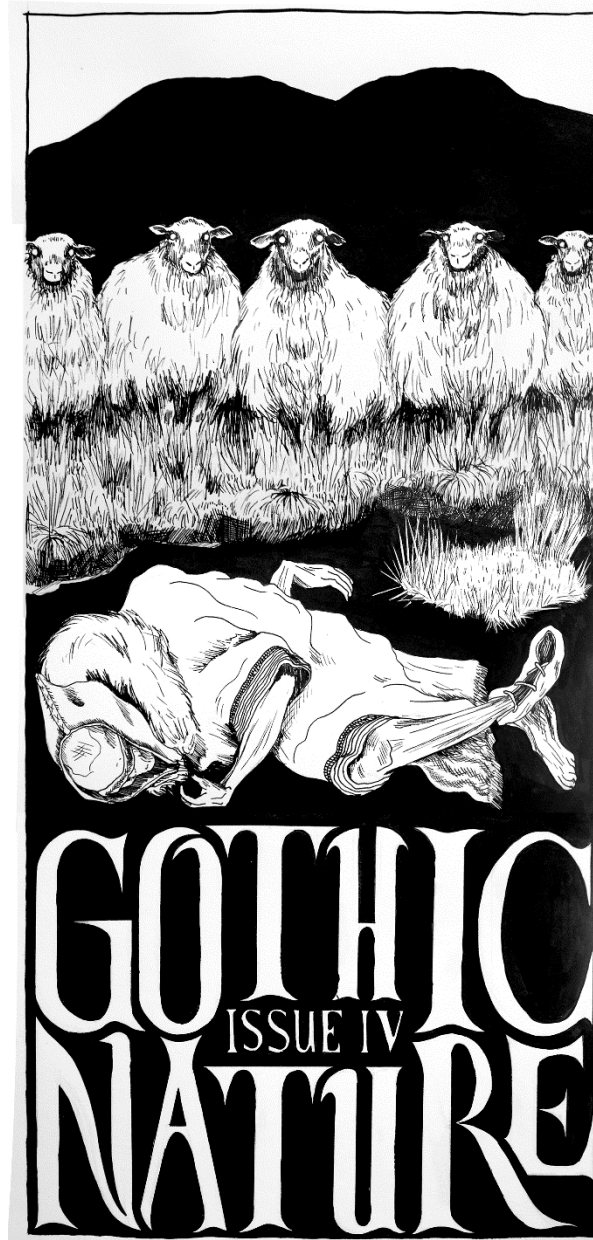
In China the glorious tusk will be whittled by an artisan
into a bough blossoming with an intricate froth of fancies

that will never
wither, die and disappear.

BIOGRAPHY

Canadian poet **Catherine Greenwood** is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing Poetry/Gothic Studies at the University of Sheffield, working on a dissertation titled *Gothicising a Poetics of Displacement: Immigrants/Effects*. In Canada her poetry has received recognitions such as a National Magazine Gold Award and a *Kiryama Prize* Notable Book Citation, and her work has also appeared in publications in the UK and USA. Her poem titled ‘The Grolar Bear’s Ballad’ was a 2019 finalist for the CBC Literary Prize and is included in the anthology *Poetics for the More-than-Human World*. Another eco-gothic piece, ‘Lenskaya Horse’, was selected for inclusion in the 2020 *Ginkgo Prize* anthology. Other poems from a manuscript-in-progress titled *Siberian Spring* are forthcoming in *Reliquiae* and *Canadian Literature*’s special *Poetics and Extraction* issue.

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Poet Along Bell's Brook and Shinrin-Yoku

Kirby Olson

'every lake, every tree, every mountain, has a song.'

Poet along Bell's Brook

In Australia among the Aborigines
there is a keeper of song of each place:
every lake, every tree, every mountain, has a song,
passed from generation to generation, like a dream.
In America, in small towns, it's the poets
who're keepers of the brooks' ballads.

Shinrin-Yoku

Walked in the swamp for the first time this summer,
down past an old accordion tube,
under stickers, past an ash and a cherry
and a massive white pine,
until I reached a small clearing.

I could sense a mountain lion nearby
and panicked, clearing out
as bugs bit and stickers sucked blood.
Overhead were knob-knotted dead trees.
I fled over ferns and ivies

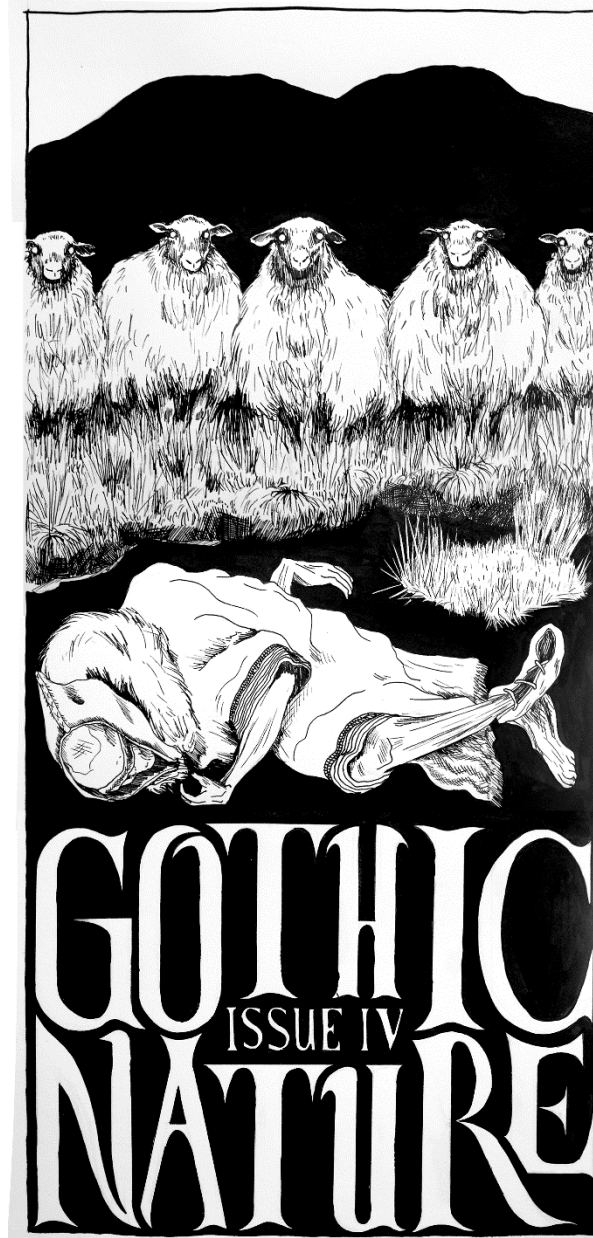
until I got back to the prairie
next to the chiropractor's house.
I saw a purple and a yellow flower.

I took photos and put my shoes back on.
Some days, nature scares the hell out of me.

BIOGRAPHY

Kirby Olson is a poet living in upstate New York in the Catskill Mountains. He often walks in a tiny nearby swamp (12 acres) and this is generally pleasant, but sometimes his imagination gets the better of him. His book *Christmas at Rockefeller Center* (WordTech 2015) is available through Amazon.

GOTHIC NATURE



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Celebrations and Destructions of the Natural World

Angie Contini



Title: *Ecology No. 6* (2020) Hand-cut collage in vintage timber frame



Title: *Ecology No. 3* (2020) Hand-cut collage in vintage hand-carved timber frame



Title: *Ecology No. 7* (2020) Hand-cut collage in ornate vintage frame



Title: *Night Forest* (2021) Mixed media, hand-cut collage and acrylics in vintage ornate frame

BIOGRAPHY

Angie Contini is an experimental interdisciplinary artist and writer living on Gadigal land (Sydney), with a PhD from the University of Sydney (2018). Specialising in the connection between art, nature and health, Angie works across a broad range of media, including photography, music, collage, dance, theatre and poetry. Conceptually, her work explores themes of nature, ecology, mythology, existence, time and identity. Angie is committed to an interdisciplinary practice that embraces complexity, privileges improvisation and experimentation, affirms the reciprocity between critical thinking and creative expression in all mediums, and forms the ground for a discipline of optimism. Angie's first full-length poetry and hand-cut collage book, *fierCe*, is published with Flying Islands Books (2023).

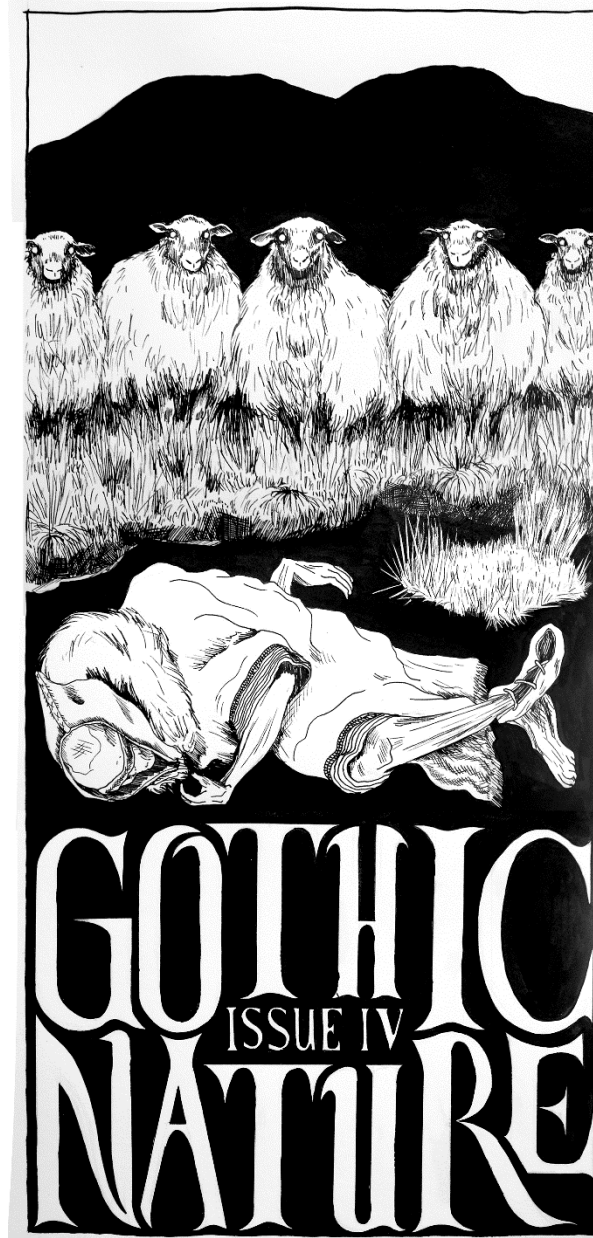
Angie's publications, exhibitions and artworks can be viewed here:

W: www.behance.net/angiecontini

IG: @angiecontini

fierCe: [Flying Islands Books](#)

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Bats

Rick Hudson

'A pixie's trick. And then they are gone.'

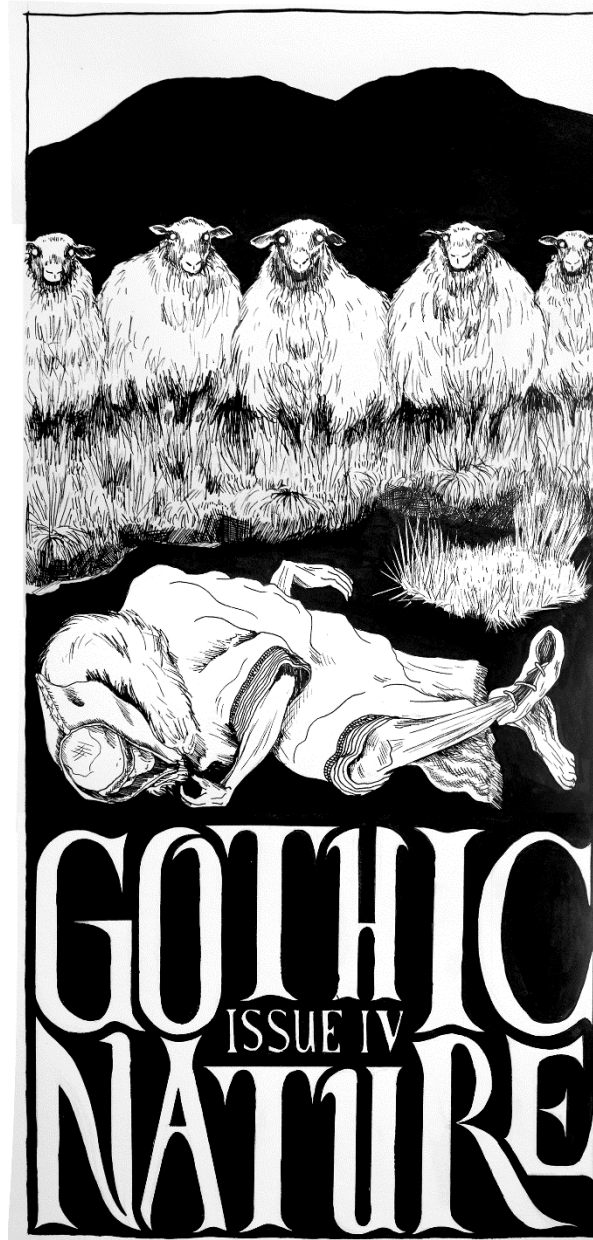
We were deep into Clock House Woods when she told me to turn off the torch. It has to be totally black, she said, for it to work. She hissed a stage whisper, as if she were trying to excite a child. Not far now, but be careful. Be careful, yes. In the absolute darkness my feet fouled between and slipped on the knotted sprawling roots. Next to me in the darkness and a coat that was far too big for her, she was tinier than ever. Her eyes would be shiny with excitement; she was giddy with her gift of mischief and couldn't wait. And then eventually, here, we are here. Yes here, where the trees were so big and old they were black against the dark. I looked up and saw the branches scratching for Orion. Now turn on your torch, but keep it pointed at the ground. Like this? Yes! Beneath me the cold soil sinewed with the roots of ancient birches. Now do this! She flung her arms in the air. I swung the torch beam up into the trees with both hands and the black came alive. Circling with hysteria above us and flexing like starlings they made only the smallest of noises. Too fast for birds: bats. And they vortex around us and her laughter jangles with her naïve ingenuity. A pixie's trick. And then they are gone. I catch her grinning in the torchlight. Again? Yes, again!

BIOGRAPHY

Rick Hudson is an English Literature and Creative Writing academic who specialises in the study of horror / Gothic; fantasy and sf texts principally from a Bakhtinian and psychoanalytic perspective. He is also a writer in his own right whose fiction includes both experimental literary fiction, popular horror fiction and fiction which is located in the much-disputed territory between these two poles. He has seen his fiction published alongside that of writers including Neil Gaiman; Clive Barker; John Carpenter (yes, THAT John Carpenter); Shaun Hutson; Bentley Little; Storm Constantine; Graham Masterton and Guy N. Smith as well as broadcast

by BBC Radio. He also contributes articles to consumer magazines available from W.H. Smith's and other major retailers that focus on the gaming industry.

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Incident at Mermaid's Cave

Michael Wheatley

'Tides were tricks and waves were wiles. The sea made you think you were safe.'

All you had to do was jump. That was the game. A couple of seconds spent falling before you broke the surface and the current carried you to shore. Sand would scratch your cheek as you gulped in air, coughing and spluttering and safe. The waves would stretch out to your shoulders, trying to take you back. If the other children were to be believed, you would want to do this again and again and again.

"You don't have to do this," said a kind girl with a warm smile and wet hair. "It doesn't mean anything. Not really. The others just do it to show off."

'But you've done it. Everyone's done it. And you weren't scared.'

Their class were lined up along a thin ledge in Mermaid's Cave. Like lemmings, his mother would have said. Not that she could know any of this. The mouth of the cave had been worn into a woman, her legs melting into the water. When the light shone at just the right angle, the sea shimmered like scales. It was beautiful, in its own way. Except for the black rocks which reached up around her.

At the back of the cave, the stone had been washed away into a kind of staircase. The kind of staircase where you sometimes had to jump from step to step and it was always slippery. It curved back around, ending in an overhang just above the water. There was always a queue and a crowd. This was a shared moment.

For months, the Divining Pool had been all anybody wanted to talk about during lessons. They would share their experiences of the journey, construct their own personal miracles. The name had come from a story someone had once been told; one of the ones you remembered, not one of the ones you forgot. One of the stories you tried to keep with you, for fear of losing it and forgetting what you lost.

‘Everyone’s scared. No matter what they try to tell you.’ The kind girl nodded her head towards Ennis, one foot above the pool, the other firmly on the rock. ‘He’d have jumped by now if he wasn’t.’

They gathered an hour or two before sunset on a Thursday, after school and while their parents were listening to the Father. If they saw what they were doing, lined up like lemmings, then the water would be the least of their worries. But because everyone was in on the game, they made sure to always leave a couple of lookouts on the shore. When those in Mermaid’s Cave saw a stone splash into the water, that meant it was safe. That was the signal to jump.

He had not planned to go to the Pool that day, but he knew that plans change. He had only ever kept watch, but when he volunteered this time one of the older boys knew that he had yet to jump. ‘Are you scared? Is that it? You can’t stay here. Are you scared?’ If you did not jump, you were an outcast. Worse than that, you were nothing.

To get to the cave you had to skirt along the side of the shore, careful not to lose your footing. If you slipped, you had to swim back. Or worse. Though worse never happened. He had inched his way towards the mermaid, her arms open and welcoming. All you had to do was jump. That was the game. Then he could do it again and again and again.

A quick scream was followed by a long echo as Ennis was swallowed by the sea. None of them would see him on the other side; the shore was too far away, the cave too enclosed.

That was why the stories were so important. To hear their take on the journey. Nobody saw it but you. It was a lonely experience.

Niamh had said that it was like a whirlwind of bubbles, the air knocked out of you and the water taken hold. Carrick's story was the best, filled with twists and turns, not a word wasted. Máirín claimed that she had seen something under the water, but nobody really believed she had even jumped. She was just trying to scare everybody, to spoil their fun. There was always one or two people like that.

He had wondered for a while what his experience would be like, when he summoned the courage to jump. He had already begun to choose the right words for his story. Tumbled. Tossed. Roar. Peace. There would be some lies in among the truth, but nothing too scary. Just enough that his story earned its place. That people would remember he had jumped.

A couple more cries followed, and he took an uncertain step up the staircase each time. The Divining Pool became clearer and clearer the higher he ascended, until he could make out his reflection in the water. It seemed so still, so quiet, as if he was floating gently beneath the surface. But he knew that was what the sea did. It lied to you. Tides were tricks and waves were wiles. The sea made you think you were safe.

‘What was it like for you?’ he asked. ‘What... what happened?’

‘I thought I was going to drown,’ the kind girl said, smiling her warm smile. ‘Might have done, for a while. Came out onto the shore coughing and spluttering and thinking that I would never breathe again. And then I walked straight back and jumped straight in. Again and again.’

He had been told that his face gave away his thoughts. They burst out of him, no matter how hard he tried to make them not. His mother said that it was the sign of an honest soul, and sometimes he was glad of that honesty. He was glad that the kind girl had stopped her story.

‘It’s not like that for everybody,’ she said. ‘I think I’m just a bit strange, that’s all. It was a restless day, too. Most people find it really peaceful. They’ve told me so.’

‘They do?’

‘Absolutely. Listen, I’ll go first, okay?’ She took his hand and then released it. Her eyes were such a vivid blue. ‘Just do what I do. And then I’ll see you on the other side and you can tell me all about it.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

He counted the number of people ahead of them. Two more splashes, two more screams, and then she would jump and he would be left alone. They had reached the top of the staircase, the rock cool and damp beneath their feet. Soon everyone would be watching. Everyone would be waiting. And the sea would wait longest of all.

When the first scream came, everybody moved forward but him. He was wondering whether it was too late to turn back, staring at the outcrop which had brought him here. He would be an outcast, that much was certain, but everybody would forget in time. Then he heard a splash behind him as somebody stepped in a puddle and an eager hand pushed him into place.

‘Just do what I do, okay?’ The kind girl turned to look at him. ‘It’s really not that bad. You breathe in and take the deepest breath you can. Don’t—’ A second scream swallowed her words. ‘Close your eyes and keep them closed. It will sting otherwise. And don’t try to fight it. The water knows what it’s doing and where it wants to take you. You’ve just got to trust it, okay?’

A stone splashed in the distance. ‘Just do what I do.’ Then the kind girl took a confident step and fell feet first into the sea. He watched her go. There one second, lost the next. Not even a shadow beneath the surface.

He was alone, waiting for a stone to skim the surface of the sea and tell him that his time had come. The end of the overhang was smooth and wet, like the tip of a slimy tongue. Stalactites surrounded him like jagged stone teeth. He knew now that the mermaid was a siren, luring each of them into this consuming cave. He stared ahead, waiting for the signal. When it came, he watched some more.

The sun, soon to set, sparkled on the surface of the pool. The mermaid’s tail was clearly in view, and he thought of her open arms and how the sea lied. All he had to do was jump. That was the game. Then he could never do this again.

Instead, his foot slipped. His body twisted and he tried to fall back onto the overhang, to stand back up and try again. The last thing he saw was the sea’s scales fading one by one as the sun moved on. Then, his head hit something hard.

As he sank below the surface, a trail of dark water followed him. The current picked him up and carried him away and he could hardly remember what he had been told but he knew not to close his eyes. He thought of the warm girl with the wet smile and kind hair as the sea turned blacker. His eyes stung and he wanted to rub them. Whatever Máirín had seen, he saw too.

The water was cold, so cold even in the height of summer. And he did not know whether he was in the cave or out of it, whether he was near the bottom of the sea or floating just beneath its surface. His words came back to him. None were correct. Only roar. A never-ending roar. It was hard to keep track of how long he had been under.

After a while, he forgot how to breathe. He forgot not to breathe. Water breached his lips and trespassed down his throat. He was being dragged somewhere uncertain and unknown and he saw what Máirín saw once more, only it was nothing, just an endless sea. He started to cry, the tears instantly lost.

Then, sand scratched against his cheek. He broke the surface but still everything was dark. The sound of rushing water strangled everything else and he felt as though he was trapped in a storm, a whirlpool, the victim of one of those awful stories where a ship becomes stuck in a draining mass that eats anything and everything within.

He saw a kind girl with a warm smile and wet hair, knelt in golden sand stained red. She tried to say something, but he could only hear water, as if her lungs were bloated with brine. Her lips moved but no words came. He feared he might never hear again.

Slowly, her voice broke through. It was soft at first, broken up by the sound of rushing currents and roaring waves which tried to take him back. Then, he recognised words he knew. His name, at first. The sound so soft.

‘Kevin! Kevin! Oh, my God, Kevin! Somebody help! Please! Kevin, are you there? It’s all going to be okay, I promise. Help!’

She looked so sad. He did not want to make her sad. He rolled into her arms to try and comfort her. He started to cough up sea water, unsure when it would stop or if it ever would.

‘Help! Somebody please help!’

Then, to the sound of Monessa’s voice, Kevin faded into the unconscious. The only voice that could swallow the sea.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Wheatley is a practice-based researcher at Royal Holloway, University of London. His work considers weird fiction in the age of climate crisis and the question of classifying an inherently protean form. His other research interests include the notion of the tortured artist, body horror, queer mythology and cannibalism, as explored in his journal article, ‘For Fame and Fashion: The Cannibalism of Creatives in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Haunted* (2005) and Nicolas Winding Refn’s *The Neon Demon* (2016)’ (Exchanges, 2020). He lectures at the University of Worcester and edited *The Horned God: Weird Tales of the Great God Pan* (2022) for The British Library and published the experimental short story collection, *The Writers’ Block*, in 2019. Further publications feature in *Gothic Nature*, *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, *Fantastika Journal* and the *BSLS*.

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