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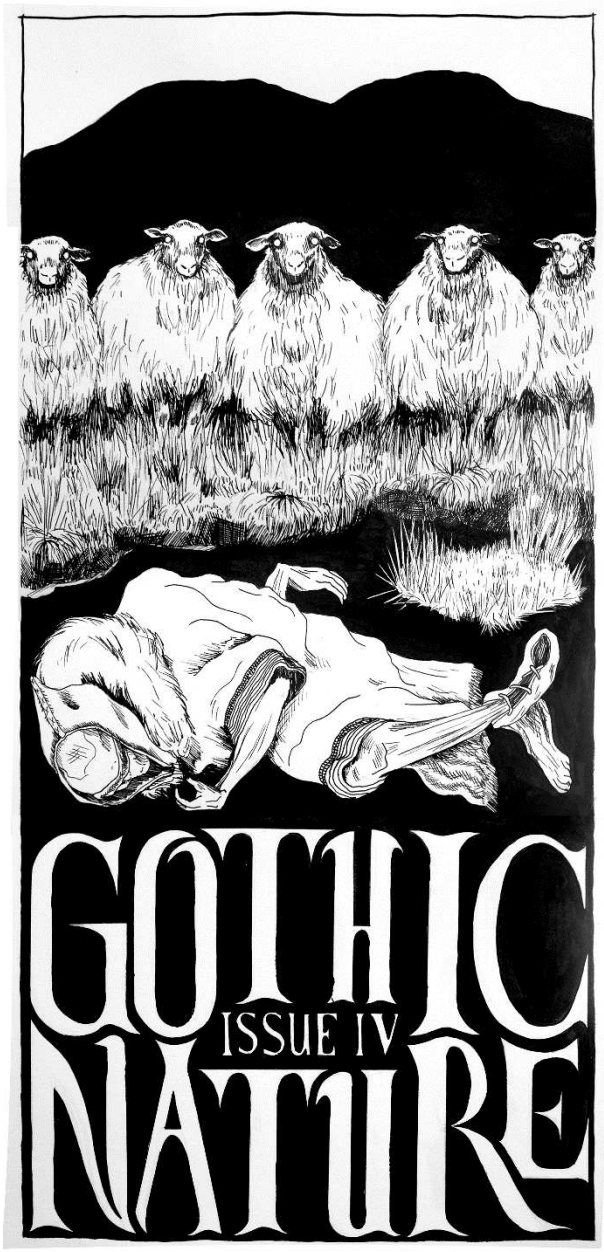

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Ecogothic: Ten Years On

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 holocenic 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*

[6]Notable 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 debilitative 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.

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[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.

William Hughes is Professor of Literature in English at the University of Macau, China. He is the author of *Beyond Dracula: Bram Stoker's Fiction and its Cultural Contexts* (2000), *That Devil's Trick: Hypnotism and the Victorian Popular Imagination* (2017), and *The Dome of Thought: Phrenology and the Nineteenth-Century Popular Imagination* (2022), as well as *The Historical Dictionary of Gothic* (2013), *Key Concepts in the Gothic* (2018) and *Key Concepts in Victorian Studies* (2023). He has co-edited 7 essay collections with Andrew Smith, including, most recently, *Suicide and the Gothic* (2019). With Andrew Smith he also co-edits the 'Gothic Companions' series for Edinburgh University Press, and with John McLeod the 'Beginnings' series for Manchester University Press. He is a Fellow of both the Royal Historical Society and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and a past president of the International Gothic Association.

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