American Gothic Culture: An Edinburgh Companion

Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam (editors)

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For many, the phrase 'American Gothic' conjures up the image of Grant Wood's 1930s painting of a puritanically dour older man and woman stood in front of a pale wooden house, with a foregrounded pitchfork held like a bayonet at rest augmenting a stillness suggestive of unwelcoming restraint and potential violence. Concentrating on myriad understandings of traumas, ruptures, and violations, Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam's edited collection, *American Gothic Culture*, does what might be expected from such a bold title in showcasing this precocious offspring of Euro-Gothic grown uniquely monstrous in form and infiltrating all aspects of modern U.S. culture. Faflak and Haslam divide this collection into four sections – 'Gothic Histories, Gothic Identities'; 'Gothic Genres, Gothic Sites'; 'Gothic Media'; and 'American Creatures' – containing a dozen different perspectives that reveal that there is no feasible means of separating place from the actions of its occupants: where nation goes, so does its culture, where culture goes, so do the questioning shadows of its gothic. Ranging from doctoral candidates and early career researchers to seasoned professors in the field of gothic studies, contributors to Faflak and Haslam's *American Gothic Culture* present discussions that form a comprehensive overview of the diverse infiltration of American culture by Gothic as a mutably symbiotic 'mode or discourse' (16) through which the fears and desires that underpin the U.S. as global dominant can be openly expressed. While there are standpoints with which to take debate, and examinations that are sometimes frustratingly

abridged, this only adds to a dynamic collection of essays that prompt a desire to continue delving into the Gothic core of American culture.

In their introduction, sweeping statements such as 'the definitions of America and those of gothic are so closely related as to be inescapable' (2) by Faflak and Haslam do precisely what is needed from an exploration of the darknesses that lie at the centre of the most globally influential modern culture: they encourage quizzical curiosity. Faflak and Haslam tease out the problematics of an American identity that promises utopian dreams built on what they rather euphemistically describe as a 'murky past' (15) that undeniably includes slavery as an 'originary trauma' (17) with 'ongoing social and cultural effects' (12) alongside the attempted 'eradication […] of indigenous or racial others' (6) as part of 'the violence of colonisation and expansion' (7) haunting American culture: the cyanide seeds lurking in its apple pie dreams.

A brief tour of the history of Gothic writing as a challenging exposé to humanist objectivity – the uncanniness paralleling supposed reason and rationality – sets a tone for the works to come by reminding the reader that 'codes and limits' can always be transgressed, and 'America's pristine genesis' is, at best, a fallacy (3). And so Faflak and Haslam enthusiastically guide the reader towards an understanding governing this collection of essays, namely that of the insurmountable disparity 'between the "national narrative" of the American Dream and the historical realities of violence, subjugation and attempted genocide that materially support the construction of that narrative': a 'murderous intent hidden by a welcoming smile.' (10)

In part one, 'Gothic Histories, Gothic Identities', Christine Yao, Haslam, and Arthur Redding draw on the racial monstrosities that populate America's history and its Gothic fictions. Yao uses the trope of Gothic monstrosity in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar*

Huntly as a medium for examining the bestializing of indigenous American Indians. Collapsing of 'the conventional categories of the human and the monster' (25) raises ambiguities that dissolve differentiations between indigenous populations and colonizers: both are animalized by antagonisms, with savagery and monstrosity as a revelatory catalyst for revenant forces of 'survival and resistance.' (40) The inextricable link between Gothic and slavery forms the basis of Haslam's essay, with the crux of his argument found hiding in parenthesis: 'American culture is gothic throughout'. (44) The powerlessness and oppressions present in slavery are shown as transposed into metaphors that are both vehicles for and targets of gothic narratives. Haslam suggests that 'Slavery or the concomitant representation of race and racism remains as […] a lingering excess', (46) addressing politically, culturally, and emotionally combustible material with sensitivity and clarity, recognizing Gothic symbolism of historical materiality for the 'slippery form of signification' (47) it is. Finally, in this first section, Redding also discusses the dominance of white fear in early American Gothic fiction, analysing a modern 'refashioning' of prevailing racial antagonisms 'embedded in the hegemonic cultural narratives' for a changed and changing audience. (61) Drawing upon the dominance of a shared history of (intentional and unintentional) displacement – of white European settlers, African slaves, indigenous populations, South American migrants, and myriad refugees from war and oppression – within American culture, Redding writes of a resultant 'dispossession and racial violence' manifested in tales such as Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). (68) Redding's discussion leaves this section open-ended, placing the traumatic history of this nation, and its inadequate forms of redress, as a continuing irruption into the present. His quote from Teju Cole's novel *Open City* (2011) that 'Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them' sits alongside an observation that 'Gothic compels us to acknowledge […] hurts, [and] to respond' (73) and reads as something of a précis for the whole collection.

The second section, 'Gothic Genres, Gothic Sites', features essay on Southern Gothic, Urban Gothic, and Schoolhouse Gothic by Christopher Lloyd, Andrew Loman, and Sherry R. Truffin, respectively. Lloyd resumes the thematic conjunction of inherited trauma in a compelling presentation of the south's alienation within the nation, with it marked as 'exceptional, specific and different' (80); 'other' to the (northern) national norm. Following on from Redding, Lloyd advocates the inextricable intertextuality of history and the American Gothic genre. Through cinematic and novelized fiction such as Harmony Korine's 2009 film *Trash Humpers*, about a group of elderly sociopathic Nashvilleans, and Alan Ball's HBO series *True Blood*, based on Charlaine Harris's 'Sookie Stackhouse' novels set in the backwater town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, and about a telepathic human-fairy hybrid's interactions with vampires as America's newest minority citizens, Lloyd teases out Gothic coding mechanisms for southern collective revenants of violence, race, and sexuality. Loman moves investigation of America's Gothic into urban spaces, which he places as 'discursive field[s]' set in 'the street' that serve to challenge 'histories and theorizations of gothic'. (96) This urban domain is an arena of distrust where slums, as Loman's principle focus, are feared as sites that conjoin 'criminality and poverty'. (101) Perhaps the most fearful element of urban Gothic comes at the end of Loman's essay with the reminder that the dwellers in these spaces are but 'unseparated drop[s] in the great ocean of human existence'. (102) Last in this section is Truffin's discussion of Schoolhouse Gothic. For those who, like this reader, this is an unfamiliar area within Gothic practice, Truffin opens up an exciting avenue of debate. Fictional and non-fictional educative spaces are examined for their play with tropes of tyranny, physical and mental violence, institutionalization and inequity, and her discussion of Joyce Carol Oates's *The Accursed* (2013) is one that would encourage anyone of Gothic persuasion to put this tale on their 'to read' list: containing a curse, a trap, 'ghosts, demons, vampires and hellish alternate dimensions' as well as 'psycho-sexual repression [and] mass

hysteria' set on a 'claustrophobic campus', complete with a protagonist whose history includes links to religion, money, politics, and slave trading, (112) it is a Gothic smorgasbord!

'Gothic Media', the third section of this collection, contains essays by Julia M. Wright, Christoph Grunenberg, and Michael Hancock, on television, art, and video games. Wright's discussion of classic Gothic-realist hybrid series such as *The Munsters*, *The Addams Family*, *Dark Shadows*, and *The Twilight Zone* concentrates on their rewriting of 'domestic conventions' (113) in what is a fascinating interrogation of Gothic television and the illusory nature of a medium that can never show 'real life'. Grunenberg considers the vacillation between attraction and repulsion present in American Gothic art and how it illustrates cultural crises. In what can only be an *amuse bouche*, he covers movements that include Apocalyptic, Kalifornia, Pre-millennial, and Postmodern Gothic art as glimpses into America's shadows. Hancock moves the discussion towards video games, slowly being recognized as a fascinating fictional form. This essay presents an absorbing argument for video games as an 'uncanny symptom of the neo-liberal subject's recognition of its own lack of self.' (167) Playing is argued here as an amalgam of performance, selfhood, and repetition: 'the ghost of […] past failure'. (168) Hancock's 'Doppelgamers' stands out as a cogent argument for considering video games as (potentially) the ultimate Gothic exposure of the fallacy of self-determination, with players 'free' to make choices that are preordained to meet inexorable endings.

The final section, 'American Creatures', has essays on cinematic serial killers, vampires, and zombies by Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, and Linnie Blake. For most, it is creatures such as those deliberated here, as sites of terror and fascination, which exemplify our understanding of 'Gothic'. Ní Fhlainn compares 'celluloid' and 'real' American serial killers, locating them within narratives that counter the American Dream as

'distorted mirrors' of 'the consumerist and consumption-driven American nightmare.' (187) Weinstock's 'American Vampires' may not present as unfamiliar material as others in this collection, but of note is the case made for a pre-history that includes nineteenth-century 'anti-Indian' propagandizing (204), casting them as blood drinkers said to possess 'almost supernatural powers' alongside abilities that include being able to 'move silently' and 'control nature'. (205) Weinstock also looks at psychic vampirism in Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman's *Luella Miller*, the 'revenant plagues' (207) of Ambrose Bierce's short story 'The Death of Halpin Frayser', and early cinematic 'vamps' – irresistible *femmes fatales* cast as 'chaotic force[s] of social disruption'. (208-209) Finally, staggering after vampires, come zombies. As a professed 'vampophile', Blake's argument that zombies 'hold sway' amongst Gothic creatures may not be one to which adherence is wholeheartedly given, but this is a convincing comparison of zombies and the free market. In Blake's words, both 'sweep away traditional agents of identity formation'. (223) Although, there is vindication of vampires as Gothic dominants as she acknowledges Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) – a tale of mass vampirism in suburban America – as the inspiration behind George A. Romero's *Living Dead* film series. Ultimately, Blake casts zombies as a 'silent majority', quietly (and messily) critiquing 'the media […] the state […] and the ordinary American citizen […] compromised by self-interest and cupidity'. (225)

Having wholeheartedly enjoyed this lively and varied collection of essays, a small note of lamentation would be not to find a return to the editors for a concluding indication of where they believe the darknesses that haunt American Gothic culture may be heading. 'American Gothic Culture' is a phrase that epitomizes a nation, with its identity and identifiers uniquely bound in a hinterland where the horrors and fears of history and fiction coincide. The essays in Faflak and Haslam's *American Gothic Culture* identify the progression of what amounts to a psycho-historical national wound licking. Eventually the

healing process may take effect but, meanwhile, painful exudations cannot be ignored. As this latest evaluative lick of damaged corpus makes clear, the self-inflicted injuries are being admirably evaluated. The essays in this collection make evident that there is no safe form of cultural acceptance. Born of questioning, resistance, and fear, Gothic remains an essential part of the paradox that is this ‘land of the free and home of the brave’?