

Dreaming of Leviathan:

John Langan's *The Fisherman* and American Folk Horror

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Ever since the emergence of the Folk Horror Revival Facebook group in 2014, a number of critical studies have attempted to outline the contours of folk horror as a genre. Some of the most prominent examples include Matilda Groves's essay 'Past Anxieties: Defining the Folk Horror Narrative' (2017), Howard David Ingham's compendium *We Don't Go Back: A Watcher's Guide to Folk Horror* (2018), and, especially, Adam Scovell's *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017), the latter of which set the tone for a majority of subsequent discussions about the parameters of folk horror. Most approaches to the genre so far, including Scovell's, have remained largely Eurocentric, focusing on the 'Britishness' of folk horror films from the 1960s and 1970s as a conceptual marker of a form whose exact identity is still to be determined. While Scovell admits that folk horror's 'genealogy is less important than its stark ability to draw links between oddities and idiosyncrasies' (2017: 6), his claims are nevertheless rooted in the cultural contexts of post-war British culture, as he infers the commonalities of the genre from what is now known as the 'unholy trinity' of folk horror films—*Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971), and *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973). Scovell deduces from these films a narrative framework, the 'folk horror chain', that delineates some of the form's most comprehensive traits and techniques (2017: 17-18). The folk horror chain's key elements—landscape, isolation, skewed belief systems and morality, as well as the 'summoning/happening'—are useful, at first, in identifying texts within the subgenre, regardless of their national, political, or ideological origin. When read not only as narrative elements, however, but also as socio-cultural indicators embedded in the historic timeline of a

certain group, community, or nation, the chain gains new meaning through its interconnectedness with the folklore and literature of that people. Scovell claims that ‘every country has its own “folk”, folklore and superstitions after all and, therefore, also has its own Folk Horror potential’ (2017: 8); his generic characterizations thus leave room for further investigations into the significance and applicability of the chain across national boundaries as well as beyond film as folk horror’s main medium.

The recent explosion of American folk horror texts testifies to the necessity of this investigation. While filmic and televisual examples seem equally to predominate in the United States—from Robert Eggers’ *The VVitch* (2015), Karyn Kusama’s *The Invitation* (2015), and Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018) to *American Gods* (2017), *American Horror Story: Cult* (2017), and *The Terror* (2018)—examinations of folkloric materials have abounded in American gothic and horror literature since colonial times. Washington Irving’s short stories ‘Rip van Winkle’ (1819) and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ (1820) as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ (1835) are prime examples of American folk horror, as are later iterations such as H. P. Lovecraft’s seminal tale ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ (1926) and Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ (1948). More recent literary cases include Daniel Mills’ novel *Revenants* (2011), Emma Cline’s *The Girls* (2016), and J. D. Wilkes’s *The Vine that Ate the South* (2017) as well as John Langan’s *The Fisherman* (2016). In this essay, I will read Langan’s second novel as a prime example of American folk horror storytelling by drawing out the subgenre’s narrative intricacies as well as its connections to historical and contemporary cultural-political situations in the United States. Following my theorizing of folk horror’s distinctly American qualities, I will show how *The Fisherman* not only centers legendary myths surrounding the colonial past of the US but also how it ultimately emerges as its own retelling of that past, carving out a space where the human condition and the American condition collide.

Folk Horror, the Culture of Fear, and the American Condition

The aforementioned extensive yet by no means exhaustive list of American folk horror illustrates that oral and written texts have a much longer history in relation to folklore and horror than do cinematic productions. In the early 1800s, authors and ‘scholars became interested in extending the study of literature into the realm of oral tales and folksongs’, and they ‘turned their attention to the literature of the new continent—American literature—as they collected and published the “literature of the folk”’ (Stahl 1983: 424). While folk horror is not exclusively defined by a text’s use of folkloric material to showcase its horrific effects, Sandra Stahl’s ideas nevertheless bear witness to the importance of legendary narratives in the development of nation-specific folk literature. Such tales can, as Jan Harold Brunvand argues, ‘provide insight into the attitudes of the American people both now and a century or more ago toward the major events of the day’ (2006: 771). Tracing the current political climate of the US back through the country’s history reveals how the complex developments of both American folklore and literature have generated a vast repertoire of narratives that reflect the intricacies of national history well into the present day. The history of the disenfranchisement of certain minority and marginalized groups features largely in these narratives, revealing how processes of othering contributed to the establishment of these groups, crafted as collective monsters allegedly threatening the cultural and political stability of America. Be it the savage ‘Indian’ or the violent ‘Negro’, their fate historically alternated at the master’s will between annihilation and integration, a contradictory dynamic that continues to characterize the US’s search for a unified national identity.

Images of such monstrous entities have been at the center of US cultural productions in the horror genre for decades, testifying to Scott Poole’s proposition that ‘[s]eeing America through its monsters offers a new perspective on old questions’. He goes on: ‘Only by looking at a multitude of monsters can we come to understand something about them and, in turn,

something about American history' (2011: xvii, xiv). This declaration, in conversation with Stahl's assertions about the American interest in its own folk narratives, reveals that any theory of American history speaks to the history of American folklore, and vice versa, as two inseparable sides of the same coin.¹ Richard Dorson echoes this idea and names as the cornerstones of American folklore 'the great dramatic movements of American history: exploration and colonization, Revolution and the establishment of a democratic republic, the westward surge, the tides of immigration, the slavery debate that erupted in Civil War, and the triumph of technology and industrialization'. These events, among others, make up the 'framework of the traditions and institutions that have shaped the American character' (1959: 203) across all eras and areas of American history. Dorson continues that these foundations 'need to be taken into account in the history of American literature' (1959: 203),² which can never be read or studied in isolation from American folklore because these fields continue to develop in an interwoven web.

In the US, as Brunvand observes, 'authors have come from all groups and classes, and the same is true for American folklore', echoing American folklorist Alan Dundes's uncompromising declaration 'Who are the folk? Among others, we are!' (1980: 19).³ While scholars such as Tok Thompson have rightfully responded with questions about who or what is included in Dundes's idea about 'us' and 'others' (2019: 14), it remains clear that American literature, in all its forms, is continuously influenced by folklore, folk history, and folklore studies, all of which hinge on the central importance of storytelling: for example, the oral stories of indigenous peoples from the pre-colonial era, the diaristic traditions of European settler-explorers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the African American slave accounts from the nineteenth century, or so-called 'great American novels' such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

These interwoven literary and folkloristic traditions have shaped narratives of American history as a collection of stories about 'monsters slain and monsters beloved'

(Poole 2011: 4). If American folk literature and history are shaped by the monsters of enslavement, savagery, human trade, war, and the repercussions of the idealism of imperialism, so are its horror texts. As such, many vampire, werewolf, and witch tales thematize New England's legacy of the Puritan battles between human good and supernatural evil; American ghost stories negotiate the gothic fear of haunted houses and unresolved generational disputes; race horrors read the non-white monster as a racialized other; zombie narratives go back to the transatlantic slave trade and enable the return of the repressed; slashers threaten the allegedly safe spaces of white suburbia; and sea as well as nature horrors examine the terrors of the open waters threatening whalers and slave ships across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Texts pertaining to these subgenres carve out spaces that allow a particular kind of monster to take center stage—a monster who, while seemingly a victim in these respective tales, caused the story's apparent perpetrator to suffer prior to its diegetic events: the witch hunter, the abusive parent, the white master, the capitalist consumer. American horror thus negotiates humanity as the central form of monstrosity in a history predicated on what Matilda Groves, in the context of folk horror, calls a 'horror of the people', which is why 'in folk horror the word "folk" is key' (2017). The particular horror in folk horror is thus embedded in the genealogy of the respective people's geography, in the evolution of their social, cultural, and political systems, in the origin and implementation of their ideologies, and in the durability of their traditions—in short, in the intensity of the folk's ties to the elements of Scovell's chain. While the aforementioned subgenres of horror all touch upon the notion of the monstrous folk as a fundamental generic marker in a variety of more subtle ways, American folk horror texts make this idea explicit. They introduce protagonists at the mercy of folk beliefs that arise as or because of the terrifying specters of a personal and collective past. As such, American folk horror emerges as a collection of stories whose horrors derive from the fictionalization and reappropriation of historical cultural traumata and

interconnected psychological pathologies that show its readers and spectators disquieting versions of themselves through national metaphors of fear and monstrosity rooted in American history, landscape, and folklore. Howard David Ingham echoes this assumption in the conclusion to his guide to cinematic folk horror: ‘We are haunting ourselves. As long as we haunt ourselves, there is a place for this. As long as we haunt ourselves, even when folk horror recedes into the collective unconscious again, as it surely will at some point, it will be back’ (2018: 428).

Ultimately, therefore, American folk horror develops from the contours of the central gothic idea of repetition, realized in folk horror through the transgenerational hauntings of the folk’s past wrongdoings. While many have claimed that the US is too young a country in comparison to the UK to participate in proper conceptualizations of folklore and thus of folk horror,⁴ I argue that the United States’ past and present national and international significance as a political power has contributed to the construction of an immense archive of historical materials that have made their way into folkloric storytelling and myth-making in ways that carve out spaces for the unique potentials of American folk horror—a subgenre whose harrowing effects serve as individual and collective mirrors refracted from the past onto the present. From this follows that if, in folk horror, folk means both folklore and people, and if the folk are haunted by their respective folklore, whose history is, in turn, grounded in the people’s time and place, then the genre as a whole speaks to particular understandings of both a human and an American condition. A fear of the past as well as its repetition is, at its core, then, in fact a fear of ourselves and of our potential ability to repeat our forebears’ mistakes. In its essence, folk horror negotiates, on the one hand, the fundamental fear of being folk, of being human, and, on the other, of becoming the dreaded other and thereby losing our quintessential humanity. As such, no matter how many insurmountable beastly or demonic creatures threaten the people, the human folks themselves remain the most terrifying entities in folk horror stories.

American folk horror can be seen, then, to carry forward the impulses of the formative years of American horror in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Groves, folk horror is ‘a horror of the psyche’ (2017), and, from the eighteenth century, writers began to feature ‘psychological terror over physiological fear’ when ‘the haunted British bedchamber [. . .] gave way to the haunted American psyche’ and to the ‘psychopathology’ (Magistrale and Morrison 1996: 1) of the gothic specters at the core of the aforementioned events and myths: Puritanism, slavery, Indian removal, and westward expansion. American folk horror, as it dips into these historical and literary archives, thus emerges as a timely genre in an era when the cultural horrors (re)created by American political leaders once again challenge collective identities and induce fear at the human as well as the national level.

By reading this idea of coming to both material and psychological terms with the past through (folkloric) storytelling across US national history, it becomes clear that American folk horror is principally concerned not only with the human condition, but, more specifically, with iterations of what a variety of scholars and critics have termed an American condition. M. G. Montpellier, for example, attributes ‘the reality of the American condition in this American moment’ to dire living conditions, below-minimum wages, and insufficient healthcare, pointing towards the fact that ‘the same old political rhetoric that promises to address the plight of the American condition comes up short’ (2016: 15, 64). In a powerful journalistic piece in *The American Prospect*, Arthur Goldhammer similarly describes the contemporary moment as one emerging from ‘a time when the president insists that fear of the alien is the defining characteristic of the American condition’ (2017). Additionally, Daniel Strand claims that ‘love of country is akin to affirming all the sins that drench the history of America’, which, as he continues, ‘has been one long nightmare of oppression and aggression’ (2018). Jerrold Packard further suggests that the American ‘South’s adherence to slavery [. . .] settled the most tragic part of the nation’s destiny, leading to internecine war as

well as to a drawn-out postbellum racial nightmare from which America has still not healed itself' (2003: 32). From these assertions, it follows that a current *conditio americana* may be predicated on unrealistic conceptualizations of the American Dream—the belief, rooted in the Declaration of Independence, that equal opportunities are available to anyone with the right ability and work ethic.

The continued failure of this ideal has culminated in the aforementioned calamities of the American economy, health care system, education structure, and so forth. Following Geoffrey Skoll, then, the current American condition seems to become more and more synonymous with an 'American culture of fear [that] is dominating the world in the twenty-first century. Its purpose is exploitation. Its means are ideology and repressive physical force. Its exemplar is the American global war on terror. And its form is empire' (2016: 2). A more realistic and current way of theorizing the twenty-first-century American condition, therefore, is to conceive of it as a circumstance of an American Nightmare, whereby individuals are not only conditioned to be constantly afraid of the unknown but also to be discontented with the increasing challenges to national unity and security as well as with established concepts of freedom, whose growing limitlessness is resulting in option paralysis and competitive consumer cultures.

Due to the fact that the anxieties at the heart of this American condition are based on existential fears and are thus predicated on the kinds of affective impulses that also define the horror genre, American folk horror brings about a permutation of what Noël Carroll has famously called 'a philosophy of horror', at the core of which are the 'emotional effects [horror] is designed to cause in audiences' (1990: 8). From this follows that a theory of American folk horror is situated at the intersection of Scovell's folk horror chain, Groves' emphasis on the folk as people, and Ingham's idea of self-haunting, all the while confronting its protagonists, readers, and viewers with the complexities, fears, and terrors of human and

American conditions, whose imperatives to dream, dominate, and be exceptional turn the folk into ruthless monsters.

In what follows, I offer a reading of John Langan's 2016 novel *The Fisherman* through this multifaceted lens of American folk horror in order to delineate the ways in which it emerges as an archive of legendary cautionary tales rooted in the (hi)stories of American fear, folklore, and literature as well as in the adversities of a contemporary American condition. A multilayered narrative whose present-day frame story is engulfed in the myriad of embedded myths that terrify both readers and protagonists, Langan's second novel becomes a space where trauma, grief, and loneliness leave the widowed protagonists desperate, vulnerable, and thus susceptible to the dark promises of the Fisherman; the book's eponymous source of terror turns to folk materials in an attempt to win his fight with the limits of humanity and mortality. By dipping into the principal anxieties at the core of the American culture of fear, the literary archives of the folk horror chain, and collections of mythic stories from the eastern US, *The Fisherman* establishes itself as a newly imagined version of the dominant American national narrative, shaped by the 'terrible reality' of its past (Langan 2016: 222). By reading the text within the temporal, spatial, and socio-cultural contexts of its intra- and metadiegetic worlds, I will show how this rendition of a national narrative—rooted in the horrors of the US's colonial past and its Puritan heritage—lends itself especially well to folk horror because it speaks to the idea that folk horror constitutes not only horrors *of* the people but, first and foremost, horrors committed *by* the people. Therefore, in *The Fisherman*, as in American folk horror overall, the horror is and has always been the American folk themselves.

The Fisherman: An American Legend

While at first glance, Langan's novel seems to take place in two clearly distinct timelines, the past of the embedded narrative and the present of the frame narrative, which are meticulously separated by marked chapter sections and headings, *The Fisherman* soon becomes

characterized by the complexity of the central legend's multiple narrative levels. Protagonist Abraham Samuelson's contemporary situation is defined by loss and grief after his wife of only two years, Marie, passes from cancer. Abe comes to spend the majority of his days fishing with his work colleague Dan Drescher, who is likewise widowed. During their trips, the two men drown their sorrows in the depths of Svartkil River, a fictitious stream Langan envisions in the image of the many waters that run across the Hudson Valley in his home state of New York (Yanes 2017), an area that continues to spawn folk tales, ghost stories, and phantom accounts. According to Judith Richardson, ever since Washington Irving's 'recurrent allusions to the history-erasing Yankee flood of the post-Revolutionary period', the 'troubled perception that history was being washed away under the myriad of "waves of civilization" repeats as a leitmotif in regional writings', which have become known as 'laments over the lost past' of the valley and the surrounding Catskills (2003: 25). The novel's setting is thus determined in true psychogeographic⁵ fashion by the inherent qualities and the alleged myths of its landscape, characterized by the trails, resorts, and wildlife of the wide-stretched Appalachian provinces of southeastern New York.

Most prominently, *The Fisherman* draws its mysteries from the fundamental juxtaposition between land and water in this eastern-US context, and its alternating allusions to lightness and darkness and thus to safety and danger are rooted in the area's ancient traumata that surround the region's original settlers. The suffering they imported from the old world has infused the topography of their settlement with a mesmerizing power and a simultaneous feeling of impending doom. This backdrop will leave Abe no choice in the twenty-first century but to go fishing in the by-then forgotten vicinity of this settlement and discover the horrors of a spot called Dutchman's Creek, regionally known as '*Der Platz das Fischer*' (2),⁶ which nowadays flows out of the Ashokan Reservoir (built between 1907 and 1915) in Ulster County. Scovell observes that, in folk horror, landscape can serve as an agent of punishment (2017: 17). In this sense, the seeming inevitability⁷ of Abe's fate, which leads

him to the novel's place of destruction, draws a direct link between the terrors developing around the contemporary protagonist and the people who inhabited the Creek when it was still called Hurley Station:

the Station had been there first, built a good few decades prior to the settlers who streamed into the area in the early seventeen-hundreds. When the town had been put up, the Catskills were still Indian country, and that's no exaggeration. Twice the tribes swept down from the mountains and burned Wiltwyck. The families who founded the Station were Dutch [and] as far as the record shows, the Indians left the Station alone. (53-54)

Abe and Dan hear about the history of Dutchman's Creek and its alleged dangers at Herman's Diner, a name that serves as one of the novel's most blatant allusions to American novelist Herman Melville, which the novel will exploit extensively. The principal narrator of the legend entitled 'Der Fischer' at the center of *The Fisherman*, Howard, in turn emerges as the mirror image of American horror author H. P. Lovecraft in both his physique and his efforts as an aspiring writer. These instances of homage situate *The Fisherman* in not only the wider tradition and history of American literature and, specifically, American horror fiction, but they also require particular knowledge and an openness to referentiality on the part of readers. Both Herman and Howard are ascribed mythic attributes, thus contributing to the novel's overall atmosphere of uncanny intangibility: in the case of Herman, this is achieved through his eponymous presence but mysterious physical absence. Howard gains mythic status by echoing the novel's earlier allusion to the inescapability of the widowers' encounter with the legend: 'Almost like I'm supposed to tell it to you fellows, isn't it?' he asks. 'The tone of his voice was casual, but I was suddenly aware of a tremendous, heavy urgency behind it, as if the story he had promised were heaving itself toward us' (45).

Abe and Dan become trapped in the diner by the pouring rain outside, 'sealed off from the world beyond' (45), urged even further away from what Scovell calls the 'established

social progress of the diegetic world' (2017: 18). Their move away from reason is thus provoked by the contradictory yet interplaying forces of land- and seascapes but will soon be predicated on a clash between the logic of modernity, represented by Abe's disbelief in the myths of the land he visits, and the archaic systems or happenings of the legendary diegesis of Howard's story. To Abe, the Fisherman becomes an iteration of the dreaded other, an element of a supposedly magical world that hits too close to home, for the villain is human and the folklore surrounding his story is too uncannily realistic to be part of an intricate jest: 'it was the stuff of a scary movie, a fishing yarn gone feral [but] not once during his story had Howard given me the impression he was lying' (198).

According to Groves, the 'folk horror narrative begins when this old wisdom meets with new knowledge and disagrees' (2017). As such, *The Fisherman* becomes predicated on the narrative and contextual setups of folk horror through Howard's story, which he heard from a Reverend Mapple, whose explanation of the happenings, in turn, come from Lottie Schmidt, daughter of the legend's central focalizer, Rainer Schmidt. On the one hand, the novel serves as a compound palimpsest of oral folktales that blend into each other in a *mise-en-abyme*-like inward spiral towards the original source of horror; first and foremost, however, it serves as a collection of mirrors that confront each generation with their respective unprocessed past and thus with their abhorrent, frightful present. 'I can't escape any of it', says Abe. 'Myself am hell, right?' (28). As such, the novel's geographic focal point—the historic frontier area around and beneath Dutchman's Creek—functions as a reminder of the American condition, trapping the respective communities first in the 1800s and then in the present-day both literally in place and figuratively in time.

Abe's twenty-first-century encounter with the nineteenth-century story of Rainer Schmidt's family, and ultimately his own encounter with the Fisherman in the final section of the narrative, opens up the protagonist's confrontation with his own reason. As the narrative progresses and Abe learns that the Fisherman watched the murders of his wife and children in

his home country of Hungary and subsequently ‘set off to find the means to get them back’ (233) through resurrection, the protagonist moves further and further away from his ability to think lucidly and to act like a rational human being. While at the beginning of the novel, Abe struggles with his fears of loss, loneliness, and death, he subsequently becomes more and more afraid of the condition of being human. ‘My mind wasn’t processing the events of the last couple of hours in any appreciable way. [. . .] What it all meant was beyond me, which I knew was not a good thing, but which I hoped to delay reckoning with for as long as possible’ (229). He experiences ‘unease, shading into outright fear’ when he discovers a horrifying creature by the side of the Creek that takes the form of half-human-half-fish, ‘the skull embedded in its flesh. Was the skull even human? [. . .] The thing was impossible, yet here it was’ (216). Abe’s fear of loss of life has transformed into a fear of losing his cognitive abilities; he starts to feel like a liminal figure, much like the human-animal amalgamations he encounters in the Fisherman’s realm: ‘It’s the face of the one he confronted that bothers him the most—not its inhumanity, the eyes, the scales, but the maddening suggestion of the human, its proximity to any, to all, of them’ (138). The protagonist not only fears the loss of reason but is on the very verge of also losing his humanity.

In comparison, the Fisherman’s resuscitation plans expose his dangerous game with the boundary between humanity and divinity, which will ultimately ensure a repetition of history. The Fisherman moves along the porous margins between human and above-human in his unwavering desire to tame Leviathan (the legendary serpent-like sea monster), cheat the laws of nature, and use its powers to revive the dead—deeds reserved, as stated in Isaiah 27:1, for God alone: ‘In that day the LORD with His sore and great and strong sword will punish leviathan the slant serpent, and leviathan the tortuous serpent; and He will slay the dragon that is in the sea’ (Mechon Mamre). In this sense, while Abe struggles to keep his humanity and laments the dissolution of his rational faculties, the Fisherman purposefully crosses the line where earthly epistemologies meet supernatural knowledge, more than willing to abandon his

humanness altogether to achieve his goals. Leviathan becomes a symbol of this transgression.

Poole argues that the creature represents

the effort to reconcile the seemingly contradictory nature of God, a being who elicits both wonder and horror. [. . .] In both Psalm 74 and in the third chapter of Job, Leviathan acts as the enemy of God, a terrible serpent that must be destroyed so that both creation and the people of God's covenant can be preserved. On the other hand, Leviathan in Psalm 104 and Job 40 appears as God's own creation, a being with a strangely close relationship with the Deity. (2011: 6)

In Langan's novel, several characters express a similarly conflicted impulse towards the Fisherman, who, both in Rainer's timeline and later during his encounter with Abe, has managed to catch Leviathan in its home in the black ocean beneath Dutchman's Creek. The Fisherman has 'cast his lines and lodged his hooks into the bulk of this immensity with a patience that's equal measures mad and heroic. He has brought this monster, this god-beast, to the brink of complete capture' (151). The Fisherman thus serves as a humanized yet corrupt representation of God, whose determination to tame the sea demon not only brings him closer to becoming that monster himself but also runs counter to God's aforementioned efforts to ensure the continuance of humanity by eradicating Leviathan. The Fisherman thereby reverses the impulses of holy Scripture, feeding into Scovell's idea that, in folk horror, 'violence can be theological in nature' (2017: 18). By going against the well-established, divine ideologies of Manifest Destiny that define the lifestyles of the settlers of Hurley Station, the Fisherman sneers at religion as their foundational drive and invests rather in the ritualistic practice of sacrifice to establish his own cult of resurrected ghost followers by using his victims' emotional weaknesses—loss and grief. The Fisherman's projection of his own psychopathologies onto others emerges as the fundamental logical fallacy of this project, which speaks to the novel's opening warning about the dangers of living in the past and the unwillingness to accept defeat, uttered by Abe's dead wife Marie in one of his dreams:

‘What’s lost is lost’ (33). The reluctance of several of the living characters to adhere to this logic and their readiness to discard their humanity (and even humanness) to avoid being alone serves as the novel’s fundamental comment on the fragility of the human condition and the anguish of human nature.

In Howard’s story, this inability will fall upon the community lead by Rainer, a professor of philology from Heidelberg, Germany, who, in the spirit of the American Dream, crossed the Atlantic with his family from the old country to the new world in the early 1800s. When their settlement is disturbed by the unholy doings of the Fisherman, who begins to offer up and resurrect Station inhabitants to increase his powers over Leviathan and to retrieve his family, Rainer interferes and brings the antagonist’s efforts to a temporary halt with the help of mysterious books that teach him powerful occult manoeuvres. However, this investment in folk literature and multilingual rhetoric through Rainer’s study of philology is depicted ambivalently: his knowledge about books, stories, and ancient practices is what ended his career in Europe, but it also enables him to understand the Fisherman better than anyone else in the new world. And yet, Rainer’s plan, like the Fisherman’s, ultimately fails, for the antagonist comes back to haunt Abe in the novel’s present, ostensibly as punishment for not believing the story in the first place and for disrespecting the land and its history. While the reader witnesses Rainer’s struggle with the seemingly endless possibilities of occult practices and Abe’s ultimate acceptance of the incredible reality of the fishing legend, the novel allows the Fisherman no more than the dream of his resurrected family. His wife and children never return because, even in the land of allegedly endless possibilities, humanity has its limits, establishing him as the most physically and psychologically isolated character in all diegetic dimensions of the novel.

At this point, inevitability becomes the text’s decisive folk horror theme through a focus on the impossibility of immortality and the fear of death. These affects are represented by the Fisherman as a broken man whose inability to accept the laws of nature and to deal

with his grief in a productive way transforms him into the text's ultimate monster. A replica of a slave master, whose resurrected workers function on the incentive of reunification with their loved ones—an empty promise for disembodied, hollow figures—the Fisherman's corruption transcends even the alleged malevolence of Leviathan, who emerges as a helpless victim at the mercy of its master's violent dream.

The same is true for Lottie, Rainer's daughter and the principal transmitter of the legend of 'Der Fischer', who becomes enchanted by the Fisherman and is subsequently forced into a comatose dream. Unable to move or speak in her unconscious state, Lottie is physically present in her family's reality but spiritually transported to another plane, where her mirror-self—trapped in the black ocean that is the Fisherman's home—confronts her with her most feral impulses and her most terrifying psychological fears. As Lottie 'is staring into a mirror from which she cannot look away' after the Fisherman bewitches her, 'it's as if a curtain has been drawn over her vision of the black ocean, the other her' (119). She sees millions of corpses in the sea of death and even spots her family's doubles swimming among the fish-like cadavers; however, it is her focus on an eerily familiar girl in the masses that ultimately causes the horrifying exposure of her human condition:

[S]he can pick out the girl's words. It isn't very pretty. She's joined a monologue about a man, one of the girl's father's friends. [. . .] [T]he girl is describing the most pornographic of fantasies about this fellow. [. . .] From lust, the girl moves to anger. When she's finished [. . .], she starts in on her sisters. They're younger, and has the girl ever stopped loathing them? [. . .] With a shock, Lottie realizes that the girl she's been listening to is herself. [. . .] [W]hat is bad is that each vile chapter in the other-Lottie's fantasy of degradation evokes a response in her beyond simple revulsion. [. . .] She's no liar, this blank face. She's telling the truth, giving voice to impulses Lottie hasn't wanted to be aware she has. (103-13)

Langan writes Lottie not only as a double of herself, who is confronted with a self-portrait reflected back at her in the water's surface, but also as an extension of the dreaded other who returns as an allegory of the self. Counterintuitively, Lottie's inner battle against her dehumanized other-self, against her 'self-imposed darkness' (157), brings out more of her humanity and exposes her distorted beliefs—about herself, her family, and the world around her. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Lottie comes to be the one to pass on the legend of 'Der Fischer': despite the fact that she is not explicitly one of the novel's protagonists, she undergoes the most change following the horrors surrounding the Fisherman. Not only does Lottie's coma bring clarity to the settlement regarding the intruder's agenda, alerting them to the fact that his deeds are connected, that 'they're links in the same chain' (110), but also that only by confronting our worst fears, thoughts, and beliefs about our condition as humans are we set free. As Crystal Ponti puts it, 'Folk horror tests our moral compass. Do we look or run away?' (2017).

The links in the Fisherman's chain—his grief, Lottie's comatose illness, Leviathan, and his cult—thus not only draw out the Schmidt family's history and the legends with which the land they settled on was already infused, but it also directly speaks to the narrative elements in Scovell's chain. The Fisherman's realm in the black ocean expands beneath 'remnants of the forest the first European settlers cut their way through' (171), i.e., beneath quintessentially American soil (landscape). Its psychogeography, then, is tied up with the eerie solitude and uncanny darkness such remote lands and seas afford its inhabitants (isolation). Creatures like the Fisherman 'appear in strange places, in little, out-of-the-way villages, or in the middle of forests [. . .]. Remember the fairy tales, all the witches and wizards with their houses in the woods. Maybe they want privacy for their work. Maybe there is something about the places they choose to live' (118-19). Further, these spaces below the Creek come with their own folk histories about the theology of Leviathan and the settlers' ideologies, which clash not only with the antagonist's philosophies but also with Abe's

contemporary principles (skewed belief systems). And finally, while the novel could be read either as missing a central ‘happening/summoning’ or as a collection of innumerable magical occurrences, it is certainly about the event of death in its most carnal forms and the spectral ways to cheat its inevitability.

As Dawn Keetley has suggested, ‘one of folk horror’s themes may well be the effort to repair loss of some kind (often, obviously, death)’ (2016). *The Fisherman* is proof that, in the United States, this kind of reparation hinges more on the fear of history repeating itself if the nation’s violent past is not confronted than a more genuine investment in working towards equality and giving back to the harmed communities. The current practice of repairing loss—the loss of history, languages, or traditions—through folk storytelling thus comes as no surprise. As screenwriter and director George Moore observes, attributing ‘the current folk horror movement to a lack of “myth” in modern culture’:

folk horror reconnects us to a sense of universality and archetype, a sense of something eternal in the landscape and in our psyche that not much art connects with anymore. [. . .] The idea that there’s more out there than we see day-to-day also helps comfort those with itchy feet in a world where all the corners of the maps are filled in. (qtd. in Ponti 2017)

The mythic, folkloric, and occult are thus especially enticing in the United States because the absence of historical paganism—which, in turn, defines much of British folk horror—forces contemporary American culture to look elsewhere for its folk history, for example, towards the nation’s foundational myths. Heike Paul calls these the ‘myths that made America’, i.e., stories that put in place an ‘American national cultural imaginary’ (2014: 11), passed down through oral storytelling, religious education, and political doctrine. Following Moore, the original American myth at the heart of this national fantasy, that of Christopher Columbus and the imperative of ‘Discovery’, may explain some of the American interest in folk horror as well as the continuous fictionalization of this myth and its contexts within the subgenre—all

of which stems from the present-day impossibility of continuing in the footsteps of the great explorers, of discovering and seizing new territory.

In the spirit of Manifest Destiny, the American condition that emerges from Langan's novel is thus founded on Abe's and Dan's urge to (re)discover the forgotten Dutchman's Creek not only as their newest fishing spot but, first and foremost, as a new world: a place where their grief will be reconciled, where their problems will cascade away into the water, where they can start new lives. Much like Rainer and his fellow settlers, the widowers dream an American Dream of claiming new territory, engaging with the folklore and folk of the land, and returning as happier, (emotionally) richer men. 'I wasn't that much different from Dan, desperate for any chance to recover what I'd lost, no matter what I had to look past to do so', Abe confesses (223). When the two men are confronted with the Fisherman and his army of ghost slaves, however, Abe realizes the extent of madness, danger, and delusion at the heart of the ongoing resurrection project as he recognizes, through his own emotional state, the Fisherman's unquestioned rage, pain, hope, and determination to succeed this time (237). 'Horror so pure it arrested any thought more elaborate than *Run*' (243) fills Abe when he is subsequently attacked by a recently killed-and-resurrected Dan, whose powerful yearning for his family overrides his reason and loyalty towards his friend. In this moment, Abe has reached a complete loss of human faculties and can only focus on the affects his situation provokes. Simultaneously, this is when the novel reaches its ultimate folk horror climax—a moment when Abe becomes aware of the grotesque potentials of those dearest to our hearts: 'That the man I counted my closest friend was about to inflict grievous harm on me, if not kill me outright, was the most monstrous thing I had encountered yet this strange, awful day' (238).

Like Lottie, Abe comes face to face with the depths of his desires: while Lottie accepts her shockingly violent yet human impulses towards her family and thereby overcomes her coma-induced illness, Abe lets go of his suffocating hold on the memory of a healthy and

loving Marie when he meets her ghost-copy on the shore of the black ocean. ‘I think I prefer to meet up with her in my own time’ (236), Abe declares, and thereby sets himself free from the constraints of his past. Dan’s willingness to give up ‘the reality of friendship, however mundane’ (251), for a spectral life of servitude to an immortal wizarding master emerges as a central testament to the human condition: as long as the fear of loneliness and the seemingly unaccountable pain of loss overshadow the willingness to accept the past as it is, so long will the folk be confronted with the same questions again and again. In the meantime, they look out at the water, like Abe at the end of the novel: he closes his back door against the corpse-filled ocean that once tormented Lottie and has now come dangerously close to his house. He understands that if he learns to contain his terrors to the realm of his dreams, they will not define his reality. Until then, he will keep passing on the legendary cautionary tale of the Fisherman.

Mythic Streams and American Dreams

Matilda Groves proposes that the space ‘where disparate ideas and beliefs come together to meet at odds with one another marks the catalyst for the folk horror narrative. Thesis, antithesis, [and] synthesis’ (2017) thus emerge as the three cornerstones of the genre, exemplified by and in the three sections of Langan’s novel. When Abe’s beliefs clash with those introduced in Howard’s story and then merge with the reality of the legend, the text reaches its maximum narrative potential. ‘I had my fantastic story, and I had the proof of it. Who knew what this would mean for me?’ (210). The protagonist no longer doubts folklore itself but rather the healing powers and communal sense of folklore: he becomes a victim of the local manifestations of collective memory and myth, the fear-inducing stories of the Hudson Valley. This area ‘demonstrates what may be a particularly American form of haunting—one that draws on wide bases of culture and psychology’, which are, in turn, ‘very much products of present need and desire. Varied and ambivalent, [these] hauntings represent

problems, foregrounded in this region, regarding possession and dispossession, rootedness and restlessness' (Richardson 2003: 6), as exemplified in the national narratives of American history and literature from colonial times to the present.

American folk horror thus becomes a space where loss and return intersect, a frontier that defines a current American condition on a variety of levels: the Fisherman becomes an example of an allegorical other, a face from the old country that haunts the characters' present-day consciousness. Langan's novel dips into the archives of American folk horror by alluding to a culture of fear that is still determined by the remnants (and revenants) of the colonial era, Manifest Destiny, and the myth of national unity. Determined by the narrative and socio-cultural elements of the folk horror chain, *The Fisherman* stands as 'the great-grandfather of all fishing stories' (Langan 2016: 232), an allusion to the novel's potential as a response to and a rewriting of the foundational myths of the United States. It is a newly envisioned version of an American national narrative with inextricable ties to the hauntings implanted in its landscape.

Following Scovell, Langan presents 'a work which creates its own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory' (2017: 7). The novel emerges as a palimpsest of unambiguously American (con)textual mechanics that are rooted in the United States' centuries-long histories of fear, haunting, and repetition. While Rainer thrives on the ideas of the American Dream but is ultimately grounded in the earthly knowledge systems of academia, the Fisherman runs on his tireless urge to dominate with divine force: his skewed morality results from his denial of the evil and inhumanity at the core of his actions. He is thus lost at a point of no return. 'Folk horror, when understood through its roots in tragedy, is a horror of the psyche', writes Groves (2017). In this respect, the Fisherman's tragedy becomes an allegory of the nation's historic atrocities, which, since they were caused by humans, only human efforts can repair. Any attempt, as Langan's novel teaches, to cheat the laws of nature and ignore the limits of humanity will only end in disaster.

The novel's frequent use of 'dream-logic' (Langan 2016: 139) ultimately testifies to the theory of American folk horror I have laid out here: the American Dream is but a myth, a specter of the past linked to the United States' folk history and urgency for folk storytelling. American folk horror thus relies on the fictionalization of a *conditio americana* that is predicated on the terrors of (self-)haunting and the warnings of folk tales—stories by and about the folk—regarding the origins of American myth-, identity-, and meaning-making. Rooted in settler colonial history, American folk horror speaks to the present and future treatments by US writers of their own folk culture, whereby the stories they tell, no matter how rigged with supernatural creatures or otherworldly phenomena, are always already about themselves and their humanity. And therein lies the horror of *being* folk: we can never be *more* than just folk. We can only dream.

Notes

¹ In 'The Forms of Folklore', folklorist William Bascom calls for distinctive uses of the terms folktale, myth, and legend, whereby the first encompasses fictional tales that are 'almost timeless and placeless' and are 'not considered as dogma or history'; the second delineates narratives that 'are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past'; and the third are regarded as stories 'set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today' (1965: 4). As an American Studies scholar, I do not follow Bascom's understanding of folktales as detached from history, culture, time, or place. As I argue in this paper, my understanding of folk history is informed by the idea that cultural groups are tethered to specific historical developments. Such an understanding negates placelessness and timelessness; instead, it situates different communities within different collective pasts. Further, I argue that the term 'folktale' speaks to tales told by the people and/or about the people. In this sense, I follow Brunvand's argument that, in such stories, 'the people themselves become their own chroniclers'. Folktales are thus part of folk history, which is

defined by the ‘subjectivity of those who talk about it’ (2006: 771) and defies a generalized understanding of folklore. In the context of American Studies, the term ‘myth’ has significant meaning, for the development and construction of the American nation is based, as Heike Paul argues, on ‘popular and powerful narratives of US-American national beginnings which have turned out to be anchors and key references in discourses of “Americanness,” past and present’ (2014: 11). As such, theories of American myth-making take into account the constructedness of American history, which is based and depends on the cultural-political status of its storyteller. As Paul continues, ‘the foundational national discourse has always been marked by struggles for hegemony [. . .], as established regimes of representation are always being contested’ (2014: 12). From this follows that, contrary to Bascom’s definition of myths as told by and about non-human characters, American myths relate to and are related by the humans they affect and are affected by. Lastly, I want to specify that legends, as outlined by Linda Watts, ‘are traditional stories, probably derived from history. They are most often specific to a locality [. . .] They may include historical details [and] rely upon a set of shared reference points between the legend’s teller and listeners. They must incorporate and affirm some number of shared beliefs, experiences, or the like’ (2007: 244). From this follows that legends, like folktales and myths, are inextricably tied to the histories they are created from and the places they take as their settings. Richard Dorson argues that ‘[f]abulous myths as well as heroic legends flourished on the frontier’ (1959: 206), a principal geographical inspiration for many American folk horror stories.

² There have been a number of disagreements regarding the shared qualities of folklore and literature, outlined, for example, by Brunvand in his encyclopedia of American folklore. Among them are questions of orientation, ownership, permanence, complexity, purpose, and canon (2006: 598-99). Brunvand elaborates on the development of literature from folklore and vice versa, the relation of written works to their oral predecessors or counterparts, as well as the association by many critics of folklore with regional or local literature and writings from

the past (2006: 599-601). In this paper, I understand American folklore and American literature not as interchangeable but as co-dependent: their respective evolutionary patterns cannot be read separately. I use the term ‘American folklore’ specifically to refer to the works that continue to emerge from American folk history, i.e., ‘history from a personal view’ (Brunvand 2006: 771) of the people. By contrast, I apply the term ‘American literature’ to the immense archive of texts—both oral and written, both fictional and non-fictional—produced in the United States and its preceding colonies, an archive that escapes all rigid definitions of its exact contents and thus comments on its own fluidity and plurality.

³ Brunvand argues that Dundes’s allegation ‘is particularly appropriate for the United States, a country [allegedly] founded upon democracy, equality, and freedom. This viewpoint has ramifications as to who has art, including verbal art’ (2006: 597). This idea echoes my earlier assertions about American power dynamics, which have been the markers of social, cultural, political, and legal (hi)storytelling since the inception of the so-called Age of Discovery.

⁴ Gene Bluestein examines such criticism of folklore and folk traditions in the United States in *Poplore: Folk and Pop in American Culture*: ‘Another characteristic approach among folklorists is to suggest that a country like ours [. . .] cannot be the locale of serious folk development. [. . .] This analysis puts forth the idea that there is folklore in America but no American folklore; because the United States is a relatively young country and because it takes a significant period of time for folklore to develop, one cannot expect to find a national folk tradition here’ (1994: 13). Bluestein goes on to discuss the erroneous idea that folklore in the United States only exists because of the waves of immigration, whereby communities brought their folk materials from their home countries. While I agree that this is a reductive reading of the development of folklore in the United States and restricts the production of specifically American folklore, the idea of multicultural folk materials suggests processes of hybridization in terms of folklore that are well worth exploring.

⁵ Introduced by Guy Debord in 1955 as ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals,’ psychogeography has become a particular trademark and by-product of folk horror studies. As such, when Scovell speaks of the ‘palpable, clawing sentience and agency’ (2017: 19) of landscape, particularly of ruralism, he already invests in the inevitable connection and ensuing relationship between the human psyche and the ecological topography.

⁶ This is, in fact, an erroneous translation of ‘the fisherman’s spot’: the correct German version would be ‘Der Platz des Fischers’.

⁷ Ingham observes that ‘[i]nvincibility is a theme that runs throughout folk horror.

Protagonists find themselves trapped along deterministic paths; quite a few of these films end with the protagonist realising that *it was you they wanted from the beginning*. It’s not that there isn’t any escape. It’s more that escape is wholly irrelevant’ (2018: 8).

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