

Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul

By Leila Taylor

Alison Bainbridge, University of Northumbria

London: Repeater Books, 2019.

ISBN: 9781912248544, 206pp. £10.99.

In *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul*, Leila Taylor initially sets out to explore the Black goth scene and the experiences of being a Black person in what is seen as a predominantly white subculture. This is Taylor's own subculture, and her personal narrative of growing up Black and goth in America provides the narrative backbone of the book. However, this initial investigation is rapidly derailed in favour of Taylor's questioning of whether 'the American gothic [is] ontologically Black' (47).

What follows is a fascinating and thoughtful discussion of the ways in which the gothic is a reflection and exaggeration of the Black American experience, and of the ways that Blackness confronts the inherently gothic nature of American society. Taylor approaches this through multiple angles: through chapters on literature, monstrosity, the symbolism of colour, grief, music, place, and cultural shifts. Throughout, Taylor's own voice and experiences provide a counterpoint to the brutality of Black American history. At just under 200 pages, *Darkly* is not a long book. It is engagingly written and, as it is aimed at a wide audience, it is free from technical jargon. It is not, however, an easy read. Its short chapters are divided into still shorter segments that weave history, politics, and personal experience into an uncanny tapestry, each part designed to make the reader reflect on the legacies of cultural trauma. *Darkly* carries a significant weight: one that remains with the reader long after it is finished.

Darkly's strongest chapters are 'Based on a True Story' and 'American Monster', which deal with literature and monstrosity respectively. In 'Based on a True Story', Taylor points out that Black horror is not restricted to the realms of fiction but is actual lived experience – and that the most frightening part of it is its truth. Taylor does this by placing the narratives of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *Candyman* (dir. Bernard Rose, 1992) alongside the real events which inspired them: the story of Margaret Garner, an escaped enslaved person who murdered her daughter to prevent her from living a life of slavery when they were discovered, and the 1987 murder of Ruth Mae McCoy, who was shot dead by an intruder who entered her apartment through the bathroom cabinet. The blurring of lines between fiction and reality reveals the true horror of the American gothic: that the stories are true after all.

'American Monster' provides the perfect follow-up with its focus on racial politics and fear. Taylor uses the real-life basis of fictional horrors in the previous chapter in order to segue into her discussion of how America imagines Black people – specifically Black men – as monstrous, and how, in the process of combatting these 'monsters', American society itself reveals itself to be the true monster. This is the chapter which, above all, seems the most timely in light of recent Black Lives Matter protests and the police brutality which has inspired them. Taylor uses this chapter to confront the use of fear as a political narrative, specifically a fear of Blackness. She argues that 'America is unreasonably comfortable with being afraid', stating that Blackness is constantly positioned as the nebulous Other in the American political landscape, leaving white oppressors able to claim victimisation from the oppressed (68).

Darkly's following chapters serve to support this theory through their discussions of how appropriation of Black cultures has gradually morphed into the gothic. This is especially

clear in ‘Screaming it to Death’, *Darkly*’s chapter on music. While it is common knowledge that Blues became Rock & Roll, which in turn diversified into the various strands of Metal music found in the contemporary goth scene, Taylor takes time to note that – using the example of Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ and its adaptations by Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Annie Lennox – the meaning of songs becomes lost the further they are divorced from their Black roots. While the example is an extreme one, it serves Taylor’s purpose well, and acts as a perfect balance to her later analysis of M. Lamar’s music in the last chapter, ‘Fear of a Black Planet’.

Throughout *Darkly*, Taylor argues, there is a ‘lingering unease ... that slavery didn’t end, but just keeps shapeshifting’ into the national institutions that allow Black children to be shot on the street with few (if any) consequences. *Darkly* reveals an America that is built upon Black bodies, and which is haunted by them every day, even if they do not fully realise their presence. As Taylor notes, the memorials to Black bodies that scattered throughout America are often hidden, or otherwise obscured. They are memorials to people whose existence has otherwise been erased due to slavery and systematic racism, and what changes there have been in the years since the Civil Rights Movement, have been hard-won. That the legacy of American slavery has a lingering effect on every aspect of society, from music videos and cinema to politics is a horrible, but unsurprising, conclusion – as is the fact that the gothic, too, is yet another aspect of American society which excludes Blackness despite being built upon it.

Despite this, Taylor manages to end *Darkly* with – if not a sense of optimism – then one of reclamation. *Darkly*’s final chapter, ‘Fear of a Black Planet’, builds on the preceding chapters by covering the ways in which the gothic is gradually being reclaimed by Blackness through artists such as M. Lamar, whose music is heavily based on slave narratives, and films

such as *The Girl with all the Gifts* (2016, dir. McCarthy). While Taylor acknowledges that there is no 'one-true goth', and that her theories will not appeal to everyone within the culture, she also makes the important point that – while the gothic is nebulous and largely impossible to define – its every aspect 'can be distilled to one common point ... **Black**' (184).