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Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic

Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils

In its broadest sense, the ecogothic is a literary mode at the intersection of environmental writing and the gothic, and it typically presupposes some kind of ecocritical lens. Indeed, in the only book devoted to the topic, Andrew Smith and William Hughes define ecogothic as “exploring gothic through ecocriticism,” demonstrating the virtual inextricability of the two concepts.¹ Emergent in the 1990s, ecocriticism has devoted itself to studying the literary and cultural relationships of humans to the nonhuman world—to animals, plants, minerals, climate, and ecosystems. Adopting a specifically *gothic* ecocritical lens illuminates the fear, anxiety, and dread that often pervades those relationships: it orients us, in short, to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies.²

In truth, the dominant American relationship with nature, whatever else it might have been, has always been unsettling. Two centuries before eighteenth-century writers Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe invented and popularized the European gothic, America was already a haunted land: the ghosts born of colonialism and its attendant environmental perversity grew entrenched in the very soil of North America’s contested ground. It’s there in Garcilaso de la Vega’s 1605 account of the adventures of conquistador Juan Ortiz when he “groped his way through the [Florida] underbrush” to view the horror of a panther “feeding at its pleasure upon the remains” of a child. It’s there in Captain John Smith’s 1624 relation of how Powhatan’s warriors chased him “up to the middle in an oozy creek” and waited until, “near dead with cold,” he surrendered to face an uncertain fate. And it’s there in that oft-cited passage from *Of Plymouth Plantation* in which William Bradford writes that he and his fellow Pilgrims confronted “a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men.”³ With these deep cultural origins in mind,

any definition of American ecogothic should first take into account the fact that critics have largely abandoned the idea that American gothic is merely an assemblage of transplanted European tropes modified to account for regional differences. Present from the moment European settlers arrived in the “New World” and began to write of their encounters, the American gothic is less a genre than a fluid, ubiquitous literary mode, sewn into the very warp and woof of American literature.

In a similar vein, ecocritics have pushed to expand the definition of environmental criticism, acknowledging the pervasiveness of the environmental in literary texts. Lawrence Buell models this tendency when he writes, “Once I thought it helpful to try to specify a subspecies of ‘environmental text.’” Now, he continues, “it seems to me more productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text—to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces.”⁴ Each of these revised notions allows for greater flexibility in considering cultural and literary modes—insisting that one may find American gothic tropes in works not usually labeled as gothic and that sophisticated environmental concerns may emerge in texts located well beyond the shores of Walden Pond.

The critical movement that explores the ways in which literature represents the relationship of humans and their nonhuman environment has also long been infused with dread. Greg Garrard opens his introductory text on ecocriticism by quoting from Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which was instrumental in the emergence of the modern environmentalist movement. The opening of Carson’s book is heavy with foreboding. She draws a portrait of an idyllic town in the heart of America—green fields, deer, ferns, wildflowers, trout—but then goes on to describe how “a strange blight crept over the area.” An “evil spell had settled on the community,” Carson writes: “mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and

sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death.”⁵ To be under the “shadow of death” is to be squarely in the domain of the gothic. And both Garrard’s defining work of ecocriticism and Carson’s originary work of modern environmental writing begin under that shadow.⁶

1. Defining Ecogothic

Efforts to characterize the term “ecogothic” arguably began with Simon C. Estok’s provocative 2009 essay “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia.” For Estok, “ecophobia” is a term that describes the “contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment.” Recognizing (and overcoming) this contempt and fear is an integral part of Estok’s call for an ethical system that includes not only nonhuman animals but also “nonsentient entities”—indeed, our entire natural ecology. The “irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world,” he claims, is “as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism.” Estok argues that control is an integral part of ecophobia: indeed, the latter was born “at the constitutional moment in history that gives us the imperative to control everything that lives. Control,” he continues, “is the key word here.”⁷ As we seek to master nature, however, it continually evades and exceeds our grasp: nature has its own agency (as Estok indicates with his inclusion of the natural world’s “agency” in his identification of what provokes an ecophobic response).⁸ Even our own actions, human actions that bear upon nature (and how many of them do not?), continually spiral and fray into unforeseen consequences. At the broadest level, then, the ecogothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia, not only because ecophobic representations of nature will be infused, like the gothic, with fear and dread but also because ecophobia is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or lack thereof, is central to the gothic.⁹

Since the publication of Estok's article, two volumes have taken up the challenge of elaborating the concept of the ecogothic: Smith and Hughes's 2013 collection *EcoGothic*, and a 2014 special issue of *Gothic Studies* edited by David Del Principe on the ecogothic in the long nineteenth century (with a focus on Italian, British, and Irish literature). While Smith and Hughes begin by defining the ecogothic broadly—it is about taking up the gothic “through theories of ecocriticism”—they go on to describe the ecogothic more specifically as a persistent attempt to confront the apparent “blankness” of nature. They describe, in other words, the way in which nature has been cast as a “crisis of representation” or a “semiotic problem.” They note that the ecogothic's entrenched dystopianism “illustrates how nature becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis.”¹⁰ Offering examples of the “blankness” and implacable “whiteness” of nature in ecogothic literature—e.g. *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and *Moby-Dick* (1851)—as well as of the inscrutability of the “wilderness,” Smith and Hughes also adduce how humans have continually desired some sort of control over the menacing problem of meaning that nature has embodied: the landscape “seems to invite mastery.”¹¹ Smith and Hughes thus highlight, as does Estok, that whether in the realm of the real or of signification, nature poses a problem of control, inciting human efforts at mastery.

In his introduction to the 2014 special issue of *Gothic Studies* on the ecogothic, Del Principe similarly begins broadly with a definition that asserts the interconnectedness of gothic and nature (ecology). The ecogothic approach, he writes, takes “a nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear.” Whereas Smith and Hughes focus on an external nature (the “wilderness”) as marking a crisis of representation within the ecogothic, Del Principe focuses on a “wilderness” closer to home: the “Gothic body,” preeminent site of that “monstrosity and fear,” so crucial to the gothic.

He thus echoes Kelly Hurley's work, which explores how late nineteenth-century gothic both contained and provoked "anxieties about the shifting nature of 'the human'" at a moment when new scientific discourses were mapping emergent models of the body as "abhuman" and "ambiguated."¹² For Del Principe, whether the body is "unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid," the ecogothic turns a "more inclusive lens" on that body, asking how it "can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity."¹³ For Del Principe, then, the monstrous body is the linchpin of the gothic—and the ecogothic expands the terrain, the constitutive ground, of that body, which is never strictly "human" but always a blend of the human and the nonhuman.

Thus far, then, critics have established the ecogothic as (1) a repository of deep unease, fear, and even contempt as humans confront the natural world; (2) a literary mode that uses an implacable external "wilderness" to call attention to the crisis in practices of representation; and (3) a terrain in which the contours of the body are mapped, contours that increasingly stray beyond the bounds of what might be considered properly "human."

2. *Ecogothic Time and Space*

In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Chris Baldick offers a succinct definition:

For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of *inheritance in time* with a claustrophobic sense of *enclosure in space*, these two dimensions reinforcing each other to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration.¹⁴

Baldick captures two "dimensions" here that virtually every critic includes as crucial characteristics of the gothic: "inheritance in time" and "enclosure in space." In this definition, the gothic represents some form of *entrapment* in both the temporal and the spatial realms. The

ecogothic, we argue, extends these preoccupations of the gothic; it not only takes up (and has always taken up) questions about our very being (such as who we are) but also more particular questions of determinism (and freedom), especially as these questions play out through a long history and on the far reaches, the limit edges, of what we think we know about the human—and what shapes or “possesses” the human.

It has certainly been a truism of the gothic that it represents an implacable “inheritance” in time, an unforgiving return of the past in the present. This truism is no doubt in large part due to the importance within the gothic tradition of Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay on the uncanny. Freud argued that the “uncanny” effect is produced by the resurgence of once-familiar content from the past. Forgotten or repressed, this content returns newly incarnate as hauntingly unfamiliar: the uncanny, in short, is the “unintended repetition,” as Freud put it, of the past.¹⁵ In the wake of Freud’s famous articulation, critics of the gothic repeatedly stress characters’ helplessness in the face of a past that they (or others) have tried desperately to bury. The gothic signals “the disturbing return of pasts upon presents,” Fred Botting notes. “Gothic shows time and again,” Mark Edmundson declares, “that life, even at its most ostensibly innocent, is possessed, that the present is in thrall to the past.” Allan Lloyd-Smith reiterates that the gothic “is about the *return* of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present.” And Jerrold Hogle claims that within the spaces of the gothic “are hidden some secrets from the past ... that haunt the characters.”¹⁶

In the traditional gothic, the past that returns is most often one shaped in the crucible of society, culture, and family—most obviously, the buried family secret, the inherited curse, the “sins of the fathers,” as Frederick Crews famously titled his book about Nathaniel Hawthorne. And indeed, Maule’s curse, which fatally shadows the Pyncheon line in *The House of the Seven*

Gables (1851), is a perfect example of this “sin”—one of land, property, and money. American gothic has, of course, also been haunted by its collective past of colonization and slavery. Teresa Goddu reads the gothic as “intensely engaged with historical concerns,” situating American gothic in particular “within specific sites of historical haunting, most notably slavery.”¹⁷ Hence Cassy, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and Linda Brent, in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), are gothic figures, their abject bodies haunting their white owners both for the abuses they have committed and for entrenched familial and racial sins.

In the ecogothic, however, time is not just familial, social, cultural, and political but *evolutionary*. Jane Bennett has urged that we take a “long view of time,” the perspective of “evolutionary rather than biographical time.”¹⁸ The (long) past that is inexorably inherited is one that marks us in particular *as animals*, and it is a past that persists vestigially within us. As Del Principe astutely remarks, the ecogothic often specifies the more general human estrangement from nature—the reluctance of humans “to come to terms with their nonhuman ancestry and the common, biological origin of all life.”¹⁹ As the ecogothic develops the dictum that the present remains in thrall to the past, then, it casts its net still further back than does the gothic into the era of prehistory, into our prehuman (and nonhuman) origins.

The second crucial element of the gothic that Baldick asserts is its “claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space.” Baldick elaborates this point by emphasizing the entrapping *built* environment, writing that the gothic transpires in a “relatively enclosed space in which some antiquated barbaric code still prevails”: a “sinister labyrinthine building,” for instance. He adds that “Gothic fiction is characteristically obsessed with old buildings as sites of human decay.”²⁰ Hogle reiterates this idea, arguing that the gothic tale usually takes place “in an antiquated or

seemingly antiquated space—be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard.”²¹ While the castle has certainly been central to the gothic tradition (as Siân Silyn Roberts points out, “the metaphor of the castle—the stock-in-trade of gothic fiction—betokens everything from political tyranny to gendered oppression, *ancien regime* decadence to psychological trauma”), it has, for perhaps obvious reasons (not least, a distinct dearth of castles) never been quite as central to *American gothic*.²² American writers have, however, materialized the crimes of family and race in more mundane houses: Edgar Allan Poe’s crumbling aristocratic mansion, Hawthorne’s house built on land stolen from Native Americans Indians and wrested from a working man, and the Southern plantations and slave-owning homes that entrap the resisting and haunting bodies of Stowe’s Cassy and Jacob’s Linda Brent.

While buildings have loomed large even in American gothic, critics have also noted the particular importance of natural landscapes to the gothic tradition. After Hogle describes the “antiquated space” of the gothic, he also adduces the “primeval forest or island” as important gothic settings.²³ And the forest has featured prominently in much of British gothic (not least the fiction of Anne Radcliffe). As Lisa Kröger writes, “While much is made about the Gothic edifices, such as the ancient estate or the crumbling castle, the environment, most often seen in the Gothic forest, plays just as integral a role in these novels.”²⁴ American gothic, however, has long been as good as defined by its representation of a haunting “wilderness.” Even as this “wilderness” was psychologized, turned into a “moral” wilderness by writers and critics—transmuted into what Joseph Bodziocck calls “the howling wilderness of chaos and moral depravity”²⁵—the stubborn materiality of land, trees, swamps, and vegetation has meant that American gothic literature has always been *ecogothic*.

The American gothic has embodied from the beginning, then, the ways in which the “enclosure in space” of Baldick’s definition is not only the built environment—the ruined castle, the abbey, or the dungeon—but the larger natural ecosystem in which humans are enmeshed. As Stacy Alaimo has eloquently argued (in a claim that is integral to many of the essays that follow), the human, inevitably corporeal, is in fact “trans-corporeal.” The human, she writes, “is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world.” The latter, moreover, is never “empty space” or a mere “resource” for our use but “a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions.”²⁶ It is a world, moreover, animated by forms of agency (exactly what Estok claims we fear: the “agency of the natural environment”). Humans are not entangled with a passive and inert natural backdrop, then, but with a nonhuman that is, as Bennett has argued, “vibrant” and “vital.” The realm of the nonhuman, of things, “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own,” all of which, Bennett argues, frequently serve to “impede or block the will and designs of humans.” What Bennett eloquently describes as “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” counters what we readily (too readily) see only as *human* agency.²⁷ From the conventional image of the maiden in the ruined castle, imperiled by secrets that almost always turn out to be familial, by strangers that almost always turn out to be human, the ecogothic turns to the inevitability of humans intertwined with their natural environment, surrounded, interpenetrated, and sometimes stalked by a nonhuman that has its own agentic force, a force that challenges the humans’ own.

As this discussion of inheritance in time and enclosure in space already suggests, what is entrapment in the conventional gothic (by family curses, within labyrinthine buildings) becomes a different kind of entrapment in the ecogothic. It is an entrapment marked by the expanded boundaries of both time and space (evolutionary time and global ecosystems). To the extent,

then, that the gothic has always been marked by a profound determinism (with its tropes of ineluctable inheritance and claustrophobic entrapment), the ecogothic expands the forces that constitute our determining world. It expands, to return to Edmundson's phrase, that to which we are "in thrall." It brings into view, first, the shaping force of our animal nature, inherited through a long evolutionary past, and, second, the realities (and dangers) of the natural world (not just of the built, human world), including (in place of calculating and depraved villains) often indifferent or hostile predators, terrain, and climate. Both in time and space, then, we are determined by and in relation to the nonhuman, which is both within and without, a part both of the human and of the ecosystems humans inhabit.

3. The Racial Ecogothic

One particular way to think about the expanded time and space of the ecogothic is by considering the specifically (and inevitably) *predatory* ecosystems that humans inhabit. Humans are, of course, both predators and prey: these drives are immanent within us and concretized in the world we inhabit, both forming our evolutionary inheritance and shaping understandings of the perils of our external environment and attitudes toward land and plant life (as resources to be used for our own survival). In both the temporal (evolutionary) and spatial (ecological) domains, then, the dynamic of predation—or what Val Plumwood eloquently calls the "edible and ecological order"—exerts a determining force on who we are.²⁸ In the American ecogothic, relations of predation, edibility, and environmental exploitation have often been expressed specifically within the system of racial hierarchy and oppression that has dominated American history. The American ecogothic, in other words, grows in a soil too often fed by the blood of violent oppression.

In “Letter IX” from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), for instance, Crèvecoeur’s narrator, the fictional James, writes of the “physical evil” of slavery, which he finds in Charles Town, South Carolina.²⁹ Detailing how life for the ruling class of the town is marked by “joy, festivity, and happiness,” he then notes with revulsion how in the countryside, one finds “the horrors of slavery,” where “showers of sweat and of tears which from the bodies of Africans daily drop and moisten the ground they till” (168). In describing an agricultural economy in which the soil is cultivated and even watered by the sweat and tears of slaves, James does more than point out the horrors of chattel slavery. He pulls back a veil that hides the direct physical connection between slaves, the land upon which they toil, and the fruits of their labor. This connection makes clear that the happy, prosperous citizens of Charles Town are figurative cannibals, enjoying crops watered and fed by the bodies of slaves—a recognition Farah Jasmine Griffin makes when she argues that the “Southern earth is fertilized with the blood of black people.... On the surface it is a land of great physical beauty and charm, but beneath it lay black blood and decayed black bodies. Beneath the charm lay the horror.”³⁰ Crèvecoeur’s narrator makes no attempt to hide his disgust and ends his letter with a horrifying encounter with a dying slave in the wilderness. Invited to dinner at a planter’s home, James walks “a small path leading through a pleasant wood” (177–78). An avid naturalist, he collects “some peculiar plants” along the way, but he soon encounters a truly horrifying sight, a slave locked in a cage, suspended from the branches of a tree and left to die:

I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek-bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places; and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds. From the edges of the hollow sockets and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped and tinged the ground beneath. No

sooner were the birds flown than swarms of insects covered the whole body of this unfortunate wretch, eager to feed on his mangled flesh and to drink his blood.

(178)

On one hand, James's encounter is a dark allegory of a doomed man who stands in for all the horrific practices of slavery. There is, however, a deeply environmental statement here as well, one that demonstrates how slavery has perverted the natural world of the South, literally offering up a victim for the birds and insects to devour while his blood drips slowly onto the ground.

Instances of humans consumed in one way or another by nature are common to ecogothic narratives (e.g., Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Circumstance" [1860]), and such literal meldings of the human with the nonhuman reveal the ways these texts, as Alaimo argues, imagine the human intermeshed with the "more-than-human world."³¹ Augmenting the sociopolitical implications of Crèvecoeur's portrait of racial violence is a reminder of the ecological reality of our material selves: that our bodies—never truly separate from the nonhuman environment—will inevitably decompose and become food. Very human power relations, however, have a strong hand in determining how and when a body becomes food.

Another nineteenth-century tale infused with an intermingled racial oppression and dread of environmental melding is Henry Clay Lewis's story "A Struggle for Life" from *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* (1850). Narrated by a racist country doctor named Madison Tensas, the story begins when a grotesque dwarf slave (shades of Poe's "Hop Frog" [1849]) approaches Tensas with a letter from his owner, a man named Disney. The letter asks the doctor to follow the slave to the bedside of Disney's sick mother. Taking a shortcut through the swamp, the two men soon become lost, and as they camp for the night in the swamp, the slave

becomes insolent and demands Tensas's bottle of brandy. Rebuffed, the dwarf attacks the doctor, strangling him until he loses consciousness. In this death-like state, Tensas's narration becomes a dreamy haze in which he recalls his dead mother's "black eyes" and how "I dragged my exhausted frame through the cotton-fields of the south. My back was wearied with stooping—we were picking the first opening ... the strap of the cotton sack, galling my shoulder."³² Upon regaining his senses, Tensas realizes that the dwarf has, in a drunken rage, accidentally burned himself to death in the campfire. With any revelations from his dream obscured by his return to consciousness, Tensas forgets his figurative kinship with the slave and merely concludes that the dwarf "had died the murderer's death and been buried in his grave,—a tomb of fire" (151). Lewis's story invites an investigation of the junction between cultural anxiety about racial oppression and what might be viewed as generic fears of the Southern swamp. The character of the dwarf slave embodies this conjunction of fears in that he takes on the role of a vengeful Other who lashes out at a white oppressor while also, in Tensas's racist view, taking on the features of a monster. Upon first glimpse, Tensas claims he did not initially recognize the man as a person at all:

I discerned ... something which so closely resembled an ape or an ourang outang, that I was in doubt whether the voice had proceeded from it until a repetition of the hail, this time coming unmistakably from it, assured me that it was a human.

(146)

Once Tensas meets the slave face to face, he sees before him

a negro dwarf of the most frightful appearance ... his face was hideous: a pair of tusches [tusks] projected from either side of a double hare-lip; and taking him altogether, he was the

nearest resemblance to the ourang outang mixed with the devil that human eyes ever dwelt upon.

(147)

To Tensas, the slave is a grotesque hybrid of human and ape-like features, an unnerving nonhuman “something” that he must trust to guide him through the wilderness of the equally nonhuman swamp.

That swamp environment itself, while not necessarily aligned with the racist monstrosity Tensas imposes upon the slave, brings with it no shortage of trepidation. Indeed, the swamp of Lewis’s tale shares some of the traits of Crèvecoeur’s woods in that it serves as something of a middle ground between the plantation and the town, a location where racial violence emerges in stark relief against the lushness of the natural world. For Tensas, the swamp is a realm of ethereal dread and unsettling transformations:

the wild hoot of an owl was heard, and directly I almost felt the sweep of his wings as he went sailing by, and alighted upon an old tree just where the light sank mingling with the darkness. I followed him with my eye, and as he settled himself, he turned his gaze towards me ... the swamp moss was flowing around him in long, tangled masses, and as a more vivid gleam uprose, I gazed and started involuntarily. Had I not known it was an owl surrounded with moss that sat upon a stricken tree, I would have sworn it was the form of an old man, clad in a sombre flowing mantle, his arm raised in an attitude of warning.

(149)

More than merely a startling moment in the night, the encounter with the owl highlights an inherent backwardness in Tensas’s reasoning. The owl, blended into its swamp environment,

becomes a man, perhaps attempting to warn him of the attack to follow. It is an act of skewed perception similar to his earlier vision of the dwarf slave as an “ourang outang mixed with the devil.” Tensas’s transformation of the owl into the image of an old man reveals his propensity to meld the human with the nonhuman, the two finally becoming inextricable.

Ecogothic tales, as Del Principe argues, scrutinize “the construction of the Gothic body—unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid—through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity.”³³ Coupled with his racist dehumanizing of the slave, Tensas’s anthropomorphizing of an owl reveals the extent to which he is given to envisioning hybrids that ultimately figure for repressed Others. Detailing the nuances of haunting in American gothic fiction, Eric Savoy writes, “The gothic cannot function without a proximity of Otherness imagined as its imminent return.”³⁴ Ecogothic texts thus invoke this Other as a disturbed and disturbing natural world, one in which traditional boundaries between the human and the nonhuman become blurred in grotesque ways by human atrocities and amoral biological processes.

Ultimately, in the nineteenth-century ecogothic imagination, the natural world becomes a deceptively beautiful repository for a shameful national legacy. It taps into the murder and displacement of indigenous peoples, the oppression of women, children, and the lower classes, and, of course, the horrors of slavery. These injustices play out upon a natural world that is likewise victimized. Deforestation, over-hunting, and unsustainable farming, along with countless other forms of shortsighted land management, have forever degraded the continent’s ecological integrity. Combined with their human toll, these practices cast the natural world as a burial ground for victims of social and environmental trauma. As the essays in this collection

affirm, humanity's continued abuses against the land and its denizens, human and nonhuman alike, have spawned a culture obsessed with and fearful of a natural world both monstrous and monstrously wronged.

4. *The Nonhuman Ecogothic*

Going beyond long-standing conceptions of the gothic as bound up with the histories of oppressive political, social, and economic structures, the ecogothic recognizes the imbrication of racial oppression with relations of predation, edibility, and environmental exploitation and degradation. Indeed, the ecogothic is an integral part of what has been called the “nonhuman turn.” This critical movement in the social sciences and humanities, as Richard Grusin describes it, thoroughly decenters the human “in favor of a turn toward and a concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies.”³⁵ The nonhuman turn disputes both human exceptionalism and the hegemony of social constructivism. Thus, what we might call the *nonhuman ecogothic* displaces from the center of the gothic literary mode both the distinctiveness of the human and the shaping power of social discourses and institutions. As Grusin writes, the nonhuman turn challenges a human exceptionalism expressed primarily as “conceptual or rhetorical dualisms that separate the human from the nonhuman.”³⁶ Instead, advocates of the nonhuman turn recognize the ways in which the human and nonhuman are thoroughly entangled. The human “has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman” and is in fact “characterized by this indistinction.” The nonhuman turn also questions the dominance of social constructivist thinking that, taken to its logical extreme, “strips the world,” as Grusin puts it, “of any ontological or agential status.” Indeed, it is precisely this agency of the world for which Bennett argues so

eloquently when she writes of “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things.”³⁷

The discourses of the nonhuman turn, including what turns out to be the long history of the nonhuman ecogothic, account for this agency of “things.” Perhaps there is no better example of the agentic nonhuman than the almost-sentient “mystic vapor” that “reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn” and the “fine tangled web-work” of fungi that overspreads the house in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839): vapor, trees, wall, tarn, fungi—all seem to play their part in the climactic dissolution of the house and the last two remaining Ushers.³⁸ Indeed, Poe’s story makes it clear that in the nonhuman ecogothic, the indistinction of the human and nonhuman and the agency of the nonhuman environment become determining forces on and in the human world, determining forces that are largely disavowed as humans strive to conceive of themselves as conscious, rational, and volitional selves. The shaping force of the human’s immanent nonhuman origins and of the agentic nonhuman world—disavowed, repressed, denied—can always be counted on to return with a haunting and uncanny force in the ecogothic.

In his 1861 novel, *Elsie Venner*, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., offers a powerful allegory of the nonhuman-human indistinction, thus providing an exemplary instance of the ecogothic within the American literary tradition. The novel is predicated on the fatal encounter of a woman with a rattlesnake. While pregnant, Elsie Venner’s mother ventured into the mountains to “Rattlesnake Ledge” where she suffered a snakebite that profoundly shaped her unborn child. Her daughter Elsie is born a hybrid of human and snake, her nature traversed by a “reptilian” element that causes her to lash out and harm others in ways she does not herself understand, which she is

unable to control. Perceived by most of the characters in the novel as not entirely “human” and thus “evil,” like her *Crotalus* progenitor, Elsie is doomed to a life of alienation.

Holmes depicts his heroine as entrapped and cursed within a natural environment that is much wider than the castle or ruined abbey: it is an environment of mountains, rocks, and snakes—of predator and prey, reproduction and extermination, and the inevitably interwoven fate of humans and nonhumans. The snake bite that kills her mother and permanently (de)forms Elsie is a reminder that we are all enmeshed in a natural ecosystem that we also shape. Indeed, in her constitution by and as both human and snake, Elsie is a living embodiment of Alaimo’s “transcorporeality.” And while the environment, Alaimo continues, is “a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions” and never “empty space” or a mere “resource” for our use,³⁹ humans often treat the environment and its “fleshy” inhabitants as both. Hence, Elsie’s mother’s fatal snakebite takes place in the context of a ruthless campaign (in the novel and in the real world beyond it) to eradicate rattlesnakes from the environs of Boston, to make the region habitable (only) for humans.

Historian Thomas Palmer has described how the *Crotalus* of eastern Massachusetts was turned into a monster and relentlessly hunted almost to extinction from the colonial period through the nineteenth century. In the early twenty-first century, it is all but gone, except for a few dozen in the Blue Hills. Palmer writes that the “monster” *Crotalus* was never really a native of Massachusetts:

In a very real sense he disembarked with the first Europeans, who were sure that this strange, bewildering land must contain deadly and terrible creatures, creatures that must be removed before civilized men could inhabit it—is it any surprise that such creatures were found?⁴⁰

Palmer identifies the work of fantasy, driven by fear and dread, that underwrote the campaign to exterminate the rattlesnakes of the eastern part of the US. This fantasy similarly pervades Holmes' novel in the way his characters approach not only the snakes themselves but also the mountain and the rocks where the rattlesnakes still live and Elsie herself as a hybrid snake-human. To the extent that everyone sees Elsie as "evil" (just as they apprehend the mountain, the rocks, and the snakes as "evil"), Holmes suggests that there may be nothing behind that "evil" but a pervasive ecophobia.

Elsie's schoolteacher, Bernard Langdon, is drawn to the mountain home of *Crotalus* in an effort to understand his strange pupil. Demonstrating the human tendency to moralize the natural world, as he approaches the dreaded ledge where Elsie's mother was bitten, with all its "bald and leprous-looking declivities," Bernard cannot help but feel that the "nearer aspect of the blasted region had something frightful in it." In this "blasted" place, Langdon encounters a rattlesnake, hears its "dreadful sound," and is saved from its venom only by Elsie's more powerful "poison." He then acquires some rattlesnakes in order to study them—and although he attempts to approach them with a strictly rationalistic, scientific gaze, he fails to see them as anything other than "the natural symbol of evil." It "was a very curious fact," writes Holmes, "that the first train of thoughts Mr. Bernard's small menagerie suggested to him was the grave, though somewhat worn, subject of the origins of evil."⁴¹ Langdon is not alone, as every character in the novel sees Elsie's antenatal "poisoning" by a snake as "moral poison" as Holmes puts it in the preface (xii–xiii). The virtuous Helen Darley, for instance, thinks that "if there were women now, as in the days of our Saviour, possessed of devils, I should think there was something not human looking out of Elsie Venner's eyes!" (104). All who encounter her (like those who encounter the mountain, the rocks, and *Crotalus*) feel dread and condemnation for of Elsie rather than pity. As

a literal figure of trans-corporeality, entangled with the “evil” rattlesnake and its “blasted” landscape, Elsie is also a literal figure of humans’ ecophobic relationships to their environment. The ecosystem, which Holmes depicts as indwelling in his heroine, is introjected as a “leprous” space and a malignant being, one that must be extirpated as the rattlesnake has been and as Elsie is by novel’s end.

The nonhuman ecogothic shows the human “inheritance in time” to be a long, evolutionary inheritance, one that inevitably embroils us with the nonhuman. *Elsie Venner* doubly allegorizes this point in that Elsie is not only literally part-snake, but her “snake part” also marks a distinctly nonhuman *affect* that Holmes suggests is not hers alone. Grusin has argued that this “embodied and autonomous affect” is a part of what constitutes the “nonhuman.” First of all, he claims, affect is in large part “somatic and bodily” and thus will operate “autonomously and automatically, independent of ... cognition, emotion, will, desire, purpose, intention, or belief—all conventional attributes of the traditional liberal humanist subject.” Grusin also claims that “affectivity belongs to nonhuman animals as well as to nonhuman plants or inanimate objects, technical or natural,” thus forging part of the “nondistinction” of humans and nonhumans.⁴² (Uncontrollable) affect, then, can be seen as part of the ecogothic tradition, and it is exemplified in *Elsie Venner*, whose affectivity is depicted as thoroughly alien. While the eyes of Langdon’s rattlesnakes, for instance, “shone with cold still light” and were “horrible to look into, with their stony calmness, their pitiless indifference” (161), Elsie’s eyes are described in the same way: “The light of those beautiful eyes was like the lustre of ice; in all her features there was nothing of that human warmth which shows that sympathy has reached the soul beneath the mask of flesh it wears.” Her look contained only “stony apathy” (143). Elsie’s snake part, in short, seems to have ushered in the death of the human. As Bernard proclaims, “there must be something in that

creature's blood which has killed the humanity in her" (165). For Holmes, this lack of humanity is the absence only of what we want to believe is the "human": in fact, it represents a fundamentally alien nonhuman affect and "automaticity" immanent in all humans. Poe's "mad" narrators (e.g. "William Wilson" [1839], "The Tell-Tale Heart" [1843], and "The Black Cat" [1843]), driven by forces they can neither understand nor control—as well as his famous theory of the "perverse"—are very much a part of this nonhuman affect, which is integral to the ecogothic tradition.⁴³

According to Holmes, Elsie's antenatal "injury" is a source of uncontrollable and unconscious action: what Holmes called in his novel "automatic action" and developed in a later essay as "reflex action."⁴⁴ Elsie is thus framed as not responsible for what she does, even when she is compulsively violent (lashing out at her cousin when they are children, trying to poison her governess). Indeed, the novel repeatedly dramatizes Holmes's deep conviction that Elsie's disorder began before she was born. It is littered with disquisitions on the heredity nature of character—on the fact that moral "peculiarities" are "transmitted by inheritance" (168) and that "the tricks of the blood keep breaking out" (243). As Bernard Langdon thinks,

the more he thought of all [Elsie's] strange instincts and modes of being, the more he became convinced that whatever alien impulse swayed her will and modulated or diverted or displaced her affections came from some impression that reached far back into the past... He believed that she had brought her ruling tendency, whatever it was, into the world with her.

(295–96)⁴⁵

The prenatal injury that shaped Elsie implanted within her a kind of memory that was unavailable to consciousness, which she would never be able to access and never understand—and it allegorizes not an anomalous but a mundane human condition.

In an essay entitled “Crime and Automatism” (published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1875), in which he expounds more fully than in *Elsie Venner* his views on the fundamentally hereditary nature of human action, Holmes argues that all of us are the product of “hereditary instincts,” are driven by “organic tendencies, inborn idiosyncrasies, which, so far as they go, are purely mechanical.”⁴⁶ Violent actions (like all actions) are the inevitable product of an organic cause; they are “reflex movements, automatic consequences of practically irresistible causes existing in the inherited organization and in preceding conditions.”⁴⁷ While *Elsie Venner* dramatizes the heritability of nature as an accident, the seemingly random bite of the snake, “Crime and Automatism” extends the inevitability of an inborn nature to everyone as a natural law, not a singular occurrence. In his profoundly ecogothic essay, Holmes argues that all humans are traversed by a substratum of automaticity that prompts them to act mechanically, without reason or volition. After all, everyone inherits “reflex movements, automatic consequences” from all that comes before.⁴⁸

Elsie Venner represents the particular violent incursion into the human body and mind of a rattlesnake bite, but in “Crime and Automatism,” Holmes suggests that all of us are already uncanny ecogothic subjects, traversed by the automaticity of our nonhuman origins and affectivity, an internal nature perhaps as inimical to the “human” as an external predatory environment. Holmes’s version of the ecogothic shows humans as haunted by a well of inherited automaticity, a “nature” that is inside as well as outside. Elsie may be an idiosyncratic human rattlesnake, but *all* humans incorporate a nonhuman, alien “nature” that compels them to act in ways they cannot easily know or control. The central scenario of *Elsie Venner*, then, illustrates the nonhuman ecogothic by describing the imbrication of the human, the animal, and a nonhuman automaticity and affectivity—embodying the “indistinction” of the human and

nonhuman. It also represents the profound reciprocal effect of humans and the ecosystems in which they live, in which they encounter and create (and are in turn shaped by) “leprous” rocks, “blasted” landscapes, and “evil” rattlesnakes. The determining forces of the ecogothic are vast and echo back through millennia; they are, moreover, within as well as without—and the dread they induce is of our own nature as well as the nature that lies beyond the singular limits of the human body.

5. *Conclusion*

At its core, *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* challenges the popular view that America’s environmental imagination chiefly originated from and came to be defined by the pastoral, anthropocentric, and ultimately innocuous natural world found in the writings of the Transcendentalists. Rather, what follows is an invitation to journey beyond the benign shores of Walden Pond for the treacherous wilds found in works by writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, Leonora Sansay, Edgar Allan Poe, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Jacobs, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Charles Chesnutt. These essays expose the darker aspects of the human cultural relationship with the North American natural world, a land that has variously served as predator and prey, refuge and abattoir, fertile paradise and haunted wilderness. As it has since the first Europeans set foot on the soil of the so-called New World, the nonhuman environment supports and defines the American experience while also instilling fear and, at times, even violating the bodily integrity of its human denizens.

With this paradoxical conception of the American natural world in mind, the authors of this collection tackle an array of environmental anxieties that emerge from the pages of American literary culture, charting a course from the days of the fledgling republic to the dawn of the twentieth century and beyond, chasing echoes that resound in our creation of and response to the

horrors of our present-day environmental (and ultimately human) crises. These essays explore the ecogothic as it emerges in literary portrayals of a range of socio-ecological issues, including those related to animal and plant studies, Native American Indian genocide, the nation's legacy of slavery, the oppression of women, and the ever-present blight of environmental degradation in general. What follows, then, should be viewed as part of a much longer critical project, one in which we continue to challenge and reconsider the ways fear, guilt, trauma, the uncanny, and the grotesque factor into our understanding of how the spectral presence of the nonhuman haunts America's literary mind.

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1. Smith and Hughes, "Introduction," 1.

2. Hillard quotes Punter to the effect that the "main element" traversing the gothic is fear. "Deep into That Darkness," 689. Virtually every critic who has written on the ecogothic describes its principal function as expressing fear and similar emotions. Bavidge, for instance (drawing, like Hillard, on Estok's notion of ecophobia), defines the ecogothic as a literary mode that expresses unease with the environment: "The Gothic of ecophobia dramatizes and foregrounds the multiple anxieties and discomforts of our relationship with the natural environment." "Rats," 115. Smith and Hughes claim that the gothic is the exemplary form to capture the "anxieties" surrounding contemporary debates about "climate change and environmental damage." "Introduction," 5. Del Principe writes that the "ecoGothic serves to give voice to ingrained biases and a mounting ecophobia—fears stemming from humans' precarious relationship with all that is nonhuman." "Introduction," 1. Certain words recur, then, in definitions of the ecogothic: fear, unease, anxiety, discomfort, hatred, contempt, and terror. In fact, these words themselves, in the context of the human relationship with the nonhuman, often seem to define what the ecogothic distinctly expresses.

3. de la Vega, *The Florida of the Inca*, 66; Smith, "from *The General History of Virginia*," 87; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 62.

4. Buell, *The Future*, 25.

5. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 1–2; Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1–3.

6. Sivils similarly surveys the "subtle, but pervasive, environmental unease" that threads through American literature. As he puts it, in words that describe Rachel Carson's dystopic

representation, the American environmental gothic “resides in its genius for playing upon the terror that resides beneath a curtain of pastoral beauty.” “American Gothic,” 123–24.

7. Estok, “Theorizing in a Space,” 207–8.

8. As Corstorphine writes,

If humans are indeed part of a symbiotic ecosystem, then the human urge to tame and control the wilderness, which has defined much of our civilization, certainly in the United States, would seem to contradict our assumed place in the natural world.

““The Blank Darkness,”” 129–30

9. Corstorphine notes that Roderick Nash, in his influential *Wilderness and the American Mind*, “identifies ‘wild’ as being related to ‘will’ in its earliest form, so that the term was used ‘to denote creatures not under the control of man.’” Corstorphine goes on to point out that Edgar Allan Poe’s fiction, for example, makes it clear that “among the creatures not under the control of man might well be man himself.” ““The Blank Darkness,”” 121.

10. Smith and Hughes, “Introduction,” 2–3.

11. *Ibid.*, 4.

12. Hurley, *Gothic Body*, 5–6. Hurley writes of “the ruination of traditional constructs of human identity” at the turn of the century, during the transition from a “stable and integral” body to a “metamorphic and undifferentiated” body. Instead of transcendence, the late nineteenth century offered the prospect of “existence circumscribed within the realities of gross corporeality.” *Gothic Body*, 3.

13. Del Principe, “Introduction,” 1.

14. Baldick, Introduction, xix; emphasis added.

15. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 144.

16. Botting, *Gothic*, 1; Edmundson, *Nightmare*, 5; Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction*, 1; Hogle, "Introduction," 2. Hillard calls this buried secret from the past, which is so central to the gothic, a "primal crime." "From Salem Witch," 112.

17. Goddu, *Gothic America*, 2, 10.

18. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10–11.

19. Del Principe, "Introduction," 2.

20. Baldick, Introduction, xv, xvi, xx.

21. Hogle, "Introduction," 2. Kate Ellis has written about the "failed home" as a frequent preoccupation of the gothic. "Secrecy renders every interior a haunted space where past repression can be endlessly re-created, where secrets are concealed, but never fully." *The Contested Castle*, ix, 73. Like many other critics, then, Ellis conjoins the haunting secrets of the gothic to the human, built environment.

22. Roberts, *Gothic Subjects*, 2.

23. Hogle, "Introduction," 2.

24. Kröger, "Panic," 16.

25. Qtd. in Goddu, *Gothic America*, 9. Goddu discusses at some length the tendency in criticism of the American gothic to erase history, to "psychologize" it. *Gothic America*, 9.

26. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

27. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii, ix.

28. Plumwood, "Being Prey," 89.

29. Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 166. Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in the text.

30. Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?" 16.

31. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

32. Lewis, “A Struggle,” 151. Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in the text.

33. Del Principe, “Introduction,” 1.

34. Savoy, “The Face,” 6.

35. Grusin, Introduction, vii.

36. *Ibid.*, x.

37. *Ibid.*, ix–x, xi; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii, ix.

38. Poe, “Fall,” 319.

39. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

40. Palmer, *Landscape*, 151. Palmer details the history of demonizing and killing *Crotalus* in Massachusetts. *Landscape*, 110–52.

41. Holmes, *Elsie Venner*, 147, 148, 158, 160–61. Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in the text.

42. Grusin, Introduction, xvii.

43. Poe lays out his theory of the perverse in “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845).

44. For the phrase “automatic action,” see Holmes, *Elsie Venner*, 174. For the phrase “reflex action,” see Holmes, “Crime,” 469. For a discussion of *Elsie Venner* as a working out of Holmes’s view of “reflex action,” by which Elsie’s fate is decided before she is born, see Boewe, “Reflex Action.”

45. Helen Darley comes to a similar realization—that Elsie Venner is the victim of “an ante-natal impression which had mingled an alien element in her nature”—a bit later. Holmes, *Elsie Venner*, 320.

46. Holmes, “Crime,” 466.

47. *Ibid.*, 469, 474–75.

48. *Ibid.*, 469.