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We Live in EcoGothic Times:
Gothic Nature in the Current Climate

Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland

'The story of COVID-19 is a peculiarly ecoGothic one'.

In the year or so that has passed since the inaugural issue of *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic* a lot has changed. In what seems the blink of an eye, we now find ourselves in increasingly surreal—and Gothic—times in the midst of messily intermeshed social, political, economic, racial, and environmental turbulence. Many of the portents and warnings that have been entrenched from the outset in conversations around 'ecohorror' and 'ecoGothic' have rapidly taken frightening material form—evoking both disturbance and denial in seemingly equal measure. Consequently, the subject of interrogating and understanding the inextricable relationship between the human and the more-than-human—as well as the 'Gothicness' of this relationship—is becoming less niche by the day. The themes, and potentially the tools, of the ecoGothic are pushed ever more centre stage.

In Charlie Brooker's recent Netflix mockumentary *Death to 2020*, one character muses on the past year: 'I'd say it was a train wreck and a shitshow, but that would be unfair to trains and shit'. More, certainly, has occurred in terms of ecosocial catastrophe than we can begin to catalogue here, but the global highlight of the year, of course, is COVID-19: a phenomenon that fits all too well within the themes of this journal. The pandemic, as William Hughes persuasively argued at the swiftly organised *CoronaGothic* conference (hosted by the University of Macau in June 2020) and in a subsequent special issue of *Critical Quartley* (2020) titled 'CoronaGothic: Cultures of the Pandemic', is a matter of dark and global ecology—and one which fits squarely within the remits of the ecoGothic. And indeed, the story of COVID-19 is a peculiarly ecoGothic one. We wish to dwell, therefore, for a moment, on the extraordinary context in which we are publishing issue two of *Gothic Nature*.

Much has been written on the links between humankind's treatment of the environment and disease. In the past few decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of disease outbreaks that cross over from nonhuman animals to humans, such as SARS and bird influenza (Kate E. Jones et al, 2008; Katherine F. Smith et al, 2014). A key subject for ecologists in the last decade has been to question *why* this increase has occurred. Rory Gibb et al (2020) found that deforestation, agricultural expansion, and land conversion—and, importantly, attendant biodiversity loss—increases the pool of pathogens that can make the jump from nonhuman animals to humans. They found that while the increasing lack of biodiversity leads to some species going extinct, it means that others thrive—and these creatures (rats and bats, for instance) are often more likely to host potentially dangerous pathogens that can spread to humans. Their results suggest that global changes in the mode and intensity of anthropogenic land use are 'creating expanding hazardous interfaces between people, livestock, and wildlife reservoirs of zoonotic disease' (p. 398). As we now know all too well, zoonoses (diseases transmissible from vertebrate animals to humans), such as the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19, carry the risk and potential to cause global pandemics. In short, the virus was born out of an environment in which the line between human and nonhuman is *blurred*. Created in—and uncontrollably emerging out of—the shadowy borders of civilisation, the pandemic has subsequently brought to light uncomfortable truths about our relationship with Nature that have been, so far, much easier to ignore. COVID-19, we can conclude, is a direct product of a Gothic environment of our own making.

From the outset, COVID-19 has been communicated and narrativised—and can thus be interpreted—in decidedly Gothic terms. For starters, it conforms with ease to Dale Townsend's (2013) assertion that the Gothic is characterised by metaphors of *swarming*. He highlights that Gothic figures such as zombies, vampires, and viruses are consistently 'deterritorialized, mobile and ever-more ferocious' in contemporary Gothic narratives, and 'insistently swarm' (p. xlv). The virus is indeed much like a swarm: relentless, all-encompassing, ever-spreading, and pervasive. Moving indiscriminately throughout humanity across the globe, the swarm of invisible pathogens is for many terrifying, suffocating, and claustrophobic—with the newly evolved strains of the disease inviting fearful conjectures of an intelligent, invisible enemy. COVID-19 has brought, too, paranoia, which is another enduring Gothic trope. A swathe of bogus rumours and conspiracy theories have spread, virus-like, across the world via social media. The indiscriminate spread of the disease, moreover, as it moves freely across species, as well as social and geographical borders, chimes resoundingly with the Gothic's central obsession with the traversal of boundaries. It exposes the *porosity* and trans-corporeality (Alaimo, 2010: p. 2) of our own bodies. As Darryl Jones (2020) reminds us, our very cells have walls and defences—and the success of a contagion, by definition, demands their violation. The very language used to describe the effects of COVID-19 further underlines the disintegration of boundaries. Daily death tolls and continual allusions to spectral, unseen threats thin out the line between the living and the dead.

Perhaps the most 'in-your-face-Gothic' element of all in this is the fact that COVID-19 is popularly believed to have begun with a *bat*. As with many popular tales, there is perhaps only a grain of truth in COVID-19's origin story; nonetheless, the bat has been an enduring symbol of the pandemic and it is, of course, an icon of the Gothic mode. Commonly considered dirty, fetid, monstrous, and unclean, it falls into what Lorrain McKee (2020) terms the category of our creatures we resign to the 'unloved'. Bats have long been associated in the popular imagination with infectious disease and the undead. Nick Groom (2020) contends that pandemics, pestilence, and plagues have always been a 'lightning rods for folklore and urban myths' (p. 9). He argues that the folk, and folklore, quickly found explanations for the virulence of infection through the preternatural and supernatural, most notably the vampire—a Gothic monster renowned for shapeshifting into various animal forms, markedly the bat. It is all too fitting then that our own real-life corona-vampiric mythos begins with the purported consumption of 'bat soup'. We have the uneasy sense that we have somehow *ingested* the Gothic: opening up further associations with what Jimmy Packham (2019) dubs 'vegetarian horror' (p. 78), a mode that explicitly foregrounds food politics and reveals the horror implicated in meat-eating. The pandemic has not only been a wakeup call to crack down on illicit wildlife trades and markets; it has raised uncomfortable questions that destabilise our acceptance of excessive carnivorous consumption and, to echo Packham, places the 'everyday eating practices of large swathes of humanity as a site of gory Gothic horror' (p. 81). Indeed, the pandemic increasingly serves as an uninvited catalyst which summons us to question our own Gothic natures.

In the first issue of *Gothic Nature*, Tom J. Hillard's essay 'Gothic Nature Revisited: Reflections on the Gothic of Ecocriticism' (2019) posited that the development of ecocriticism itself can be reimagined figuratively 'as if it were a horror film' (p. 21). He argues that as we interrogate the human/nonhuman relationship, we are collectively at the point in the movie where we have discovered 'the body in the basement' (p. 29)—and we are staring at it, wide-eyed and dumbstruck. One year on, if we are to continue the analogy, it is hard not to see our current lived experience specifically as an *ecohorror story*. In this vein, the pandemic—caused, in essence, by destructive anthropogenic phenomena—becomes Nature's wrath materialised, exacting a Gaia-like vengeance on the (now ironically) infecting presence of the human race. This context adds weight to the 'types' of texts and tales examined in this journal: it suggests that our array of ecohorror fictions and concurrent ecoGothic tools employed will not only grow—both in number and importance—but will increasingly resonate in the cultural moment we find ourselves within.

Overall, 2020 has served as a stark reminder of the ease with which Gothic fiction bleeds into reality. If COVID-19 is a lived story of terror, wonder, and horror—one rooted in our dysfunctional relationship with the more-than-human world—then the interrogation of 'Gothic Nature' has never been more vital. It is imperative that we seek to question, probe, and better understand the otherwise overwhelming ecosocial phenomena around us, and organise the chaos. Whether we are reading the Nature *in* Gothic, or Nature *as* Gothic, the varied literary, philosophical, ecological, geological, historical, political, and cultural discussions that sit under the umbrella 'Gothic Nature' are united in their ability to productively engage with the anxieties arising from our co-existence with the more-than-human world.

The last twelve months or so have continued to expose the fragility of academia, with the pandemic alarmingly accelerating the systematic disinvestment in the arts and humanities across the Higher Education sector. Despite the year it has been, scholars from around the globe, each affected by the crisis—some home-schooling, some un/underemployed, some adapting with lightning speed to online teaching, and some navigating the enormity of illness and loss—have come together both at the *Gothic Nature* conference in the autumn, and within this publication, to critically reflect on the ecoGothic times we are living in. We are keen to promote the tangible benefits that our small but rapidly growing community can and *do* provide through increased interdisciplinarity and inclusivity; that is, by moving into new and fruitful areas of inquiry relating to our fears of the more-than-human world in collaboration with scholars across the environmental humanities and sciences, while ensuring that we increasingly and proactively diversify the voices included in the publications, projects, and events associated with the journal. The *Gothic Nature III* conference, held in October 2020, showed genuine interdisciplinarity and attracted public interest and engagement—leaving many of its participants with the uncomfortable takeaway that 'ecohorror' and 'ecoGothic' are increasingly lived realities, and that the monstrous topics and creatures of our many stories of the Gothic nature of Nature are gravely relevant. And so it is with the essays, reviews, and interviews collected here in the second issue of *Gothic Nature*—each reflecting, either explicitly or implicitly, the tempestuous times in which they were written. Through this journal, we continue to be passionate about our commitment to Open Access publishing and to showcasing and celebrating the scholarship of both leading names in ecohorror and ecoGothic and newer researchers alike. We have kept the scope of issue two deliberately broad in order to foreground the emerging, engaging, and sometimes surprising evolutions of scholarly inquiry into *Gothic Nature*—but all, in one way or another, have much to say about how we read the world in ecosocial crisis.

This issue is fittingly opened by Dawn Keetley, who provided the excellent keynote at the *Gothic Nature* conference in the autumn. In 'Dislodged Anthropocentrism and Ecological Critique in Folk Horror: From "Children of the Corn" and *The Wicker Man* to "In the Tall Grass" and *Children of the Stones*', she perceptively identifies and interrogates two forms of folk horror plots and, in doing so, significantly develops this exciting and relatively unchartered field. The first, which she dubs 'anthropocentric folk horror', is notable for its centring of human actors. Using Stephen King's short story 'Children of the Corn' (1977) and its subsequent film adaptations (1984 and 2009), as well as by Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), she illustrates how the plots of this dominant form of folk horror pivot on 'the clash between rural/local/primitive and urban/global/modern human communities'. In the second, 'stone-centric folk horror', humans are displaced. Keetley explores this 'folk horror without people' in another of King's stories 'In the Tall Grass' (2012) and the TV series *Children of the Stones* (1977). In these tales, agency is given to the 'quasi-objects' that constitute Nature—grass and rock—and narratives expand from a human scale of time to the geological. Keetley importantly draws our attention to the significance of the folk horror genre, whether anthropocentric or stone-centric, in its unsettling ability to tell stories about the devastating human impact on the environment.

Alexandra Hauke further builds on the definition and contours of folk horror by examining the American folk horror genre in ‘The Wicked Witch in the Woods: Puritan Maternalism, Ecofeminism, and Folk Horror in Robert Eggers’ *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale*’. Hauke argues that a key theme of American folk horror is its revelation of the mutual oppression of women and Nature—one that is rooted in the United States’ dark colonial history, but persists to this day. Through a perceptive analysis of *The VVitch* (2015), she explores the limited possibilities of woman-, mother-, and witchhood in colonial New England. Hauke offers ‘postmaternal ecofeminism’ as a way of challenging violent and oppressive patriarchal and anthropocentric systems—providing a way to break free from the ‘horrors of past and present folk’ and inviting further critical discussions of the intersections between Gothic, folk horror, gender, and ecology.

Continuing the theme of intersectionality, Kateryna Barnes’ essay ‘Soundtrack to Settler-Colonialism: Tanya Tagaq’s Music as Creative Nonfiction Horror’ is an important and much-needed contribution to conversations around the decolonisation of ecohorror and the ecoGothic. Focusing on the work of Innuit artist and throat-singer Tanya Tagaq, Barnes deconstructs the darkness of Tagaq’s music, which includes a mixture of original work and covers of, for example, Iron Maiden’s ‘Run to the Hills’ and Nirvana’s ‘Rape Me’. She argues that Tagaq is able, through her art, to give voice to an enraged Mother Nature, who herself embodies the pain and retribution of the extractive violence of settler-colonialism. Tagaq’s music is shown to express the real-life trauma of indigenous peoples and their lands—deliberately complicating, opening up new dialogues around, and identifying overlooked voices in Margaret Atwood’s established work on our understandings of the Canadian wilderness. Drawing on critical race theory and Ernest Becker’s work on death avoidance and terror, Barnes resituates Tagaq’s music and lyrics as works of creative non-fiction. In doing so, she challenges established ideas around settler-made Canadian ‘ecohorror’—particularly the enduring theme of survival *against* the perceived hostilities of Nature—and demonstrates that the origin of horror in Inuit culture is not in Nature itself, but in the monstrous treatment of indigenous peoples and the natural world by settler-colonialism.

Christy Tidwell also invites further discussion around the remits of ecohorror in her essay ‘The Ecohorror of Omission: Haunted Suburbs and the Forgotten Trees of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*’. Her work demonstrates the value in re-examining older texts, including some titles which may not be such ‘obvious’ choices, within the contexts of ecohorror. Here, she draws out the *elms* in ‘Elm Street’, highlighting two environmental issues which subtly inform the film: Dutch Elm disease, which destroyed millions of America’s elm trees, and mass deforestation, which paved the way for the increasing expansion of suburban life. Drawing on Bernice M. Murphy’s seminal work *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009), Tidwell explores how suburban horror can reveal human desires to control the ‘natural’ world and its forces. Focusing on the *absence* of the titular elms, while drawing out their spectral resonances in the film, Tidwell argues that it is not just Freddy Krueger that haunts this text, but the trees themselves—introducing the provocative and exciting term ‘the ecohorror of omission’.

In ‘All You Need Is Love?: Making the Selfish Choice in *The Cabin at the End of the World* (2018) and *The Migration* (2019)’, Rebecca Gibson goes on to explore our problematic—and distinctly Gothic—response to climate crisis in two apocalyptic texts. These texts are quite different in their visions of environmental disaster: Paul Tremblay’s *Cabin* depicts a family who must sacrifice one of their own in order to prevent a series of environmental disasters that will lead to the end of the world. The family in Helen Marshall’s *The Migration*, meanwhile, is threatened by a horrifying epidemic targeting teenagers, which is revealed to be a new stage of evolution engendered by a warming climate. Gibson explores in insightful detail the full range of shared and divergent reactions and emotions the families go through, from creeping climate dread to the lure of inaction to anxieties about future loss to selfishness, apathy, and denialism. While she argues that neither Tremblay nor Marshall offer any practical solutions, Gibson’s analysis of the two texts is highly relevant to our own troubling responses to real-life climate horror, and leaves its readers with much to think about.

The final three articles of issue two invite you to dive into the deep dark blue. We received a wealth of submissions around ocean Gothic to both the conference and the journal; it seems that as awareness grows of our ever more polluted and cluttered seas, there is thriving interest and interrogation into the dark fictions around our watery worlds. In the first of these essays, ‘The

Haunted Seas of British Television: Nation, Environment and Horror', Mark Fryers examines the prolific appearance of the Gothic sea in British culture and television. He demonstrates how the symbolic power of the sea in the British consciousness as a space of imperial triumph and mastery over Nature has eroded, along with the physical coastline itself. Subsequently, these maritime environments—haunted, decaying, repressed—have become a key site of choice for British television, which itself has a long association with the supernatural, Gothic, and horror. Drawing on a number of examples, from Jonathan Miller's *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968) to Ashley Pearce's *Remember Me* (2014), Fryers argues that these Gothic seas provide an opportunity to interrogate British myths, virtues, and values. The sea in British television, he argues, is a space of 'both littoral and liminal terror' and often 'represents the binary opposite of the Imperial oceans: terror instead of triumph, confinement instead of freedom, fragility instead of strength, death instead of life and in all instances, a secure identity is displaced'. Here, Fryers provides both sharp textual analysis of British televisual nautical terror and a historiographical overview of sea horror within British culture.

In 'Tentacles from the Depths: The Nautical Horror of D. T. Neal's *Relict* (2013)', Antonio Alcalá González makes the case for a new recognised subset of ecohorror that he terms 'Nautical Horror'. Nautical horror, he argues, takes place in a watery wilderness, combining a sublime Gothic maritime background with a horrifying monstrous encounter with the nonhuman. By conducting a close reading of D. T. Neal's novella *Relict* (2013)—in which the protagonist is trapped on an atoll of the Pacific Ocean and stalked by a giant octopus that has already devoured her three crew mates—González introduces some of the key themes of Nautical Horror, including its function to shatter our illusions of human control over the environment and undermining the perceived supremacy of human technology. The article provides a springboard for the development and theorisation of Nautical Horror and opens the door to new and exciting conversations about what has been, so far, an understudied Gothic monster: cephalopods.

Echoing some of the themes around ecofeminism in Hauke's essay, while further demonstrating the value expressed by Tidwell in reconsidering older texts in the context of current environmental conversations, our final essay on the dark blue Gothic is Timo Thelen's 'Real Mermaid vs. Nuclear Power Plant: Ecofeminist Vengeance and *Ama* Divers in Japanese Horror'.

There has been a growing interest in recent years around water-dwelling eco-monsters, with notable focus on the *darker* manifestations of the often-sanitised (not to mention sexualised) figure of the mermaid.[1] Thelen takes as his starting point the fact that common conceptions of the mermaid are often extremely *Western* and seeks to productively broaden this conversation. Focusing in his essay specifically on Japanese folklore, Thelen argues that while there are certainly hybridised figures of watery monstrosity to be found in Japanese stories and legends, there is no obvious—or obviously celebrated—clear counterpart here to the 'common mermaid'. Thelen posits that in fact the mermaid's closest equivalent can be found in the real-life *ama* divers (professional free-diving women in Japan) and contends that there is much to explore in the extensive mystery and mythologies that these figures evoke. Thelen looks specifically to *ama* divers' place in Japanese horror films, examining the common themes and tropes firmly established in the twentieth century. He uses this context to set the scene for a close analysis of the film *Mermaid Legend* (1984)—a text which diverts from the expected stereotypes in its strong environmental and feminist message, as an important, if lone siren voice of its time.

Following the articles, we are thrilled to have an extensive selection of reviews, interviews, and creative submissions (which are likely to leave readers with a substantive reading/viewing list for surviving lockdown/s!). The range of film and TV reviews include a multi-authored discussion of the eco-themes within Bong Joon-ho's Oscar-winning film *Parasite* (2019), as well as well as a standout reading of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) within the context of our current times. The selection of book reviews covers both recent critical and fictional texts which relate to ecohorror and the ecoGothic, including reviews of titles such as *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture* (2018), *Gothic Animals* (2019), and *Speculative Taxidermy* (2018), as well as reviews of story collections such as *Evil Roots* (2020) and *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories* (2019). We are honoured to publish two original interviews in this issue. The first is with Mi'kmaq writer and director Jeff Barnaby, who talks to Tiffany Hearsey about his latest film *Blood Quantum* (2019), which is a zombie apocalypse narrative with a progressive environmental twist. The second is with the director of *Vivarium* (2019)—possibly the eeriest watch during lockdown—Lorcan Finnegan, who answers a series of questions contributed by various members of the *Gothic Nature* community. Finally, we are delighted to close this issue with an entirely new section, which is devoted solely to creative submissions. Opening with an adapted version of our creative keynote from the 2019 conference from Kevan Manwaring, on interrelations between the Gothic canon and lived experiences of Nature, here readers can find an array of explorations into Gothic Nature through poetry, short stories, and creative nonfiction.

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[1] For a quick overview, see Kristen Angierski's piece on 'Siren Sisters' in issue one.

Finally, and most importantly, we wish to explicitly acknowledge our sincere gratitude to everyone who has contributed to this issue. Life in lockdown has been and continues to be troubling, disruptive, and fraught with challenges to our individual and collective mental health and wellbeing; we are humbled by the number of people who have volunteered to support the development of issue two, despite being in the midst of a global pandemic. Our thanks go to our Review Editors, Jennifer Schell and Sara Crosby, and to our Editorial Board, as well as to Michael Belcher, our Web Designer, and our newly-appointed Blog Editor, Harriet Stilley. Especial thanks, of course, go to each of the writers in this issue, who have accepted the necessity of shifting deadlines this past year with patience, understanding, and good humour, all while undoubtedly navigating their own circumstances. We are delighted to bring together different voices and divergent ideas, united in their interest in interrogating the darker side of our relationship with the more-than-human world—and hope, at least in some small way, that this issue contributes to the understanding of the ecoGothic times in which we find ourselves.

BIOGRAPHIES

Elizabeth Parker is the author of the monograph *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination*, which was published with Palgrave Gothic in March 2020. She is the founding editor of *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic* and television editor for *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*. She is co-editor of *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). She has co-organised several conferences on space, place, and the relationship between the Gothic and the nonhuman and has published her work in various titles such as *Plant Horror!: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (Palgrave, 2016) and *Transecology: Transgender Perspectives on the Environment* (Routledge, 2020). She has taught English Literature and courses on Popular Culture at a number of universities across the UK and Ireland and currently works at St Mary's University Twickenham. Passionate about all things ecoGothic, she is keen to develop an ecohorror/ecoGothic research hub in the UK and is open to collaborative opportunities.

Michelle Poland is Co-Editor of *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic*. Her primary research interests are in Gothic, ecocriticism, and environmental history, as well as popular scientific and cultural discourses about the Anthropocene. She was awarded her doctoral thesis, titled *Gothic Forests in the Anthropocene*, in 2019 and is currently working on a book proposal on this topic. She has published articles on various aspects of 'Gothic Nature' in journals such as *Green Letters* and *Critical Survey* and has organised related conferences and public engagement events. She taught English Literature at the University of Lincoln and was an Archival Assistant at the Tennyson Research Centre for several years, and now works as a Research Impact Manager at Nottingham Trent University.

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