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# The Kangaroo Gargoyles: Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script[1]

Gerry Turcotte

**For many, the opening swells of Johann Sebastian Bach's** "Toccata & Fugue in D Minor" (1703-1707) will immerse them immediately in the world of classical music. But for most people, a rather more sinister image is conjured up—perhaps (pre-Lloyd Weber), the Phantom of the Opera, pining for his loved one. Disfigured, injured by society and nature, wounded in body and soul, the Phantom broods on his tragic fate, dreaming of love and music, which he will conjoin in a grotesque fugue that will culminate in kidnapping and murder.

A tad melodramatic, perhaps, but then again, for connoisseurs of the Gothic, this will no doubt strike a chord. A thunderstorm, threatening in the background, complements the image, yet another in a long line of "atmospherics," which have become quintessentially associated with the Gothic and its haunted landscape.

Of course, few would disagree that Gothic landscapes can be dark and sinister. What surprised many when this essay was first appeared was the thought that this Gothic landscape could be in any way Australian. This essay, and the radio program it developed out of, originated from an early interest in charting a comparative theoretics examining colonial Gothic fiction in Australia and Canada and its postcolonial developments. The work began as a PhD thesis that appeared in 1990. When I told people of my research interest, I was often met with disbelief. "Surely there's not much Australian Gothic Literature," I was told by one researcher studying Christina Stead. Another, who had just read through Hal Porter's short stories, suggested that the Gothic was all in my mind. A British scholar I met on a guided tour of Saint Mary's Cathedral in Sydney thought I was mad. Australia was "provincial," he assured me, but "Gothic" never. So we visited the University of Sydney where I pointed out a Kangaroo Gargoyle on one of the principal towers of the main quadrangle—all of which, like Saint Mary's Cathedral, is built in the Gothic style. And just for good measure, I read him a passage from Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* (1902).

Baynton, of course, is a "classic" of early twentieth-century Australian literature who specialised in painting a dark vision of the Bush, one far different from that reproduced by male writers of a similar period. In the story "Squeaker's Mate," for example, the strong-willed protagonist has had her back broken by a falling tree. The cowardly Squeaker soon replaces his incapacitated partner with a young woman. Understandably, his mate loathes this intruder, and eventually takes her revenge on her supplanter in the only way she can. Here, the young woman attempts to creep up on the injured woman in order to fetch a "billy can" that has been left by her bedside.

> She waited till her heart quieted, and again crept to the door.
>
> The head of the woman on the bunk had fallen towards the wall as in deep sleep; it was turned from the billy,

> to which she must creep so softly [ . . . ].
>
> She would bend right down, and try and reach it from where she was [ . . . ]. It was so swift and sudden, that she had not time to scream when those bony fingers gripped [her] hand [ . . . ]. She was frozen with horror for a moment, then her screams were piercing. Panting with victory, the prostrate one held her with a hold that the other did not attempt to free herself from.
>
> Down, down she drew her.
>
> Her lips had drawn back from her teeth and her breath almost scorched the face that she held so close. [ . . . ] Her exultation was so great that she could only gloat and gasp, and hold with a tension that had stopped the victim's circulation. ("Squeaker's Mate" 70)

If people couldn't see Australia's Gothic face peering from the shadows, something, I thought, had to be wrong. But it soon became clear to me that what I was coming up against was a problem of terminology. Or, to put it another way, that what is Gothic to some, is family to others. After all, the thought of taking a young child, placing it in restrictive clothing, and pressing its lips against the cold skin of a corpse would be revolting to some. Others would call this a wake—an open-coffin funeral. As with everything it depends on your point of view.

So what, then, is the Gothic? Essentially, it is a literature of nightmare. Said to have originated with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) in the eighteenth century, the Gothic deals with fears common to all humankind, fears both external and internal. Indeed, it is frequently the case that what terrorises the individual "out there," has originated from within.

In *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), by Robert Louis Stevenson, Mr. Hyde is the product of one man's quest for knowledge, and of an elixir that brings out the evil dormant in the soul of all of us. Frankenstein's monster, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), to use another well-known nineteenth-century example, is similarly born out of the greed for knowledge—Victor Frankenstein cannot accept the limitations of the human realm, and his curiosity breeds horror. Victor Frankenstein's thoughts during that darkest of moments, when he first brings his Monster to life, are evidence of this:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? [ . . . ] I had worked hard for two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body [ . . . ]. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. (*Frankenstein* 318)

The Gothic is preoccupied with the hidden or monstrous side—particularly as it relates to human nature. And it uses a catalogue of recurring conventions, motifs, and themes to make its point. Vampires, monsters, demonic monks—wander around dilapidated mansions, through dark dungeons or across windswept cliffs—usually in search of innocent victims. These are frequently, although not always, young, defenseless maidens, who cling to their chastity with beleaguered desperation.

The Gothic is also a hodge-podge of differing literary devices—it mixes high and low characters; realism and melodrama; good and evil. The Gothic, it could be argued, suffered in terms of its critical reception precisely because it sat uneasily within so many literary traditions, but especially because it dealt with so-called low culture and subject matter—a complaint, incidentally, which Dr. Johnson made against Shakespeare's work. In contemporary times, of course, the Gothic is very much in vogue: as a cultural force, as a literary presence and as an academic industry.

Oddly enough, one of the chief criticisms of the Gothic was that it was simply escapist—that it eschewed realism. But while it is true that the Gothic is frequently exaggerated and highly predictable, and while it does use a language of fear, irrationality and chaos, it also often speaks

from a rigidly controlled, even rational framework. Dorothy Jones makes the Gothic's close connection to realism and realistic narratives clear when she maintains that:

> The Gothic always conjures up a sense of the mysterious, the strange, even the supernatural, and this happens even if the writer doesn't deliberately employ the kinds of supernatural devices you've got in eighteenth-century writing like *The Castle of Otranto*. But for the supernatural, the spooky quality to work, it's necessary to create an environment and characters which are believable to the reader—which are even familiar because the effect of Gothic is gained by intruding into the familiar, the Homely. (Turcotte 1992)

The Gothic's intrusion into the Homely has had particular resonances for Australia and its people. The Kangaroo Gargoyle mentioned earlier may be interesting simply as a curiosity. A similar relic is an armchair commissioned by Governor and Mrs. Macquarie in 1821—a chair covered in the *skin* of the unfortunate marsupial, in a type of grotesque fusion of Old World style and local materials; it is a fusion suggested, in principal at least by one line of Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), where a haughty writer informs his dinner partner, "How he was adapting the Gothic novel to local conditions" (263).

Just how many instances of such adaptations have taken place in Australia was suggested by a one day conference on Australian Gothic, that I convened on the 8th February 1992. Held at the State Library of New South Wales it brought together commentaries on everything from Domestic Gothic to crime fiction, Burlesques of *Frankenstein* to feral pigs. In his welcoming speech to conference delegates, Professor Ken Stewart, a former President of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL), mentioned a particularly peculiar appearance of the Gothic in his attempt to offer a context for the study day.

> In 1954 the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh visited Australia. It was the first time a ruling monarch had visited. They sailed here on the cruise ship *Gothic*. That might be an example to many people of something rather bizarre. But it's an example too of how the bizarre has been on the minds of Australians for a long time. And for readers and authors alike the historical circumstances of Australia as a place at the other end of the world compared to Europe provides a starting place for discussing conventions that were for a long time available to European writers as well. But how were they transplanted? (Turcotte 1992)

## Colonial Gothic

Oddly enough, the story of the Gothic's "transplantation" to Australia is at once a story of resistance and acceptance. On the one hand, writers resisted using the mode, because it evoked the decay of the Old World. More specifically, the Gothic was a literature of disintegration. As Michael Sadleir (1927) pointed out, the Gothic's central convention was the ruin; and its popularity as a motif could be attributed to the fact that it represented the triumph of chaos over order, freedom over discipline, and it functioned as a parable of the victory of nature over humanity (8).

If this, for the eighteenth-century European, was somehow a guarantee of freedom from cloying discipline, as was represented, for example, by the Augustan poets, for the early settler struggling to stay alive in the harshness of the new colony, the metaphor of the ruin was a devastating reminder of a possible fate perhaps best ignored. To put it another way, it is not difficult to understand why a fledgling colony, and in particular a prison colony, might find a mode that celebrated the impossibility of its success somewhat unsettling. Nor is it difficult to understand how a new colony's hopes for survival could be epitomized by the neo-classical school's principles. In other words, it is understandable to find writers turning to, for example, pastoral models, which paint the world in terms of order, peace and plenitude.

Peter Kirkpatrick, the author of *The Sea Coast of Bohemia* (1992), a study on Arcadia and

Bohemianism in Sydney, puts it this way:

> [ . . . ] in post-colonial societies based on agriculture such as Australia, pastoral was an obvious metaphor to use to represent a vision of wholeness and unity with the land; and the landscape of peace, the *locus amenus*, the happy place. [ . . . ] Gothic, on the other hand, is quite the reverse. It's the worst of all possible worlds. (Turcotte 1992)

The worst of all possible worlds perhaps, but ultimately the Gothic was appealing for many for the same reasons that it was unpopular. For one thing, despite its grim implications for the future, the Gothic still appealed to the colonial writer as one of the most appropriate modes to express the New World experience. The gothic is a literature that deals with alienation, disjunction, terror, and conflict; it frequently projects its protagonist into an alien place where the character is tried and tested; and this protagonist is almost always victimized by a powerful oppressor.

One could substitute the colonial experience for the Gothic here and the terms would still make sense. The colonist is uprooted, estranged, terrified, on alien territory, and pursued (if sometimes only in the imagination) by a daunting predator: which in Australia was alternatively perceived as the Bush, the convict past, bush rangers or the Aboriginal population. It is this overlapping territory shared by the Gothic and the colonial that makes the one useful to the other.

In his revealing essay on "The Uncanny" (1956), Freud claims that the uncanny deals with that "in which one does not know where one is," unwittingly suggesting how the Gothic and the colonial may intersect. The word Freud uses to talk about the uncanny is the German term *unheimlich*. The word *heimlich* means familiar or "native," and *unheimlich*, or the uncanny translates literally as "unhomely"; the uncanny, the gothic, in other words, has to do with the "not home" or the "nor-*yet*-home." It is, I would suggest, the ideal Colonial mode.[2]

Indeed, it would be possible to suggest that the uncanny is an apt model for colonial writers who are faced with the experience of an unfamiliar world. In many ways they, like their characters, are trapped in a strange world where the laws of "reason" no longer function. They are, in other words, oppressed by the uncanniness of place. Jean-Paul Sartre (1947) has argued that this "condition" is necessary for the fantastic to operate. As he himself puts it, the old technique of placing someone right-side up, transported miraculously into an upside-down world, "sets off by contrast, the strange character of the new world" (27).

Always flexible, however, the Gothic literature of the "Not Home" was also a convenient way of re-erecting the Old World in the New, and as a way of celebrating the values of the Mother country. In short, of pretending that the "Not Home" *was* Home. Joan Kerr, one of the authors of *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales* (1980), argues that,

> Colonial castellated towers transported the imagination 12,000 miles as well as hundreds of years. Even a few crenellations, particularly if these were on a tower carefully placed in the landscape, enhanced the pretence that the view was a beloved English one. And of course, from the very foundations of the colony, Sydney Harbour itself inspired romantic imaginings. Lieutenant Daniel Southall, arriving in the First Fleet, was struck by the superb buildings and the grand ruins of stately edifices suggested by the outcrop of rocks. By the 1840s the imaginative had been replaced by actual Gothic villas of somewhat less pretentious type gathered along the Harbour. (Turcotte 1992)

By the 1840s in Australia, the Gothic was used as one way of *forestalling* the sense of isolation from Home that new settlers experienced—and one way of doing this was by recreating the Old World out of the perceived "wastes" of Australia to use one observer's term. As many commentators noted, however, while the colonial Gothic may well have had the external appearance of the real thing, what lay inside often left something to be desired. Kerr explains this

perception:

> By 1850 a visitor called John Hood described the harbourside domestic architecture in a way that still seems to have some relevance. "Many of the private houses in the vicinity of the town are delightful little retreats placed amid beautiful gardens and scenery, wood and water. Many are magnificent in their architecture and dimension. But," he adds, "it is not safe to be too curious as to the pedigree of the hosts." (Turcotte 1992)

This condescension towards colonial Australians (and the barely veiled reference to their dubious heritage) offers one explanation for the Nationalistic impulses of many Australian writers who rejected the sense that their country, Australia, was a wasteland, or that it had no history and that they, as a people, were "degenerate."

It is in this respect that the flexibility of the Gothic mode becomes particularly interesting. For just as the mode was used to re-create the Old World, many colonial—and later, postcolonial—writers turned to the form to reject this world and to replace it with the New World order (or dis/order in the case of the Gothic). For Marcus Clarke, the Gothic was a way to invest Australia with a living history, which both local and international critics claimed Australia was lacking.[3] *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1870-1872) was the culmination of this exercise. It was a historical document bringing together detailed research on transportation and convict conditions, with a veritable Gothic melodrama of Australian hardship and redemption.

Writer and critic, Michael Wilding (1986), suggests that Clarke had

> a pioneering literary purpose [ . . . ]. He was trying to do for Australia the sort of thing Hawthorne had done for America—to show that this young country had all the resources of romance, myth, and history that the old world had. (xv-xvi)

Clarke, in other words, wanted to refute the claim "that there were no materials of romance on hand for the Australian writer" (Wilding xvi).

Clarke, of course, was well versed in the Gothic. In Brian Elliott's (1958) biography of Clarke, several keys to the young writer's predilection for Gothic fiction are advanced. For example, he lists Clarke's desire to write a text called "Priestcraft and the People" in the manner of Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (1853); his extensive reading included Scott and Poe (he gave Gerard Manly Hopkins a volume of the latter's poems as a parting gift when he left for Australia); and he also demonstrated a proclivity for ghost stories (Elliott 12). Most interesting perhaps is the account Cyril Hopkins left of a collaboration between his brother Gerard and Marcus, "a narrative entitled 'Prometheus.' " Elliott claims that "the boys thought [Marcus' text] worthy of being preserved in a copy elaborately decorated by Gerard" (12). Cyril Hopkins' description of the plot is instructive: "It concerned the occult endeavours of a youthful medical student, with the help of an ancient German black-letter formula, to 'impart to a lifeless body the vital principle' " (qtd. in Elliott 18). Shades of *Frankenstein*! As Elliott goes on to add, "Such were the preoccupations of sensational fiction of the time, and Clarke returned to them later" (18). As Clarke's writing matured, however, he moved away from the more imitative use of the Gothic to a more "indigenous" application. It would be possible to argue, in fact, that the Gothic became a way for him to assert a national history, or to make his own landscape "legitimate." He did this not by inventing fictional "ghosts," but by Gothicizing "facts." He delved into the convict past and extracted its darkest chronicles, such as retelling the true story of Alexander Pearce, the first man to escape from Macquarie Harbour.

In Clarke's novel, Pearce has become a hardened convict and cannibal called Gabbett, and the following passage represents the darkest and most Gothic moment of the novel:

> [ . . . ] he was a spectacle to shudder at. Not so much on account of his natural hideousness, increased a thousand-fold by the tattered and filthy rags which barely covered him. Not so much on account of his unshaven jaws, his hare-lip, his torn and bleeding feet, his haggard cheeks, and his huge, wasted frame. Not only because, looking at

> the animal, as he crouched, with one foot curled round the other, and one hairy arm pendant between his knees, he was so horribly unhuman, that one shuddered to think that tender women and fair children must, of necessity, confess to fellowship of kind with such a monster. But also because, in his slavering mouth, his slowly grinding jaws, his restless fingers, and his bloodshot, wandering eyes, there lurked a hint of some terror more awful than the terror of starvation—a memory of a tragedy played out in the gloomy depths of that forest which had vomited him forth again; and the shadow of this unknown horror, clinging to him, repelled and disgusted. (*For the Term of His Natural Life* 100)

The "hint of some terror more awful than the terror of starvation" is, of course, the fact that he has become a cannibal. The famous conclusion to this chapter describes the half-crazed Gabbett on St. Helen's Point, discovered by a skipper and his crew:

> When the sailors came within sight of him, he made signs to them to approach, and opening his bundle with much ceremony offered them some of its contents. Filled with horror at what the maniac displayed, they seized and bound him. At Hobart Town he was recognized as the only survivor of the nine desperadoes who had escaped from Colonel Arthur's "Natural Penitentiary." (*For the Term of His Natural Life* 360)

After an earlier expedition, he is heard to say, "If I ha' had three more [ . . . ] you wouldn't ha' had the chance" (*For the Term of His Natural Life* 100). Here Gabbett means people of course.

The Gothic frequently turns to the most taboo of subjects in order to create its moments of greatest terror. For Clarke, as with a surprising number of nineteenth-century novelists, this subject is cannibalism, although sodomy and prison rape are briefly dealt with. The young Kirkland, for example, a twenty-two-year-old "son of Methodist parents," is imprisoned with violent prisoners as a form of punishment. The Reverend North pleads for him to be released, but cannot "speak" what he knows Kirkland to have undergone.

"North, restraining his impulse to overstep the bounds of modesty in his language," merely says to the Commandant, "you know the character of the men in that ward. You can guess what that unhappy boy has suffered" (*For the Term of His Natural Life* 271). The Commandant replies, "Do him good." The next day the young boy is referred to as "Miss Nancy," and wears "an expression of bewildered horror" (*For the Term of His Natural Life* 271), signs to the reader of the transgression which Clarke's text can only hint at. Kirkland soon after attempts suicide, and then dies after being flogged for this attempt. Although Clarke cannot directly mention this taboo, the Gothic arguably allows him to come closest to speaking it. In many ways this is the strength of the mode, and one that has seen it remain popular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## Postcolonial Gothic

Kate Grenville, author of *Lilian's Story* (1985) and *Joan Makes History* (1988), is one such contemporary writer who has found the conventions of the Gothic useful as a literary strategy. As she herself (1987) puts it,

> Gothic is a ready-made convention for making the moral battle interesting and vivid. As Flannery O'Connor said, you have to write very big for the blind and shout for the deaf. It's also a bit of camouflage. It's grotesque and unreal, not naturalistic. By making it look like something that you don't see in real life you can get under peoples' guards and get them to accept it in a way they might argue with if it were presented with the kind of literal details of, say, a psychological novel about the same kind of thing. They might argue, "Oh, but that character would never have done that," and the whole force of the book would be lost. You could never say that of characters in Gothic fiction; you wouldn't bother. (292)

Needless to say, this disarming quality of Gothic fiction is far from trivial. It allows serious matters to be raised in a space supposedly immune to or innocent of scandal or unwanted secrets. As a result, the Gothic has been turned to by many of the world's most influential writers: Karen

Blixen, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Fay Weldon, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, not to mention scores of Australia's best known writers, from Patrick White to Frank Moorhouse, Barbara Hanrahan to Elizabeth Jolley. That so many of these writers should be women is also not surprising, as Dorothy Jones explains:

> The Gothic is a literary mode that has attracted a number of women writers. In the eighteenth-century it was a form that a number of women used, like Mary Shelley or Ann Radcliffe, and which lots of young women liked to read. You get evidence of this in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Ellen Moers, in her book *Literary Women*, has suggested that the Gothic appealed in the eighteenth-century to women writers because it suggested the possibility of making strange and mysterious journeys *inside* the house, inside the place of their seclusion within society, as they penetrated these winding corridors and peaked inside these locked rooms. In contemporary writing, women writers are still attracted to the Gothic, I think because the Gothic so often focuses on family life, and although women are much less secluded now than they were in the eighteenth century, nevertheless they are still seen as belonging very centrally within the family. So this particular literary mode which presents the uncanny, the strange, the menacing aspects of family life has a particular appeal for women writers. (Turcotte 1992)

Of course, the notion of the familial, like the familiar, must never be taken for granted or underplayed, and the Gothic allows us to enter into the ordinary to see how artificial, how constructed, our notion of the every day actually is. This double edge of the Gothic—the traditional and the subversive—is perhaps best summed up in this anecdote, related by Peter Haining (1983), of an Irish gentlewoman speaking to her bookseller. In discussing a collection of particularly scandalous Gothic romances, the woman claims that it is, "A shocking bad book to be sure sir, but I have carefully underscored all the naughty passages and have carefully instructed my young ladies what they are to skip without reading" (16). Much is said about the Gothic in this brief exchange. The mode's characteristic capacity to shock, and to speak of the unsaid and the taboo, are hinted at, as is the ability of the Gothic text to make itself read and enjoyed despite its ostensible objectionability. The meticulous textual study, followed by scrupulous attempts to erase by underlining, which in fact merely highlights what must be ignored, is characteristic of the Gothic. It is an indication of the Gothic's dangerously disarming potential for subversion. As Dorothy Jones puts it,

> The Gothic is certainly traditionally used as a mode of subversion. I think partly because of the way the strange, the uncanny, the mysterious, is used to break into the familiar everyday world. And by disrupting that familiar everyday world you open up possibilities for questioning that world and the standards which appear to govern it. (Turcotte 1992)

Susan Midalia explains how Kate Grenville's wonderfully Gothic first novel, *Dreamhouse* (1986), uses the mode in this manner:

> The very title of Kate Grenville's novel, *Dreamhouse*, evokes the realm of the Gothic. *Dreamhouse* is the world of the unconscious, of repressed desires, especially sexual dreams and fantasies. The Gothic works in this novel to give expression to an impressive array of female sexual fantasies: homosexuality, voyeurism, incest, bestiality. As they say in the trade, this book has something for everyone.
>
> *Dreamhouse's* use of the Gothic contests what Adrienne Rich calls the patriarchal assumption of compulsory heterosexuality. In addition, the Gothic in *Dreamhouse* legitimizes what for women is the socially prohibited emotion of anger. There are numerous accounts of Louise fantasizing about using the kitchen knives against her husband or throwing his typewriter against the wall in violent protest at her sexual humiliation and exploitation. (Turcotte 1992)

I suggested earlier that the Gothic frequently introduces into the story those passages and subject matter that censors might most happily exclude: the rude, the illicit, the taboo. It should not be surprising, then, that the Gothic often deals with scatological matters, or with what Julia Kristeva (1982) has called "the Abject." The Abject refers to the language of the unwanted: bodily fluids, corporeal wastes, menstrual blood, excrement, nail parings. In short, all that is tied to the

body—and particularly, in Kristeva's formulation, to the female body. Indeed, it would be difficult to disagree that women's bodies have been commodified and idealized by Patriarchy (exemplified by advertising practices), and those parts of the body which detract from this ideal, or which subjectify the object, are relegated to the borders—to the supposedly unseeable. The Gothic, of course, is a mode that explores borderland positions, which engages with the grotesque, which allows sexes to blur to the point of transformation, and which speaks the supposedly unspeakable remarkably well, particularly this Abjectified subject matter. Midalia examines this phenomenon in relation to Kate Grenville's *Dreamhouse*, and this example will have to stand in for many in contemporary Australian writing.

> *Dreamhouse's* preoccupation with bodily orifices is part of its overall feminist concern with the relationship between identity and bodily experience. In fact, the novel is both feminist and postmodernist in its representation of the body and its sexuality as a site on which social meanings are inscribed and hence through which Patriarchal ideology might be contested.
>
> *Dreamhouse's* ludic treatment of bodily orifices is used to criticize the misogynistic reduction of woman to sexual hole. This dehumanizing Patriarchal definition of woman as hole is found in discourses as various as literature, philosophy, religion, medicine and psychoanalysis. And whether it be the Norman Mailer version of the female hole requiring to be "plugged" in militaristic fashion, or the Laurentian portal to the beyond—the source of lost male plenitude—it's always the same old Story. (Turcotte 1992)

The Gothic's response to "the same old story" is to highlight the obvious, until what we take for granted becomes glaringly ridiculous, or simply untenable. Perhaps most disconcerting as a subversive strategy, is simply to overturn the expected, as in this example offered by Midalia:

> *Dreamhouse* subverts this reduction of woman to sexual hole, by a process of tropic inversion through its insistent references to male orifices which emanate particularly nasty fluids. *Dreamhouse* reminds the reader that men too have holes which secrete unpleasant things. In the novel's comic-grotesque tribute to the horrible variousness of bodily fluids, the male characters, in postures of indignity, salivate, micturate, perspire, expectorate and vomit, victims of the deadly sins of lust, greed, anger and gluttony. This depiction of the functions of male bodily orifices is playfully, at times, maliciously, reductive.
>
> On the whole, as it were, men fair rather badly in this novel. (Turcotte 1992)

Of course, there are dangers in venturing forth into the subversive terrain of the Gothic landscape, even if they appear in the mundane form of letters to the editor. In a delightful essay entitled, "Footnotes to Fractures of the Penis [the Darker Side of Writing the Darker Side]" (1992), written for the Gothic conference cited above, Margaret Coombs—author of *Regards to the Czar* (1988) and *The Best Man for this Sort of Thing* (1990)—suggests some of the dangers of speaking the unmentionable:

> I like to think my writing is comic and political at the same time as Gothic. However it hasn't always struck readers that way. The very first piece of fiction I ever had published was an early, short version of my "child molester" story which I'd entered for the 1976 National Short Story Award. It didn't win but was published under the title "Flag Fall" in the *Canberra Times* and provoked a highly indignant letter to the editor. I quote:
>
>> "What is the purpose of writing stories of this kind? They have no entertainment value so, presumably, depend on their shock value to qualify for publication.
>>
>> "But as it rapidly becomes more difficult to shock a permissive society, so today's shock becomes tomorrow's norm. In a few more years or less, such stories will have to depend on gaining publication or winning prizes by dwelling in detail on the actual physical horror or the sexual murder or rape or the small child.
>>
>> "Meanwhile, in the real world of today, a man uses an underpass near the North Curtin Primary School to expose himself to small girls. No doubt he is sick.
>>
>> "But is it not likely that stories such as the above, published in our local newspaper and therefore

> apparently accepted and approved, serve as signposts to sick minds on the easiest way in which to turn their sick fantasies into sick actions?"
>
> You see how wicked I was? You see what a *groundbreaker* I was! I personally paved the way for *American Psycho*! —and with my very first published fiction—a mere 2,000 words—back in 1976! (Turcotte 1992)

After citing another letter of protest, Margaret Coombs comments:

> These letters seem funny now, I suppose, but I felt terribly hurt by them at the time. I also feel hurt in retrospect that the Australian literary community did *not* immediately leap into print in my defense. All you guys who are now busy scribbling away in defense of *American Psycho*, where were you *then*? Not *all* in primary school. (Turcotte 1992)

It seems that what Margaret Coombs, like so many writers from the Gothic Fringe have realized, is that there are few who will leap to the defense of the darker side. Most people seem to prefer the artifice of the well-kept living room, to the uglier face of the Gothic cellar upon which everything, after all, rests.

I am reminded in writing this, of a story I was told by a stone mason friend of mine who was getting extensive work restoring Gothic buildings in Sydney in the 1990s. It appears that sandstone cutting is a delicate art, and that there is one way to cut it in order to give it strength, and another to guarantee its eventual collapse. Hence, if your masons were disgruntled convicts, forced to work on projects they were not keen to do, and supervised by individuals who knew less than they did, it would be conceivable for them to undermine a particular project merely by cutting and laying the stone improperly. And so, in working *within* accepted and controlled conditions, it was possible for these convicts to threaten authority. This type of subversive action, which did in fact take place, would exact a convict's revenge, albeit slowly.

It is perhaps useful to think of the literature and the authoritative structures that the Gothic attacks, as a Standard Text, with the Gothic becoming an elaborate and invasive footnote that eventually overwhelms this central text. In this respect, Margaret Coombs' notion of the footnote, as she discovered it in reading her family's Medical books, is apposite:

> [The books] were very tidy, cold and dull—but a discovery I made about these was that what was rigorously excluded from the narrative burst back into the text through the footnotes. It intrigued me that the more rigorously "scientific" the stuff on display the more enthrallingly rich in highly emotive "medically irrelevant" anecdotal detail the material hidden away in the footnotes tended to be.
>
> Take, for example, *Fracture and Joint Injuries*, a forbidding navy-blue-bound 2-volume work by another British doctor: I've forgotten his name. Even the section promisingly entitled "fractures of the penis" failed to hold my interest, so "mechanistic" and "objective" was it. The *footnotes*, however, were riveting: each a miniature story strong in both wordplay and plot. [ . . . ] My favourite was one about how, once upon a time, when this doctor was a nervous fledgling resident at an Edinburgh hospital, he was confronted with a deeply distressed reveler brought by friends to the casualty department around midnight swathed in a full length crimson-lined evening cloak. No, this patient wasn't some Scottish Dracula. His cloak was to mask his predicament. He was "just an ordinary man" who'd got his penis stuck in a stone hot water bottle.
>
> Never fear, any of you chappies out there who happen to be collectors of antique Scottish stone hot water bottles and happy endings. After much trial and error, Medical Science lit upon a cure: poker-faced doctors wrapped the stone hot water bottle in wet towels and smashed it with a hammer, leaving the gentleman, his cloak and his penis intact. (Turcotte 1992)

Footnotes, sublunary body parts and bodily functions, crimson evening cloaks and crumbling buildings: the Gothic may not always be the prettiest beast around, but it is impossible to keep it forever chained out of sight, out of mind. Always, when least expected, it will free itself from the dungeon and wander through the winding passageways of our conscious and subconscious mind, rending asunder our most tenuous securities, and in the process, frequently revealing a side to

our personality, our literature, our culture, which we had never seen before.

## Conclusion

It is precisely in this last respect that the Gothic, as a mode, has achieved renewed currency. Where it was once dismissed as escapist fun at best, and insignificant dross at worst, it has emerged as one of the pre-eminent modes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries precisely for its ability to reveal our subjugated histories. Australia has only recently lost its pre-eminent literary gothicist, Elizabeth Jolley,[4] whose works *Milk and Honey* (1984), *The Well* (1986) and *Foxybaby* (1985), to name a few, popularized a contemporary, mischievous Gothic tone that alerted us to the possibilities of a feminist revision of dominant masculine inscriptions within the literary (see Turcotte, 1995). Kate Grenville has continued to textualise a Gothic history, most recently in her award-winning novel *The Secret River* (2006), which itself extends an enquiry into the profoundly Gothic spaces of family and patriarchy that were first mapped in her celebrated novels *Lilian's Story* and *Dark Places* (1994). And younger writers such as James Bradley—*The Resurrectionist* (2006)—and Christos Tsiolkas—*Dead Europe* (2005), have directly deployed the spectral texture of the Gothic to turn the gaze back on our European past.

In *Specters of Marx* (1993) Derrida insists that "Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (37), and this "hauntology" may well explain what Roger Luckhurst (2002) has identified as the "spectral turn" that sees the "language of ghosts and the uncanny" dominating the work of writers subjected to "political disempowerment" (536). For Luckhurst, these communities "at the colonial edges of England" mean Anglo-Irish or Scottish; I would suggest that the geography of the spectral is even more pointedly understood through more profoundly disenfranchised and fragmented communities located in settler societies.

The domination of the spectre in contemporary post-colonial literatures has emerged in the context of a tradition in Australia that denied the existence, even the possibility, of hauntings. Frederick Sinnett (1856), among others, claimed that Australia was too devoid of history to tempt even "the wandering footsteps of the most arrant *parvenu* of a ghost" (23). When majority writers did invoke the supernatural, or turned to the Gothic mode to generate terror or dread, it was frequently to textualise a form of white history which cast colonised or invaded peoples as a ghostly or monstrous threat to the civilised (white) world (see van Toorn 1992-1993; Turcotte 1998). This is hardly remarkable for Gothic and spectral tales have often displayed a preoccupation with such anxieties, and are marked by a long history of racialising minority figures that sees Indigeneity and ethnicity marked as monstrous, spectral and villainous.[5] Moreover, as many critics have shown, works such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *Dracula* (1897) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) often act out a catalogue of fears about tainted genealogies and corrupt blood lines, ambiguous and/or threatening sexualities and the perceived fragility of family/nation.

Given this history of demonising and "racialising" the "other" it is not surprising that minority writers have avoided these forms. In recent years, however, minority literatures have revealed an interest in the spectral that signals an emerging critical voice that is premised on interrogating historical and literary textualisations of racial, sexual or gendered "otherness." It is perhaps in this respect that the Gothic has proved most exciting. Work by Kim Scott—*Benang* (1999), Jane Harrison—*Stolen* (2000) and Alexis Wright—*Carpentaria* (2006), use a type of Gothic tone to alert us to the sinister side of Australian history, in works that both refute the notion of a history that began with European occupation as well insist on the acknowledgement of the violent spectres

that haunt the relationship between Black and white Australia. Perhaps most famous of all these writers is the photographer and filmmaker Tracey Moffatt, whose Gothic works—in particular the films *Night Cries* (1990) and *bedevil* (1993)—remind us that the air is thick with unacknowledged revenants, and that the process of healing can only begin when we heed Derrida's call to sit, at last, and "talk with ghosts."

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## Endnotes

[1] This article is a revised and expanded version of an Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Books and Writing* Radio Feature that aired 24-26 July 1992. It was later published as "Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script: The Gothic in Australia," *Antipodes* 7.2 (1993): 127-134. The present article been revised slightly to include more recent examples of Australian Gothic, though for a more comprehensive discussion of the subject see Turcotte (1993; 1998; 2003).
[2] Since this essay was first published a significant cultural industry has developed around this concept. Perhaps most influential in the Australian context is Gelder and Jacobs (1998).
[3] Again, since this article first appeared in 1993, a significant amount of work has emerged examining the idea of a Colonial Gothic, as well as works specifically addressing Clark's use of the Gothic. The most recent example of this can be found in McCann (2004).
[4] Award-winning novelist Elizabeth Jolley died at the age of 83 on 13 February 2007.
[5] See for example, Brantlinger (1988), Gelder (1994) and Malchow (1996) as just a few examples.

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