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ECOGOTHIC IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Edited by
Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils



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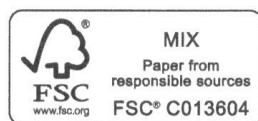
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Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

The first of its kind to address the ecogothic in American literature, this collection of fourteen articles illuminates a new and provocative literacy category, one that exists at the crossroads of the gothic and the environmental imagination, of fear and the ecosystems we inhabit. The volume explores topics such as ecophobia (dread of nature), extinction and ecological crisis, environmental injustices (particularly as they intersect with racial oppression), and human interactions with all forms of the nonhuman: animals, plants, oceans, swamps, and the climate. Chapters examine works by, among others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Chestnutt, and Leonora Sansay. A provocative intervention in conversations about how the ecogothic permeates the American long nineteenth century, this collection shapes diverse formulations of the ways in which “nature” always seems to be becoming uncanny, monstrous, and haunting—thus plotting the path of a new critical approach.

Dawn Keetley is Professor of English at Lehigh University, author of *Making a Monster: Jesse Pomeroy, the Boy Murderer of 1870s Boston* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), and co-editor of *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

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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 pervade 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.

Similar to the ways in which American literature has long been gothic, and has been profoundly shaped by the natural environment, the critical movement that explores literary representations of the relationship between humans and the nonhuman has been persistently 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 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 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. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and Herman Melville’s *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 dominance.

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 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: Poe’s crumbling aristocratic mansion, Hawthorne’s house built on land stolen from Native Americans 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 Jacobs’ 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 adds the “primeval forest or island” as important gothic settings.²³ And the forest has featured prominently in much 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 Bodziok 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.” Nonhumans, 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—to humans surrounded, interpenetrated, and sometimes stalked by a nonhuman with an agentic force that challenges humans' own vaunted ability to shape their world.

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