THE 'REALIST' GOTHIC: QUEER WOMEN AND THE MONSTROUS OTHER IN HISTORICAL FICTION

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ABSTRACT

From the moment historical fiction became defined as a genre of literary 'realism', it was positioned as the opposite of the Gothic. The Gothic, it was considered, could not be historical because its supernatural elements meant that it did not measure up to the standards of realism required. In this article, I argue that it is possible for the Gothic and literary realism to co-exist: that it is possible, even perhaps more powerful, to write a 'realistic' Gothic not made up of the supernatural, but of things that are real. I use as a case study the novel that was the creative artefact of my PhD, which is an example of a Gothic novel written in a traditional 'realist' style, and plays with the conventions of the Gothic, particularly in relation to the depiction of queer women and the monstrous Other.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gabrielle Ryan is a white writer and arts manager based in Melbourne. She has a PhD in creative writing, looking at the Gothic as a transgressive mode of representation in Australian women's historical fiction. She also has a Masters in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing.

KEYWORDS

Historical fiction—Gothic—Queer women—Literary realism

Historical fiction has long had a strong association with literary realism. This is largely due to the legacy of Sir Walter Scott, considered by many to be the inventor of the historical novel, and to Marxist critic Georg Lukacs whose seminal work, *The Historical Novel* (1937) entrenched both Scott's position and the association between historical fiction and realism. Part of this insistence on realism as a defining feature of the historical novel after Scott was a rejection of other modes of writing, including the Romantic and the Gothic (Wallace 2013: 7). Wallace argues that many of the novels that were considered not to meet this new standard of 'realism' were by women, in many cases because of the Romantic, Gothic or supernatural elements they contained (2013: 7). Jerome De Groot says that these Romantic or Gothic novels were considered, after Scott, to be 'a nightmarish type of historical novel'. He goes on to say that 'the incipient historical novel, after the example of Scott, became a rational, realist form, shifting away from the excesses of the Gothic to emphasise process, progress and transcendent human values' (2010: 16). It seems from this that the Gothic has no place in historical fiction as it came to be defined after Scott, but in fact, the early Gothic novels were defined by their relationship to history (Wallace 2013: 15), and Scott himself used the romance structure of historical fiction that was available because of earlier Gothic novelists such as Ann Radcliffe (Irvine 1999: 226). There was a clear and continuing relationship between the Gothic and historical novels, even where Scott and his critics attempted to separate them. In this article, I will argue not only that the Gothic and history make excellent companions in historical fiction, but that they can co-exist even in novels written in a traditionally 'realist' style that attempted to make them mutually exclusive. The Gothic in these novels need not be supernatural or impossible: it may be firmly of our world and the threats and fears that we encounter every day, and that this more 'realistic' Gothic can be a very useful mode when writing back against traditional history. This article focuses on how women, and particularly queer women, can use the Gothic to write themselves back into spaces from which they have traditionally been excluded, and how the Gothic can exist where it might traditionally have had no business being: in the cities, in the centre, and in real life. I will use, as a short case study, the creative artefact of my PhD: a novel entitled *Voice of the Shadows*.

Voice of the Shadows

Voice of the Shadows is a literary historical novel set in Melbourne in 1942. It tells the story of Alice Jenkins, who returns at the beginning of the novel to Melbourne from two years in Sydney, to take up a job as a journalist at the Herald. While in Sydney, Alice had a relationship with a woman that opened her eyes to her desire for women, but in the end has left her broken-hearted. She is determined to focus on work and family and not to fall in love again. But then she meets Gladys.

The Melbourne Alice returns to is a city approaching winter, and it is dark at night due to the enforcement of a 'brownout'—a less strict version of a blackout, where lights are dimmed, covered or turned off in order to foil any attempts at air raids. Many of the young men are off fighting in the war, and these things combined give the city an eerie atmosphere. But it is not all doom and gloom; the absence of the men means that women are able to take up 'men's' jobs, and the presence of the American soldiers means that there are parties, and hundreds of dashing, exotic young foreigners with money in their pockets and not much to do but entertain the local lasses. It is a heady time for women, and they are able to enjoy unprecedented economic and sexual freedom. But then women begin to be killed.

In May of 1942 three women were killed on Melbourne's streets within 15 days in what became known as the 'brownout murders'. An American GI, Eddie Leonski, was arrested soon after, and he confessed that he killed the women 'to get their voices'.

History handed me a Gothic city: dark, cold and shadowy, with all sorts of sexual transgressions occurring, flouting of traditional gender roles, a faraway war that threatened to come closer, and a murderer who killed women to get their voices. This is undeniably a Gothic scene, without a ghost in sight. My novel is written in a traditionally realist style, with the real historical murders combining with Alice's real, socialised guilt and shame about her own forbidden desires—these are the threats that make up the Gothic that walks with a human face on city streets.

Gender and war

Looking at how the world was for women during times of war is fertile ground for novelists, and several recent novels have done so. Some recent examples of these novels, and these are all specific to World War 2, are Lauren Chater's *The Lace Weaver* (2017), Kate Forsyth's *The Beast's Garden* (2016), Lisa Bigelow's *We That Are Left* (2017) and Elise Valmorbida's *The Madonna of the Mountains* (2018), as well as the work of writers such as Kate Atkinson, Kate Furnivall, Sarah Waters, and Kate Quinn internationally. The glut of these novels speaks to the fact that war is an interesting time to consider how gender roles are constructed. Jeanette Winterson argues that traditionally war imposes strict gender roles: '… soldiers and women. That's how the world is' (in Wallace 2005: 195). For Simone De Beauvoir, this insistence on strict gender roles speaks directly to how women have been excluded from history:

> the worst curse that was laid upon women was that she should be excluded from these warlike forays. For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills (1953: 95).

Recent historical novels focussing on the lives of women during wartime show how women experience war differently from men. This is not a new trend, but one that goes back to the fiction of British writers such as Elizabeth Bowen and Virginia Woolf. These writers look at the home front during wartime, and particularly at the city. In Elizabeth Bowen's stories, set in wartime London, there is very little presence of the actual war. There are none of the iconic wartime images that we see in 'war fiction' written by men: the air raids, the trenches, the soldiers, etc. Bowen's stories depict the atmosphere of a city in wartime—'an unsettled, often ghostly atmosphere that permeates all facets of everyday life in a war capital' (Davis 2013: 30). Likewise, the Pargiter family in Virginia Woolf's *The Years* never experience a bombing raid. Davis argues that, for the Pargiters, the war is 'experienced through the impressions it leaves on the domestic, private interiors of the home' (2014: 9). *Voice* does not include any descriptions of battles, or even people discussing war news: the novel is interested, instead, in the day-to-day experiences of the women.

The Gothic city and the female Gothic

Like Bowen's stories, the city in *Voice* is ghostly and unsettled. It conjures up thoughts of the Gothic, even though the Gothic is traditionally associated with sprawling country estates, and the urban Gothic should be a contradiction in terms (Mighall 2007: 54). Robert Mighall describes what an urban Gothic might be: a foggy city, where the fog obscures but also reveals (2007: 56), where the terrors are real, here and now (2007: 55). All of these ingredients were present in Melbourne in 1942.

Add to this that the Gothic is all about fear (Moers 1976: 90), and resists definition, because to define it would be to undermine its transgressive nature (Althans 2010: 11). It is associated with the unconscious mind and 'the compulsion to articulate what was unspeakable or repressed' (Parker 2008). In addition to its core characteristics of sprawling country estates, lost manuscripts, hidden passageways and ruins (Smith 2007: 4; De Groot 2010: 16), the Gothic is also recognisable by themes of: its essential relationship to history and to haunting (Wallace 2013a: 15), doubling (Hansen 2011: 639), male violence and female oppression (Cooper 2012: 166), and menacing and unstable characteristics (Althans 2010: 11). Donna Heiland says that 'Gothic fiction, at its core, is about transgression of all sorts: across national boundaries, social

boundaries, sexual boundaries, and the boundaries of one's own identity' (Cooper 2012: 157).

Gothic fiction also has a long association with women writers and women's stories, to the point where Diana Wallace said it could be seen as 'a harbinger of feminist politics' (2013: 19). With its transgressive aims and focus on the domestic sphere, as well as its relationship to history, the Gothic provides a strong drive for what women writers are usually trying to do: shed light on how the world is, or has been, for women, and depict women's experiences and stories as valuable. Wallace argues that it is well-suited to the task because 'history is a nightmare within which women are trapped' (2013: 90). Ellen Moers, in the late 1970s, coined the term 'female Gothic' to refer to this particular usage of Gothic conventions, describing it simply as 'the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic' (Moers 1976: 90). Since that time, literary scholars have explored what the female Gothic actually is. For Paulina Palmer, its three most significant elements are: a woman's problematic relationship with her own body, the transgressive aspects of female sexuality, and the psychological intricacies of female friendships and antagonisms (1999: 10). She also mentions the haunting of one woman by another, and relationships between mothers and daughters as key characteristics (1999: 10). For Alison Milbank, it is characterised by its explained supernatural: 'it evokes a spiritual world through unexplained ghostly visions and sounds, yet it finally provides a natural origin for all the effects' (2007: 157). In 1942, Melbourne was baffled for 15 days—it had no idea who or what was killing women on its streets, but in the end it was revealed to be a 24-year-old foreign soldier—the epitome, it seemed to me, of the explained supernatural and the monster in the female Gothic.

The queer Gothic

Voice's protagonist, Alice, is based on a real-life journalist named Pat Jarrett, who covered the Leonski court martial. This was unusual for the time, and she was only given the job because there were no men around to do it. But was this transgressive enough to be Gothic? Pat Jarrett was a successful, ambitious career woman who never married, and there was no indication in the biography written by her friend Audrey Tate that Pat had ever had a significant romantic relationship. I wondered why this might be. I also wondered about the three women who were killed. The first, Ivy McLeod, was a divorced woman working as a lady's companion; the second, Pauline Thompson, was a married woman who was living separately from her husband; and the third, Gladys Hosking, was a 40-year-old single woman living in a boarding house. When Gladys was killed, the police spent considerable time trying to figure out where she had eaten that night between leaving work and being killed on her way home. Neither the police at the time, nor researchers and journalists who have written

about the case in subsequent years, have managed to figure out this piece of the puzzle. This leads me to imagine the possibility that she may have had a clandestine meeting with someone who would have had too much to risk by coming forward and revealing themselves. There seemed to me a clear opportunity to connect Alice to the case in a meaningful way and explore transgressive female sexuality and restrictive gender roles: make her queer and have her fall for Gladys just before she dies. The more I thought about this, the more it made sense, and now, after countless rewrites and redrafting, I actually can't imagine Alice —or Gladys, for that matter—in any other way.

The work is particularly interesting when read through a queer lens because, although there is a flood of historical novels by contemporary writers writing women and their stories back into history, most of these heroines are heterosexual and the narrative generally follows a traditional heteronormative arc. Cooper and Short argue that this is beginning to change (2012: 11). In the UK and the US, novelists such as Sarah Waters, Jeanette Winterson, Amy Bloom, Sara Collins and Emma Donoghue are beginning to represent queer women in literary historical novels, but the trend has not yet really carried to Australia, particularly for novels with an Australian setting. There are a number of relatively recent literary historical novels by women with queer female characters and content: Kelly Gardiner's *Goddess* (2014), Jesse Blackadder's *The Raven's Heart* (2011) and Catherine Padmore's *Sybil's Cave* (2004), to name a few, but all of these are set overseas. Two exceptions are Anna Westbook's *Dark Fires Shall Burn* (2016), set in Sydney in 1946 and exploring the underworld of the postwar city, and Pip Smith's *Half Wild* (2017), which ranges from Wellington in 1885 to Sydney in both 1917 and 1938 and tells the story of the true lives of Eugenia Falleni. It's a novel that, at its core, challenges and questions gender identity and sees its protagonist identify as both a man and a woman at different stages. There is certainly scope in the Australian literary landscape for more historical queer content—and *Voice* seems to step neatly into that space.

The backdrop of war is a good one to use in the representation of marginalised sexualities as well as of gender roles. Rachel Wood (2013: 308) has explored the restrictions, but also the opportunities, of wartime, particularly for anything beyond the conventional: 'wartime opened up new spaces and offered new opportunities for sexual encounters: the blackout in particular offered a sense of privacy in public spaces'. Australian author Anna Westbrook talks about how the war allowed women to go into the workforce, and there make connections with other women who had the same desires they did: women they would never otherwise have met (Gray 2017). Ruth Ford argues that the women's services, particularly, did the same thing (in Damousi and Lake 1995: 81)—women had the chance to wear uniforms and do more 'masculine' jobs, as well as spend a lot of time together. Gender roles and identities, previously strongly enforced,

were now slowly being dismantled (Ford in Damousi and Lake 1995: 81), or at least complicated. Westbrook's novel, mentioned above, explores the impact of the war on the city's underworld, and shows where there might be opportunities to challenge and subvert conservative gender roles and sexualities. Sarah Waters' novel *The Night Watch* (2006), set between 1941 and 1947 in London, also explores these opportunities. Waters depicts London as a city where 'sexuality and gender identity in particular are heavily policed, watched and worried over; yet the rapidly changing city landscape and concurrent blurred moral codes of wartime are shown to allow thrilling moments of freedom from the policing of gender and sexuality' (Wood 2013: 306). The Melbourne of my novel does this too: women had more freedom than ever to roam the streets after dark, to attend their jobs and their leisure activities, but then women began to be strangled at random. All of a sudden, women were scared to go out. Certain conservative commentators said that these murders were something of a divine intervention, halting what they perceived as the breaking down of the moral fabric of society through women transgressing their traditional roles (Darian-Smith 2009: 184).

The representation of queerness has strong ties to the Gothic. Lesbian desires and figures have often been encoded in fiction through the use of spectral, ghostly, uncanny metaphors, according to Terry Castle:

> The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. She is far away, and she is dire (1993: 2).

Laura Doan and Sarah Waters (2000: 24) sum up the dilemma of searching for her—'the lesbian past grows increasingly insubstantial the nearer one draws to it'. Sarah Waters describes that '… lesbianism has often been rendered invisible, for one reason or another, in history and in literature. It's always been marginalised. One of the things I try to do in my books is put it in the centre of things. So in that sense I'm fleshing out a ghost' (in Parker 2008: 9). Emma Donoghue, in her study on desire between women in literature, explores how this ghosting or supernaturalising of the lesbian was, for a long time, a way to equate her with the monstrous, the nonhuman: 'an eerie turning away from nature's law' (2010: 134). Donoghue goes on to discuss the work of Paulina Palmer who analyses how writers have been turning this on its head since the 1970s, reworking 'the conventions of the Gothic (including vampires, witches, ghosts and other spectral visitors), using them not to hide or denigrate eroticism between women but to celebrate its transgressive physicality' (Donoghue 2010: 138). In *Voice*, I want to follow in the tradition of this celebratory writing of real queer women and bring it out of the shadows.

Subverting the 'ghosted' lesbian

In *Voice*, I attempt to subvert the shadowy, 'ghosted' lesbian and have Alice be most aware of her body when she is following her lesbian desires: when she is dancing with Gladys at the tea-dance, in Gladys' room when Gladys' is pinning Alice's dress, and when she and Gladys have tea at the café and stand, afterwards, waiting for the tram, sharing their first kiss under the cover of darkness in the brownout. They become embodied when they are together, rather than the other way around. Conversely, Alice's former lover Pat (named in tribute to Pat Jarrett by whom Alice is inspired), who we learn about in flashbacks, seems to be disappearing once she chooses to leave Alice and accept a proposal of marriage. Before that, we see Pat dressed in men's clothes and this seems to be the real Pat, at least to Alice's eyes. When Pat dresses in women's clothes she is almost unrecognisable to Alice and seems to disappear: she fades away and leaves no footprints. Her women's clothes seem to be the disguise, and Alice muses on the extra pleats and flounces, ribbons and lace, that make Pat difficult to see. Pat has chosen to obscure her queerness and hide it behind a mask of respectable, conventional heterosexuality, and in doing so, she loses her identity. Palmer (1999: 86) says that the use of spectral imagery in the contemporary lesbian Gothic does not 'disembody' or 'decarnalise' her, but instead 'foregrounds the importance of the body, its passions and vulnerability'. Castle says:

> The case could be made that the metaphor meant to derealise lesbian desire in fact did just the opposite. Indeed, strictly for repressive purposes, one could hardly think of a worse metaphor. For embedded in the ghostly figure, as even its first proponents seemed at times to realise, was inevitably a notion of reembodiment: of uncanny return to flesh (1993: 62).

Alice resists the marriage plot that Pat chooses, as she feels it would be a denial of who she is. But she is anxious about her queer desires, and this anxiety manifests in another Gothic way—that of doubling. Alice concocts parallels between herself and the killer, particularly after he is caught and confesses that he killed the women to get their voices. She equates his desire for impossible possession with her own, a way of making-same, and a response to her learned guilt. Her relationship with her first lover, Pat, is littered with images of possession as desirable, and this is the only model that Alice can bring to her burgeoning friendship with, and desire for, Gladys. She frets that she and the killer might both be examples of a desire for possession that can only be destructive.

In playing with the ways in which the women in the novel come in to and out of focus when embracing and denying their queer desires I am able to play with Gothic imagery and tap into and subvert the spectral ways in which lesbians and queer women have been depicted. As Sarah Waters said, the ghost is fleshed out and becomes real; the Gothic becomes part of the real, plausible world.

Alice/Leonski: a Gothic doubling?

Alice's shame and guilt about her desires are a demonstration of the psychological aspect of the Gothic; she is haunted by the disconnect between what she wants and what she is supposed to want, and by the guilt bestowed upon her by a world that constructs gender and sexuality in a way that doesn't fit her. This guilt and shame lead her to create affinities between herself and the murderer in a Gothic doubling that depicts them both as sinister creatures; Alice sees that they both have the same potential for destruction, though in different ways. Throughout the novel, I attempt to draw parallels between sex and death that feed into this doubling. Examples of this are: when Alice imagines the second murder victim, Pauline Thompson, admiring Leonski's huge hand and looks forward to it undressing her later, anticipating sex rather than murder; and also after Gladys is killed and Alice, in passionate grief, sees images of her own loving hand stroking Gladys' neck metamorphosing into the killer's hand strangling her. There are other images of necks and throats as a site of both affection and violence; the neck is symbolic in Alice and Gladys' brief relationship when Alice straightens her collar, or Gladys takes off Alice's soiled scarf. These are juxtaposed with the broken necks of the three strangled women. Palmer discusses the uses of this sex/death parallel in Emma Donoghue's novel *Hood*—sex and death are the:

> … two physical states which, according to Bakhtin, most clearly exemplify the grotesque body: the body in a state of sexual excitement and the corpse. Both, Bakhtin emphasises, involve transformation, presenting the body not as static, but in a condition of process and flux (1999: 88)

Alice's guilt and shame make her believe that she and the killer are one and the same, and that he just happens to get to Gladys first. This is an example of what Palmer describes as 'encoded misogynistic/homophobic attitudes' (1999: 31). Gothic narrative, she says, 'often includes in its cast of characters representations of the monstrous and the abject, and it is woman—and particularly the woman who identifies as a lesbian or forms primary relationships with members of her own sex—who tends to be assigned these roles' (1999: 13). For most of my novel, Alice conforms to this image and anxiety, but I attempt to unpick this Gothic misery at the end—Alice comes to

realise that she is nothing like the killer and we are left instead with a real, depraved killer and a woman who is grieving, but nonetheless has a real choice, and a possibility of a future outside the conventional. The Gothic doubling that casts Alice as a monster is divested of its power.

Unmaking monsters

Even the depiction of Leonski as the monster is unpicked by the end of *Voice*. While he is on the loose, killing women apparently at random, he is a supernatural force in Alice's imagination. She wonders who he is, how he managed to kill these women without leaving a trace. When she sees him for the first time, in the courtroom, she is struck by how young and ordinary he is. He is the supernatural explained, a smiling assassin who looks like the boy next door.

Violence is committed in my novel by normal men against real women. There are many examples in the novel of different forms of gender-based violence, with the murders committed by Leonski being the most extreme. There are depictions of domestic violence, casually sexist jokes, well-meaning paternalism in the workplace, and entitlement that turns to anger and is a breath away from physical assault. This violence is not committed by monsters, but by men. I believe my novel is topical now, with women regularly being killed by men—in their own homes, on the streets—and resultant conversations and counter-conversations about toxic masculinity—what it is, where it comes from, and who is responsible for it. But *Voice* is not only topical now; it was topical almost 80 years ago in Leonski's time, in 1942, and at any other time in history, and, unfortunately, there is no indication that its relevance is going to diminish in the immediate future.

The power of Gothic conventions in *Voice* is in how they are subverted, and as such we come face to face with how real they are: how they do not need to be supernatural to inspire fear. A Gothic horror story is one in which the reader is treated to a titillating, stimulating fear that is resolved by the story's end. A story in which the Gothic is set up, and then untangled, leaving only real men and real violence in its wake, is one where we don't have the satisfaction of a resolved fear, and this is indeed a subversion, opening the possibility of a realist Gothic.

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