Rebecca Duncan, *South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-Apartheid Imagination and Beyond*
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In *South African Gothic*, Rebecca Duncan explores the appropriation of the gothic genre and mode by twentieth- and twenty-first-century South-African writers who have obliquely addressed the critical issues of their country, such as racial politics and the geography of separate development.[1] As Duncan convincingly demonstrates, in the works of the writers under examination, the Gothic is instrumental in the process of truth telling about a history that resists capture: it facilitates an exploration of the system of 'apart-ness' created by the National Party in 1948, its demise in 1994, and the consequences that emerged in the subsequent decades. As Duncan specifies, such a system 'refuse[s] decoding, refuse[s] total illumination, and thus require[s] ceaseless attention' (p. 135). The Gothic is thus particularly well placed to express and explore this need for constant (re)interrogation of the various forms that the apartheid regime has taken, as it bears witness to its atrocities and provides readers with a critique of history and society. Indeed, by 'giv[ing] shape to anxieties that emerge with force under conditions of change' (p. 4) – a fundamental characteristic of the genre since its creation in the eighteenth century – Duncan demonstrates that the Gothic is an excellent instrument for the representation of a postcolonial reality such as South Africa's that was greatly affected by historical changes.

After providing a brief history of the genre of the Gothic, the Introduction succinctly illustrates the historical, social, legal, linguistic, and economic context of South Africa from the nineteenth century up to the present age, in which the material inequalities of history still persist. This provides a very helpful primer for readers who are not familiar with the subject. Duncan then examines the literary production of different historical periods, beginning in the first chapter with the 'interregnum' – 'that period when apartheid's political structures were incrementally beginning to give way, but when it remained anxiously unclear what shape the future would take' (p. 44). During this period (approximately dated from the 1950s to the 1980s), gothic fiction, as exemplified by Nadine Gordimer's 'Six Feet of the Country' (1956), Etienne van Heerden's *Ancestral Voices* (1986), and Reza de Wet's *African Gothic* (1985/2005), appropriated and denaturalised the idyllic aesthetics of the earlier *plaasroman* (farm-novel) genre. In the *plaasroman*, the capitalist development deriving from the rise of

[1] The policy of 'separate development' was rolled out after the inauguration of the South-African Republic in 1961; it resulted in the revocation of Black citizenship, as well as the formal division of the territory into swaths of white-owned land and unlivable pockets of land categorised as Black (the 'bantustans').

the gold industry is depicted through white pastoral narratives as a disruptive dispossession, an 'uneven' and not a uniform process of transformation. South-African gothic writers appropriated the genre and denaturalised its pastoral connotations through the use of the uncanny and the tropes of exhumation, enclosure/confinement, and narrative fragmentation. In this way, they depict South Africa's occluded (but dormant) histories of injustice.

In the third chapter, Duncan examines the backward-looking tendency and spectral return of the past in post-apartheid texts of the 1990s and 2000s. The analysis of narratives such as Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000), Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull* (1998), and André Brink's magic-realist novels *Imaginings of Sand* (1996), *Devil's Valley* (1998), and *The Rights of Desire* (2000) demonstrates how 'the retrieving historical impulse [...] registers a national culture of retrospectiveness' (p. 90). As it is typical in gothic works, the attempt to organise traumatic, repressed memories into a coherent, rational pattern becomes also an act of mourning. The confrontation with supernatural characters and events narrated in the texts under examination is interpreted by Duncan as the epitome of an act of both physical and cultural excavation that uncovers what lies hidden in the past of South Africa. The topic of recovered traumatic memories is further addressed in the final section of the third chapter, which examines Terry Westby Nunn's *The Sea of Wise Insects* (2011) and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), and focuses on these works' portrayal of sexual violence and physical wounds. This again metonymises the traumatic (and sometimes impossible) uncovering of the unspoken past of South Africa, where legislation prescribed strict limits on physical encounters between white, 'coloured', and Black people. Duncan's analysis thus confirms the productive functions and expressions of the gothic genre that can be identified in literatures from countries that have not been studied previously through such a perspective.

The final chapter is dedicated to the literary fictions published after the turn of the millennium, but also includes the study of (short) films and graphic novels. Post-transitional, experimental texts such as Lauren Beukes' novels, Sarah Lotz's *The Three* (2014), S. L. Grey's *Downside* trilogy (2011-2013), and the graphic novel *Rebirth* (2012) by Josh Ryba and Daniel Browde are examined here for their engagement with the issues of poverty and unemployment resulting from the transnational, neoliberal economic agenda of the post-apartheid years. Duncan argues that they do so through the hyperbolic language of exaggerated violence and the representation of subterranean spaces. The latter is exemplified by the depiction of the cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town as representative of contemporary conditions of material precarity, immaterial money, the uneven distribution of

wealth and privilege, and surplus population. This argument is supported by a wide variety of sources and Duncan's astute analysis of them, which also helps those readers who are not familiar with South Africa to learn about the troubled history of a country through gothic tropes, an attribute that is undoubtedly one of the main merits of this volume.

South African Gothic is commendable for its rich vocabulary and ample use of primary and secondary sources (including theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, and scholars of the Gothic such as Fred Botting and Dale Townshend) that reveal a solid and profound knowledge of the subject on the part of the author and an active engagement with the contemporary critical debate. The discussions of works such as Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) and Angelina N. Sithebe's *Holy Hill* (2007), as well as of literary texts that are only affiliated to the Gothic, such as Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), include brief plot summaries and clear, compelling analyses of specific passages, amply illustrating Duncan's arguments. Accompanying the main text of the volume is an extensive list of very instructive endnotes, which add helpful information and point to alternative critical readings. On the other hand, the use of very long (though flowing) sentences could sometimes prove difficult for the lay reader who is not familiar with the subject, although the frequent anticipation of subsequent arguments by Duncan is very helpful.

On the whole, Duncan's study is certainly a stimulating reading for all those who are devoted to the Gothic, and scholars of the Gothic will certainly benefit from this volume, which inscribes many works by South-African writers into the canon of contemporary gothic literature. In doing so, *South African Gothic* further demonstrates how the genre evolves and mutates through different cultures and historical periods, adapting its forms and contents for the depiction of the past and present anxieties of our world.

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