Transformations of the Family
in Contemporary American Horror Fiction by Women

Rozprawa doktorska napisana
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I can never come out.
So I guess I’m going in.
(Kathe Koja, *The Cipher* 354)
Introduction

Prologue

This dissertation would not have happened had my mother not given me Kathe Koja’s *Skin* in 2003. Published in Polish by Zysk i S-ka in the series *Kameleon*, which included such disparate authors as H.P. Lovecraft and Nick Hornby, Elizabeth Hand and Saul Bellow, Paul Bowles and Douglas Adams, Koja’s book triggered my interest in American horror fiction by women, a fascination which has miraculously survived my doctoral dissertation about them. Interestingly, it was not until years later that I learnt that Koja was, in fact, a horror writer and was originally published by Dell/Abyss, a now defunct publishing house specializing in cutting-edge horror in the early 1990s. Initially, I thought that the Polish publication series, *Kameleon*, was misleading in the sense that it put popular genres writers side by side “serious” novelists, thus blurring the semi-sacred generic boundaries, but with time I have come to recognize this gesture as liberating rather than erroneous, even though I suspect that this particular publishing decision was shaped by marketing forces rather than progressive politics.

In a somewhat similar vein, out of more than fifty novels and hundreds of short stories by women horror writers that I have read over the last five years, I have selected sixteen novels which come from a variety of literary and material backgrounds. I have put side by side works which can “pass” for great literature in the strictest Bloomian sense and niche works celebrated mostly in the Goth subculture and/or by vampire aficionados. Some of the writers are fairly famous today, while others reached the height of popularity two decades ago. Some works were published in hardcover, while others were accorded only one printing, a lurid cover and a cheap paperback layout. My intention is to showcase such diverse types of
works in order to emphasize the tensions and struggles underpinning contemporary horror production, especially when it comes to authors who do not boast of such world-wide recognition as Stephen King or Anne Rice. I purposefully avoided any discussion of “literary excellence,” which as John Guillory has masterfully proven in his *Cultural Capital* (1993), is a fairly unreliable concept, inexorably tied to conservative politics and deployed as an exclusionary and regulatory practice, ultimately treated more as a status symbol and social group designator than a universal indicator of distinction.

The most important question that presents itself is why I have opted only for women writers? In the marked absence of “men writers” or “male writers” labels, should the category “women writers” be even deployed? Is it a polite nod to cultural feminist debates concerning real or imagined essential attributes of a “woman”? If so, does it perpetuate the exclusion of those writers who for some reason do not fit a pre-determined definition of “a woman writer”? Does it signal a social and cultural impasse which has not been overcome by third wave feminism or the so-called postfeminism? Is it an anachronism at a time when a general trend in Western academia is to re-name “women’s studies” as “gender studies” and to relax the focus on gender binary, if not let go of it completely? To my mind, switching to a more universal category of “writers” is a luxury I cannot yet afford, not when the supposedly more inclusive appellation of “horror writers” persistently conjures male rather than female names. Simply speaking, academic books on horror fiction fall into two categories: those that are distinctly gendered female (a minority) and those that are markedly ungendered and pertain to male authors almost exclusively (a vast majority).

That being said, I am wary of making gender binary the main axis of my work, and I am far from trying to prove that women writers’ oeuvre is inherently different from their male counterparts because of real, perceived, or imagined gender distinctions. In my opinion, the

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1 A similar question is debated by Helene Myers in her introduction to *Femicidal Fears* (2001). However, in her account she contrasts essentialism with postmodernism in order to discuss how difficult it has become to talk about oppression and victimhood in the current academic climate.
conditions in which one comes to write horror fiction as well as the sum of life experiences which shape a horror writer are far more important than just a given author’s gender. Obviously, in a field which has been culturally constructed as a predominantly male territory (both in terms of its creators and consumers), gender does matter, and identifying as a woman and a horror writer translates into a body of work which, by definition, works against the main currents of horror fiction and which is often forced to start its journeys from generic borderlands rather than from the very center of horror literary circles.

Inspired by Rosi Braidotti’s 1991 *Patterns of Dissonance*, Joanna Bednarek in her full-length study of sexual difference in contemporary literature and philosophy (*Lines of Femininity*) rightly points out that the critical legacy of deconstruction, which was so readily and perhaps somewhat uncritically embraced by the Anglo-American feminist theorists, has spawn a series of stifling and limiting debates over femininity. Academics who choose to write about women artists now feel the need to protect themselves against the barrage of anti-essentialist criticism, which asks them to deconstruct gender and divorce it from lived experiences.² But, as Catherine Malabou boldly puts it in *Changing Difference* (2009), anti-essentialism constitutes an act of theoretical violence, which inadvertently supports physical, emotional and economic violence to which women have been historically exposed. Bednarek proposes to cease asking whether disparate groups of women share certain experiences and have something in common or not and to stop criticizing publications that trace sexual difference in cultural texts, and to start inquiring instead how femininity exists within power structures, which manifest themselves in the materialism of lived experience, politics, working conditions, educational choices, subject matter of artistic works, preferred formal devices and media forms, to name just a few such elements.

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² See Bednarek, 20.
Similarly to Bednarek’s proposed conceptual framework in *Lines of Femininity*, I want to think of contemporary women’s horror writing as a pulsing assemblage in which femininity acts as a flow or intensity rather than a fixed component or essence shared by all female horror writers. One of the main goals of this work is to examine the generic borders that inform the way women’s horror fictions are read, publicized and critiqued. In other words, I am interested in how the very category of “horror” is sustained, co-curated and challenged by women writers, and how the instability of generic definition may actually be a welcome thing in horror scholarship.

Each chapter, each analyzed book is an exercise in what Karen Barad calls intra-action in which the knower, her theoretical toolkit and “the known” do not pre-exist the moment of experiment (or analysis, reading) and it is only the agential cut that “effect[s] a separation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’” (815). Just as with each new analysis, my definition of horror fiction slightly mutates, simultaneously constricting and expanding in time-space: as an academic and a horror fan, I am un/made by the fiction I read and the analyses I pen. In other words, this dissertation, understood as a thought experiment utilizing various discursive-material practices, “enacts an agential cut” through which I am constituted as well (Barad 815). Chapters in this work, conferences at which I have presented my findings, publications, seminars, doctoral courses, summer schools, horror festivals, informal discussions and formal meetings are all part of a wider assemblage of my becoming-scholar.

Bearing in mind Adrianne Rich’s “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” and Donna Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges,” I need to acknowledge my own position as a precarious employee of the Polish academia, a white middle-class cis-woman living in the capital of

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3 “A specific intra-action (involving a specific material configuration of the ‘apparatus of observation’) enacts an *agential cut* (in contrast to the Cartesian cut—an inherent distinction—between subject and object) effecting a separation between ‘subject’ and ‘object.’ That is, the agential cut enacts a local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy. In other words, relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions. Crucially then, intra-actions enact agential separability—the local condition of exteriority-within-phenomena” (Barad 815).
Poland, kindly supported by her husband and her family, an able-bodied person with a mostly invisible history of depression, and a Central European citizen whose name remains unpronounceable to my English-speaking colleagues from the West. All this and more have shaped the choices I made in terms of my thesis subject matter, my personal politics and engagement with feminism, my theoretical toolkit and conceptual framework, the authors I have in/excluded, the research questions I have formulated, and the methods I have applied. It would be insincere and pointless to insist on a pretence of academic objectivity, especially since I am analyzing horror, a bodily genre\(^4\) which actively disrupts and disturbs the Western infatuation with logic, reason and a neat split between body and mind, culture and nature, male and female.\(^5\) In order not to slip into lazy relativism I want to stress that I remain cognizant of the responsibility for choosing determinate assemblage components in each and every analysis carried out in this dissertation.

Having graduated from English philology and American cultural studies at the University of Warsaw, I have absorbed Anglo-American literary feminist criticism as well as tools of deconstruction filtered through a North American critical lens. Only recently have I begun supplementing these hegemonic theories with continental philosophy, original French deconstruction and feminist new materialism(s), which I believe is visible to some extent in my struggles to move beyond deconstruction without leaving it completely behind. Although my dissertation subscribes to a deconstructivist analytical framework, and my analyses are supported by the invaluable gains of feminist psychoanalytic theory, gender studies and queer

\(^4\) Throughout this dissertation I will be referring to genre as a generative rather than a descriptive concept. My usage of genre echoes John Frow’s approach: “[F]ar from being merely ‘stylistic’ devices, genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausability, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science, or in painting, or in everyday talk. These effects are not, however, fixed and stable, since texts – even the simplest and most formulaic – do not ‘belong’ to genres but are, rather, uses of them; they refer not to ‘a’ genre but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation” (2).

\(^5\) See Williams, “Film Bodies” (1991).
theory, classic literary theory of the fantastic and the Gothic\textsuperscript{6} as well as genre theory, I remain painfully aware of their limitations. In the pages that follow I will explain my methodological choices in more detail and discuss my decision to examine the triad – horror fiction, women writers and family relations.

**Whither Horror?**

In 2014, David Peak wrote that

\[\text{[t]he narrative of horror is composed of what we’ll refer to as ‘meaningful’ language, or language that emerges from the synesthesia of image and perception…. If meaningful language is composed of both image and perception in relation to the body, this then results in language that, when received by the listener/reader, creates an imaginative, sensory response; it is through the language that ignites the senses, the language that is digested through the body as a way of relating to what is being told. (19)}\]

Peak’s definition of horror narrative in *The Spectacle of the Void* (2014) speaks to the popularity of horror within certain strands of cutting-edge contemporary philosophy, such as speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, dark vitalism and selected new materialist lines of inquiry. What binds all these threads, however divergent in theoretical frameworks and objectives they may seem, is their consistent recourse to matter, corporeality and physicality of experience. Somewhat surprisingly, horror seems to be flourishing in the twenty-first-century philosophical discourse just as its other emanations have found fertile ground in pop culture, new media and “the rhetorics of horror” which is visible in everyday life (Gelder, *The Horror Reader* 1). Horror has gone a long way since penny dreadfuls, *Weird Tales* and post-war pulp fiction and has finally left academic obscurity behind.

\textsuperscript{6} I have decided to use a capitalized version of the word in order to emphasize connections (however elusive and ambiguous they might be) between modern-day horror and Gothic literary traditions. Still, as Anne Williams reminds us, the decision to use a small or a capital letter is already an act of critical inclusion and exclusion and while some avenues are opened through the usage of “Gothic” rather than “gothic,” others are closed off (13).
Depending on the definition of horror, one might be tempted to offer various explanations for horror’s recent popularity and its heightened visibility in the media. Horror could be seen as a perfect embodiment of postmodernism, a latter-day Frankenstein’s creature, in which contemporary infatuation with the monstrous, the fragmented and the metatextual comes to the fore (Pinedo, *Recreational Terror*). Conversely, horror might function as a given culture’s reservoir for social and cultural anxieties which need to be debated and worked through in a safe cocoon of fiction (Grixti, *Terrors of Uncertainty*). Horror might also be interpreted as a natural (?) response, heavily coated in fear, disgust and utter fascination, to new advances in science, technology and medicine (Colavito, *Knowing Fear*). The academic debates cover a wide spectrum when it comes to reading horror. Some scholars apply feminist psychoanalytic framework to horror fictions (Linda Williams, Tony Williams, Carol J. Clover, Joan Copjec), while others opt for Marxist and psychoanalytic analysis of horror as cultural production (Franco Moretti, Robin Wood). Some follow a diachronic investigation of terror as an aftershook and side effect of the Enlightenment (Terry Castle), while others choose a synchronic discussion of excess, disturbance of norms and monstrosity (Mary Russo, Barbara Creed, Robin Wood). As Clive Bloom suggests, psychoanalytic theories of the uncanny, the abject, the grotesque might be construed as narcissistic at their core as they all pertain to the threat against our own selves, and could be thus contrasted with the fear of the absolute unknown of which H.P. Lovecraft wrote in the early twentieth century (“Introduction: Death’s Own Backyard” 15-16):

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (57)
Thus on a more abstract level, horror narratives could offer a glimpse into the absolute unknown, the world-without-us, as Eugene Thacker calls the negative space, the speculative world to which human beings have no immediate access. But before looking at specific examples of both theoretical and more popular takes on horror, it is essential to stress once again the irreducible connection between horror and the body, which remains essential to the definition of horror developed in this work.

In 1826, in an essay on the supernatural in poetry published in the New Monthly Magazine, Ann Radcliffe, the mother of the Gothic, clarified the distinction between terror and horror: “Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (quoted in Bruhm 37). The soul is moved, yet it is the body that responds and the body senses that react affectively to the terrifying and horrifying stimuli. This striking emphasis on bodily sensations in horror fiction has reverberated through the last two hundred years of horror and the Gothic. In contrast to other, more high-brow and seemingly more rational genres of literature, horror fiction remains tied to that original Radcliffian explanation and its bodily focus.

Not only is the centrality of the body increasingly visible in popular cultural discourses and media texts, but it also underpins a number of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century research methodologies, which bring into focus personal, marginalized and hitherto concealed aspects of human existence, including the corporeal. And contemporary scholarship in horror and the Gothic is finally responding to this paradigm shift. This dissertation is not intended to offer a systematic history of the horror genre or an overview of the most prominent figures in the field; instead its main goal is to put forward a generative definition of horror fiction, one that can be found in the tensions and contradictions between different

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7 See Thacker, 5-9, for a further discussion of the world-without-us concept.
affects, effects, themes and stylistic choices; a definition that comes back to the corporeal features of horror and terror, that is the body of the reader who reacts affectively to the narrative and the imagined bodies that are affected through and by the flows and movements of the narrative.

Gina Wisker, in *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* (2005), an entry-level compendium that covers all the rudiments for undergraduate and graduates students, playfully describes horror as being

pretty much everywhere. Horror is entertaining and educational. Horror is contradictory, paradoxical; it combines opposites, destabilizes, and challenges, but often does so in order to restore order, however order is culturally constituted at that particular time and place. It is social, political, psychological, emotional, spiritual, supernatural, natural, and part of the human condition. (4)

Wisker sees horror as “a branch of Gothic writing,” which is, however, more prone to graphic representation of “violence, terror, and bodily harm than the Gothic” (*Horror Fiction* 8).

Writing about horror as an embodiment of what is “both desired and feared” (*Horror Fiction* 8), she falls back on David Punter’s and Fred Botting’s Freudian and psychoanalytic readings of horror literature. Assuredly a well-researched and enjoyable read, Wisker’s analysis is diluted by its sweeping definitions, which leave the reader wondering if there exists anything outside of horror. Of interest, however, is Wisker’s insistence on including feminist and queer horror texts, a welcome gesture often missing from general overviews of horror. She even underlines that “domestic settings and the nurturing relationships within the family are locations for horror in women’s writing in particular” (*Horror Fiction* 9).

Mark Jancovich, whom Wisker also quotes in her study, concentrates on how the horror “genre is based on the process of narrative closure in which the horrifying or monstrous is destroyed or contained” (9), thus expunging the transgressive elements and bringing back order. This in turn echoes Linda J. Holland-Toll’s *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie* (2001), in which she argues that the most effective form of horror fiction is the
disaffirmative horror fiction, in which order is not restored, the sense of safety is lost, and the community is irrevocably torn apart. Holland-Toll’s definition of horror fiction rests on the concept of cultural dis/ease, which is produced through “antinomy, however unrecognized and unarticulated. Antinomy, irony, and paradox, which often result in ambiguity, gaps, and slippage, are strong presences in horror fiction” (15). She then proceeds to describe three main elements of horror: “the Dionysian intrusion of the supernatural,” “the emotional response of terror, horror, or even repulsion,” and “the sense of extreme, exaggerated and unresolvable antinomy, which effectively resists closure and resolution more radically than other fictions” (16).

Interestingly, Holland-Toll follows Jane Tompkins’s call to discover “what kind of cultural work” is performed by literature, in this case horror fiction (1). In this sense, her analysis moves away from simply listing major themes and functions of horror, and moves towards a more culturally and socially engaged form of critical thought – one that wants to examine how horror fiction “redefin[es] and reorder[s] the socialscape” (1), and not merely how it represents society’s repressed fears and anxieties. Although still bound by conventions and generic guidelines, Holland-Toll’s definition approximates my own understanding of horror, as she emphasizes the importance of cultural dis/ease in defining transgressive texts which cannot be contained in just one type of critical reading. According to Holland-Toll, horror’s potential for exceeding fixed boundaries and generic formulas is founded on its very marginality – horror is “a fiction of the outer limits of humanity, a fiction of ‘Otherness,’ and thus is often embodied in scenarios which reflect ‘Otherness’” (7). And just like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Monster Theory, 1996) and Judith/Jack Halberstam (Skin Shows, 1995),

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8 Interestingly, as Holland-Toll admits, although most critics of horror fiction support the antinomous paradox of finding delight in terror, some see it as a sign of horror’s innate conservatism and its objective to strengthen the status quo through working through negative affects, desires and anxieties (David Gibson, Joseph Grixiti, Terry Heller, Stephen King, etc.). Others, however, challenge the affirmative and restorative functions of horror (Edward Ingebretnsen, Martin Propp, David Skal, Clive Barker, etc.). See Holland-Toll, 254, endnote 23.
Holland-Toll stresses the importance of late-twentieth-century monster culture and postmodern investment in the figure of the Other.

Clive Bloom in his overview of horror, ghost stores and the Gothic scholarly work, points to several possible motivations for writing such tales: authorial need to work through personal traumas and unsettling experiences, primeval fears of the unknown, of cosmic annihilation, of mental disintegration and confusion of identity, the fear of the dead and their return to life, Freudian “conjunction of repulsion and fascination” (“Horror Fiction” 219), the workings of the uncanny, and the revulsion concerning the body and bodily fluids. The latter is discussed by Bloom in terms of feminist criticism of the Gothic, which is “concerned with the psychological and symbolic meanings that might lie behind such gruesome entertainment” (“Horror Fiction” 220-221). The theme of forbidden contact, pollution and abjection is mentioned in connection to King’s triad of horror affects: terror, fear and, the lowest, revulsion (Danse Macabre 25). Still, as King himself admits, horror, because of its formulaic inclinations and merely temporary transgression, is an intrinsically reactionary genre, “as conservative as an Illinois Republican in a three-piece pinstriped suit” (Danse Macabre 421). Bloom notes, however, that for other horror writers such as Whitley Strieber, horror is essentially “the literature of conspiracy and therefore a politicized literature” (“Horror Fiction” 222, original emphasis). Similarly, Clive Barker (of the Books of Blood fame) trusts in the genre’s subversive qualities (quoted in Bloom, “Horror Fiction” 222).

Of course, horror can also be read as a subgenre of the fantastic, which is what Rosemary Jackson (Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, 1981) and Tzvetan Todorov (The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, 1973) do in their well-known literary analyses. Another popular way of categorizing horror is to locate it under the umbrella term, “speculative fiction” – a term whose first modern usage is attributed to Robert E. Heinlein – which encompasses fantasy and science-fiction alongside horror. Additionally, other critics,
such as Noël Carroll, point to the generic affinity between science fiction and horror, which makes the two genres at times virtually indistinguishable (13-14). And in a different place I analyzed how classic ghost story and detective fiction share a number of generic traits (“Cross-Pollination of Crime and Gothic Fiction”), which points to a high fluidity of genre fiction, horror included.

Prominent American horror editor, Ellen Datlow, writes that for her horror is “a genre of unease,” which can actually be any genre (“Interview: Ellen Datlow”). Still, for editing purposes she uses the dark fantasy vs. horror division, which rests on her own subjective reaction to the level of darkness in a given text. For Stefan Dziemianowicz, another well-known horror editor and scholar, horror has become “a more complex and less clearly defined branch of popular fiction” (“Foreword” 17). Michael A. Morrison rightly points out that due to its natural shape-shifting abilities, horror easily incorporates elements of other genre fiction such as science fiction, romance novels or even westerns, and moves smoothly into and out of the mainstream, Joyce Carol Oates and Stephen King being here prime examples. And yet, whether we treat horror “as a genre, a marketing category, or simply a collection of texts that share a common tonality” (Morrison 10), its etymological origin (Latin horror – to stand on end, to bristle, and the old French orror – to shudder) brings us back to the body which is supposed to react to a given stimulus in a clearly defined way.

James Colavito, in his popular science study, examines how horror reacts to the changing modes of human knowledge and human ability to reason and to learn. Interestingly, he sets up a somewhat problematic dichotomy situating psychoanalytic readings revolving around sexuality and more serious “intellectual” musings concerned with science and technology at the two ends of a critical spectrum, himself siding, rather unsurprisingly, with the latter. One cannot deny Colavito’s self-assurance in highlighting very compelling ties

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9 Read the whole interview at www.nightmare-magazine.com/nonfiction/interview-ellen-datlow/
between science and society, literary developments and horror in the arts from the mid-eighteenth century Gothic till today’s “horror of hopelessness.” Still, his study suffers from heavy-handed eurocentrism and certain Gothic elitism that causes Colavito to eschew more popular (and perhaps less refined) emanations of horror. What, however, is interesting is his persistence in treating the Gothic as a subgenre of horror and not the other way round (25). In his perspective, horror predates the Gothic by millennia and can be found already in ancient Summerian or Greek works, a bold claim which conveniently ignores literary developments of modernity.

To my mind, however, the rise of the novel cannot be divorced from socio-cultural, economic and political situation of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Europe, which is why I prefer to link the origins of horror and the Gothic with modernity. On a similar note, Noël Carroll locates the beginning of horror fiction in the late eighteenth-century English Gothic novel, the French roman noir and the German Schauer-roman, and sees horror as “a variation on the Gothic form in England and related developments in Germany” (13). Using Montague Summers’s classificatory framework for the Gothic, Carroll contends that out of the four subtypes of the Gothic (the historical, the natural/explained, the supernatural and the equivocal), the supernatural one was most relevant for the development of proper horror fiction (4). In a sweeping critical gesture, Carroll puts Matthew Lewis’s The Monk (1797) – “the real harbinger of the horror genre” (4) – alongside Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), John Polidori’s The Vampyre (1819), American Gothic tales by Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, Sheridan Le Fanu’s In a Glass Darkly (1872) and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897). He briefly mentions psychological horror stories of the late Victorian era, but rather unexplainably decides to omit the classic ghost story. After describing Lovecraftian cosmic horror and the Weird Tales phenomenon he moves on to the birth of horror cinema in the interwar period and beyond. For Carroll, horror (or art-horror, as
he prefers to call it) is a genre that coalesced in the 1820s right after the publication of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Ultimately, the defining feature of horror (which also explains Carroll’s categorization decision) is the presence of a monster, which threatens the human subject with impurity, the collapse of borders and interstitiality (in Mary Douglas’s and Julia Kristeva’s sense) as well as embodied hybridity. What is of interest is Carroll’s attempt to answer the question why people willingly expose themselves to repulsion, fear and a whole array of negative affects found in horror fictions. He works through several possible answers: the theory of cosmic awe and terror, semi-religious experience of the numen, psycho-sexual readings of repression, desire and the uncanny, the conservative need for restoring order and the politicized need to destabilize the *status quo*, all of which Carroll rejects as insufficient in their generalizations and critical myopia. In their place, he proposes a theory of “cognitive pleasures,” which may be found in the revelatory nature of most horror plots: the push to uncover, to demystify, to understand and to disclose the unknown, often represented by a monster figure which defies clear-cut categorization. Still, in other studies of horror fiction, Carroll has been criticized for too rigid a structure and homogenizing view of horror.\(^{10}\)

One last important academic work concerned with horror that should be mentioned is Joseph Grixti’s *Terrors of Uncertainty* (1989), in which he defines horror as “a type of narrative which deals in messages about fear and experiences associated with fear” (xii). Grixti approaches horror “as a genre which works within a set of conventionalized parameters, and thus within the form of a specific set of formal rules of discourse and language” (147), which are in turn shaped by socio-cultural forces and attitudes that exceed popular understanding of horror as a space for sadistic and masochistic satisfaction, a cathartic encounter with “the beast within” or a confrontation with childhood fears of death

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\(^{10}\) See Gelder, “Introduction” 4.
and abandonment. Even though Grixti’s work suffers from a rather limited socio-linguistic focus, it remains an important contribution to horror scholarship as it attempts not only to investigate different meanings of horror narratives but, even more importantly, to understand how these predominant meanings are themselves developed and sustained via cultural production and criticism.

The working definition of horror fiction, which will be tested and retested over the course of this work, combines a number of theoretical approaches. Most importantly, the significance of the body will emerge time after time in my analyses – specifically, the body described within the pages of selected horror novels and, to a lesser extent, the body of the reader who reacts to the stimuli presented by the authors. Similarly to Holland-Tell, I am also interested in the cultural work that horror literature is engaged in, but not necessarily in Grixti’s understanding of horror as a testing ground for dealing with socio-cultural anxieties and fears. Rather, I want to ask how the imagined realities of family life and human relationships in contemporary horror fiction co-create and respond to socio-cultural, political and economic transformations taking place in the Global North. At the same time I am aware that horror does not simply offer a warped reflection of reality, which could, after all, be easily dismissed (and often is dismissed by horror detractors). I am more interested in power relations and hierarchies of meaning in whose production horror literature is actively engaged. For this reason, I define horror as a highly affective cultural formation capable of transgressing generic borders and heavily invested in exploring the unacknowledged, repressed and marginalized aspects of human existence.
American Horror in the Twentieth Century

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century horror was to be found in short fiction, echoing Edgar Allan Poe’s recommendation that the unity of effect is best achieved in a short form. Pulp magazines of the early twentieth century were full of shocking tales of the emerging science fiction, fantasy and horror genres. However, after World War II, most pulp magazines collapsed and, as Dziemianowicz recalls, “[t]he decline of markets for short horror fiction mirrored the diminishing popularity of short fiction in general” (18), and it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that horror returned, albeit in the form of a novel. After the 1970s boom in horror fiction, facilitated by the mainstream success of blockbuster horror movies such as The Exorcist and Omen as well as the huge literary success of Stephen King’s novels and their subsequent adaptations,11 the 1980s saw a massive rise in mass-market paperbacks, specialty presses, horror magazines and anthologies. Small press magazines such as Cemetery Dance, Whispers and Weirdbook together with Charles L. Grant’s Shadows series and specialty press anthologies such as Borderlands, Masques, Night Visions provided a testing ground for newcomers and allowed established writers space for dabbling in shorter form.12 As Morrison contends, by the late 1980s, “the fulminating horror underground served nurturing and generative functions” (10) and together with increasing market demands actively shaped today’s horror genres. In the 1980s, horror was published mainly in four forms: the hardcover, the mid-list hardcover, the paperback, and the small-press publication. The bestselling hardcover formula, of which King’s ‘Salem’s Lot (1975) was the first example, followed the same marketing, stylistic and thematic patterns as bestselling hardcovers in other genres (such as political thriller, crime fiction or spy novels).

11 Following Collins, “Culture in the Hall of Mirrors,” it is worth remembering that the strong connection between American horror literature and cinema rests on reciprocity and mutual attraction, which also explain the ease with which concepts from literary theory travel into film studies and vice versa, a move which will become clear later on this dissertation as well.

The 1980s also saw a switch in popularity between short story (which had reigned since the early American Gothic tales) and the ascending novel. Today, it is the horror novels that climb the bestselling lists rather than anthologies and collections of short stories, even though many contemporary horror writers actually prefer the short story and publish primarily in this format (Thomas Ligotti, Laird Barron, Lisa Tuttle, Livia Llewellyn, etc.). Morrison argues that a switch from shorter to longer forms of fiction resulted in a change in the aesthetics of contemporary horror which, to his mind, has become less scary, as it has focused on the communal, the mundane, the everyday rather than on inexplicable intrusions of the supernatural or the uncanny (15). Morrison also laments the genre splicing which, according to him, has resulted in rather weak hybrid works in most cases.

Small-press magazines, which barely survived the 1960s and 1970s, flourished in the late 1970s and 1980s, and after the slump in the late 1990s they are now on the slow mend utilizing new media technologies and social media platforms. Because of their “eclecticism and liberal policies,” small-press magazines of the late 1980s and early 1990s offered a starting platform for many of the authors included in this work such as Kathe Koja, Poppy Z. Brite and Elizabeth Massie (Morrison 19). And ever since early 1990s, anthologies of the “best of” type have filled up the space left by those specialty presses that folded or were eclipsed by publishing industry moguls pushing aggressively for further consolidation of the market. One should mention the now-discontinued Karl Wagner’s *The Year’s Best Horror Stories* series as well as Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling’s *The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror*, contemporary Datlow’s *The Best Horror of the Year* and quite recent *Year’s Best Weird Fiction* (different guest editors), and a number of online magazines such as *Nightmare* and the still on-going *Cemetary Dance*.

Even though most horror lines were dropped by major publishing houses in the 1990s, one line deserves an honorable mention – Dell’s Abyss, which started in 1990 and which
published a number of important horror works by female newcomers such as Kathe Koja, Nancy Holder, Kristin Kathryn Rusch, Poppy Z. Brite and Melanie Tem. As a matter of fact, more than one-third of all the Abyss titles were written by women writers, an unprecedented move on the part of any horror line before or since. Incidentally, it was Koja’s *The Cipher* that opened the series in February 1991. Under the care of Jeanne Cavelos, series editor and its biggest champion, Abyss became synonymous with highly original and cutting-edge horror. After Cavelos left the series and the critical acclaim failed to translate into financial success, Abyss line was closed in early 1998 after forty-three titles, with Poppy Z. Brite’s *Lost Souls* being its last publication. Hantke, in his overview of Dell’s horror imprint, notes the uniqueness of the Abyss line, clearly noticeable in its edgy covers, “artsy but sexy, more reminiscent of pop art’s boldness that (sic) the gothic’s doom and gloom” (62), its dedication to novelty and clear break with the stylistics and themes of 1970s and 1980s bestselling horrors, exemplified best by Stephen King’s hefty, multi-character, realist novels. In contrast, Cavelos preferred more succinct novels, focused in their scope and less concerned with the social and the communal than with the intimate and the individual. For Hantke, who sees the supernatural as a twentieth-century remnant of the Gothic, this also meant abandoning the “return of the repressed” rationale for horror and a switch to “the space of individual psychology” (65-66).

Hantke notes that several developments influenced the decline of horror fiction in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of the reasons was a change in marketing categories, which coincided with a more relaxed approach to horror’s generic boundaries among its practitioners and fans (59). As Cavelos suggests, horror has always struggled as a genre and its splintering into other genres (young adult, supernatural romance, dark fiction, urban fantasy, etc.) over the course of the 1990s came as no surprise. Other reasons for horror’s decreased popularity

included consolidation around major bestselling authors, disappearance of middle-range or mid-list authors, and a general economic slump suffered by the American publishing industry.

Even though Stephen King is the author most readily associated with horror fiction, it is actually English writer, Clive Barker, who influenced the scope and shape of cutting-edge American horror in the 1980s and later. In fact, Ellen Datlow decided to begin her overview anthology, *Darkness: Twenty Years of Modern Horror*, in 1985 (a year Clive Barker’s *Books of Blood* 1-3 won the World Fantasy Award) in order to stress Barker’s impact. Although Datlow admits that it may be a somewhat arbitrary choice (as recognized anthologies of horror fiction were published well before Barker’s time), Barker’s short fiction signaled a change, a breath of fresh air into Anglo-American horror fiction, which in the preceding years presented a more restrained and less gory approach to horror, again best represented by Stephen King’s oeuvre. Interestingly, Stefan Dziemianowicz calls this subtler approach dark fantasy after Charles L. Grant’s definition (14). And similarly to Datlow, Dziemianowicz notices a qualitative change in horror with Clive Barker, in whose wake a self-styled group of horror newcomers, the splatterpunks, followed. Although short-lived, splatterpunk opened up the discussion concerning the acceptable limits of gore, sexual violence and graphic content in horror fiction as well as the influence of other media on horror literature, specifically horror cinema and rock and metal music.14

**Women of Darkness**

Although Hantke, in his overview of Dell’s Abyss publications, discerns a gender politics at play behind Cavelos’s decisions, he does not develop this line of inquiry. Still, the

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14 Two splatterpunk anthologies worth mentioning here were edited by Paul M. Sammon in 1990 and 1995, respectively. While the first one included only two stories by women writers, the second boasted a gender parity of sorts, and Sammon himself specifically addressed the emphasis on female writers. Still, by 1995 splatterpunk, understood as an easily definable horror subgenre, was no longer relevant. In the following years, “extreme horror” or, in some cases, “torture porn” have been used to describe similarly graphic horror stories.
fact that Hantke acknowledges Cavelos’s conscious choice to include more women writers in her horror line is in fact a huge step, especially when one considers the rampant tokenism of most horror literature overviews. The list of women writers mentioned in such works is pretty predictable. Anne Radcliffe and Mary Shelley are included as the early Gothic/horror authors. From time to time, Edith Wharton appears as a ghost story writer alongside Henry James. Daphne du Maurier is mentioned in connection to Hitchcock’s movie adaptations, and the triad – Shirley Jackson, Joyce Carol Oates and Anne Rice – sums up all post-World War II women writers. In some cases, Southern Gothic writer, Flannery O’Connor or British fantasist, Angela Carter, are added.15

Gina Wisker is one of very few horror critics who have actually explored women’s contemporary horror fiction. In an essay on Angela Carter, she writes: “Great women writers throughout the centuries have produced ghost stories and horror stories, but perhaps one of the problems of reclaiming horror as a genre for women is this very equation of the female victim, the edge of the pornographic, with horror” (“On Angela Carter” 247). Still, contemporary women writers do not balk at this perceived connection, but instead interrogate it carefully and explore “sexual licence, alternative sexual relationships, and power in ‘normal’ relationships,” as Wisker adds (“On Angela Carter” 247).

The emphasis on sexuality in women’s horror fiction that Wisker mentions is also discussed by John Nicholson, who set out to prove that “[s]ex has always underpinned horror but it ‘came out’ with Clive Barker” (276), an interesting claim, which Nicholson himself questioned later. In fact, he notes that between 1991 (the completion date of his essay on sex

15 A case in point is S.T. Joshi, a well-known literary critic and editor, who has published several books on weird fiction and H.P. Lovecraft and edited numerous collections of lovecraftian tales. Most of his more academically inclined books concern male writers. In The Modern Weird Tale (2001), out of thirteen writers selected for analysis, Anne Rice is the token woman. In The Evolution of the Weird Tale (2004), a collection of essays and reviews, many of which touch upon rather obscure and virtually unknown authors, the only woman writer included is Poppy Z. Brite, whom Joshi proceeds to describe in such unabashedly paternalizing terms: “She takes herself too seriously. She is not as good a writer as she thinks she is” (208). In his 2009 collection of reviews and essays, he includes two women writers: Shirley Jackson and Sherry Austin. In Joshi’s defense, it can be said that he uses exclusionary, elitist and paternalistic voice to discuss all writers whom he dislikes, their gender notwithstanding.
in horror) and 1996, it was women writers who took up where Barker left off and explored issues of sexuality, sex and sexual politics. He notes the popularity of horror erotica, both straight and lesbian, vampire erotica and fruitful marriages of historical romances, fantasy, horror and erotica (Anne Rice’s works published under the A. N. Roquelaure pseudonym are probably the most famous example).

Important anthologies of women’s horror fiction of that time include Women of Darkness (1988) and Women of Darkness II (1990), both edited by Kathryn Ptacek and published by Tor Horror imprint (a line closed in 1990), and Lisa Tuttle’s edited collection, Skin of the Soul (1991). Another important collection, What Did Miss Darrington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction (1989), edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, is also worth mentioning, as even though its main focus was the supernatural tale, understood rather loosely as “Gothic romance, ghost story, fantasy, allegory, parable, surrealism, psychological drama, inner-space fiction, dream vision” (xvi) rather than horror, it features Rosemary Jackson’s very informative overview of women’s supernatural fiction. Inspired by ecriture feminine, Jackson sees women’s supernatural fiction as an inherently feminist enterprise, one that explores patriarchal culture and effectively overturns its emphasis on representation and realism. She reads sexual politics of women’s stories in terms of their feelings of social dislocation and disempowerment, which manifest themselves in the prevalence of themes of spectrality, haunting and madness, vulnerability (mental, physical, economic) and the limits of male-centered language. Still, her claim that women turn to the supernatural looking for a new spirituality, in contrast to male writers who turn to non-realistic fictions “for purposes of horror, sadism, violence, or suspense” (xxxii), is too simple and reductive. At the end of the day, however, Salmonson’s groundbreaking anthology remains an important stepping stone for women in horror fiction.
Lucy S. Snyder, American horror, fantasy and SF writer, in her “Historical Overview of Classic Horror Novels,” quotes statistics published in Strange Horizons and VIDA: Women in Literary Arts to emphasize the gap between male and female authors in terms of the number of reviews and the amount of attention bestowed upon specific works. In a special issue of Nightmare Magazine: Women Destroy Horror! (2014), in a roundtable discussion among Kate Jonez, Helen Marshall, Rena Mason and Linda Addison, the four horror writers talked about the publishing industry and gender politics of writing horror as a woman. Jonez rightly points out that dividing people into two gender categories is problematic and, as a writer, it is impossible for her to think in such categories (182). Mason responds that she is absolutely conscious of sexual politics, which is why she writes stories with mostly female protagonists, as these are the stories she has personally always wanted to read (183). Similarly, asked about distinctly feminine aspects of their work, all four writers differ in their approaches. While some agree that their work is feminine in that it revolves around women, others point out the tricky nature of the feminine/masculine dichotomy and express their uneasiness and ambivalence concerning the reigning definition of femininity. Their responses to questions concerning the gendered aspects of publication process, audience’s reactions to horror fiction by women horror writers, and their own take on the popularity of torture porn and common misogyny in horror narratives run the whole gamut, thus suggesting a lack of uniformity in their experiences and approaches. Interestingly, while Linda Addison and Rena Mason are comfortable with being labeled female horror (or dark fiction) writers, Kate Jonez and Helen Marshall are much more wary of such labels. In fact, Marshall understands the need to use new terms such as the New Weird or dark fantasy, in order to put some distance between contemporary horror production and earlier horror narratives, which customarily and, to some extent, unconsciously reproduced the same tedious plotlines in which women’s bodies were either abused for the sake of male protagonist’s development or used as cheap thrills (188).
Gothic as Horror: Horror as Gothic?

Even though most scholars of horror eagerly point out contemporary horror’s indebtedness to European and American Gothic traditions, they rarely describe the exact moment horror emerged alongside the latter. In fact, in many cases the differences between the two are of degree, not kind, and the two concepts are used somewhat interchangeably, a good case in point being Tony Magistrale and Michael A. Morrison’s edited collection of essays on American horror fiction, in which the Gothic seems to seep into horror almost imperceptibly. Bloom writes about this tendency in “Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition”:

Gothic tale, ghost tale, terror romance, Gothic horror. All these titles seem to cover virtually identical literary productions with the definition of one acting almost as a catch-all for the others. This is all given an irritating twist when it becomes clear that while ‘horror’ and ‘Gothic’ are often (if not usually) interchangeable, there are, of course, Gothic tales that are not horror fiction (Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca is a good example) and horror tales that contain no real Gothic elements (Elizabeth Bowen’s ‘The Cat Jumps.’) (211)

According to Bloom, in his introduction to Gothic Horror, it was “gothicism… that transformed the old folk tale of terror into the modern horror story” (2). He credits Edgar Allan Poe with finally shaping horror out of the Gothic by infusing his stories with “the horror of the mind isolated with itself” (Gothic Horror 3). Obviously, one could come up with alternative timelines and start just easily with Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein as the first modern horror tale or with cosmic terror tales of H.P. Lovecraft and his essay on the supernatural in fiction. What is troubling (though rather symptomatic) about Bloom’s account is that out of almost forty writers he mentions in his introduction only six are women (and one of them is actually a late nineteenth-century spiritualist and medium rather than a professional writer).
Similarly, Fred Botting, in *Limits of Horror: Technology, Bodies, Gothic*, moves seamlessly between horror and the Gothic and the two concepts become, if not interchangeable, tightly interwoven, especially in contemporary times when the transgressive features of the Gothic are heightened by new technologies of the body and reproduction as well as the expanding technobureacracy under late capitalism. Botting argues that “[t]he new horror demands a broader Gothic frame: fiction and film cross into everyday life, displaying the permeable, shifting boundaries between reality and fantasy and enveloping every social positions” (6). Still, he also suggests that perhaps Gothic, as an intrinsically hybrid formation, has dispersed so profusely over the last two centuries so as to become “meaningless and redundant, a diffusion of significance and affect in the fantasies and anxieties of culture” (162).

As a matter of fact, critical scholarship on the Gothic in all its national, historical and generic versions and subgenres, far outnumbers that on horror. It is worth mentioning that the Gothic, “a genre which has, from its inception, been seen as feminine and female” (Meyers 25) was devalued for decades and, to a large extent, it was feminist criticism that has “move[d] the Gothic from literary margin to center” (Meyers 26). Seminal feminist critical studies by Ellen Moers (*Literary Women*, 1976), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979) and Tania Modlewski (*Loving with a Vengeance*, 1982) paved way for the Gothic studies renaissance. The 1980s saw the publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986) and David Punter’s seminal work, *The Literature of Terror* (1980). Well-known publications and collections of essays soon followed, among them Punter’s revised two-volume edition of *The Literature of Terror* (1996) and *Gothic Horror* (1998), Fred Botting’s *Gothic* (1996), Andrew Smith’s *Gothic Literature* (2007), Maria Beville’s *Gothic-postmodernism* (2009), Catherine Spooner’s *Contemporary Gothic* (2006) and *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, edited by Catherine
Spooner and Emma McEvoy in 2007. These publications, together with a selection of academic journals devoted to the Gothic and the establishment of the International Gothic Association in 1991, prove steadfast popularity and reach of Gothic studies.

The European Gothic, whose heyday encompassed both late Neoclassicism and early Romanticism, partook of both trends and was influenced by the philosophies of both eras, and yet remained distinct from the two.\textsuperscript{16} The Gothic, understood as a time- and place-specific literary genre (that is a Gothic romance) is relatively easy to locate, stylistically, thematically and historically, and much scholarly criticism has been penned about its uniqueness, its subgenres (such as Female Gothic and Male Gothic),\textsuperscript{17} and its major thematic preoccupations.$^{18}$ However, when it comes to twentieth-century fiction, the Gothic is a much more indistinct formation and considerably more difficult to define, which, I believe, explains an evident critical dilemma of drawing a clear line between Gothic and horror cultural production. In \textit{Contemporary Gothic}, Spooner presents her reading of the Gothic as profoundly invested in its own past, “self-referentially dependent on traces of other stories, familiar images and narrative structures, intertextual allusions” and adds that “[i]f this could be said to be true of a great many kinds of literature or film, then Gothic has a greater degree of self-consciousness about its nature, cannibalistically consuming the dead body of its own tradition” (10). What Spooner sees as metatextual self-consciousness within the Gothic, Botting interprets as Gothic’s ability to plant its own features into other genres. Still, both views explain why I find it impossible to discuss contemporary horror without referring to Gothic scholarship (which concerns both classic eighteenth-century Gothic romances and

\textsuperscript{16} Some scholars treat Gothic as part of Romanticism, for instance, Williams in \textit{The Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic} (1995) reads the Gothic and the Romantic as one poetic tradition.
\textsuperscript{17} Ellen Moers is credited with the term Female Gothic from her 1976 study, \textit{Literary Women}. Since then this term has been used, adapted, updated and critiqued in a number of scholarly works on the Gothic. See Wolstenholme (1993) and more recent collection which problematizes this term, Brabon and Genz (eds.) (2007).
later texts that either were inspired by the Gothic tradition or reformulated the Gothic in their own fashion).

Of special interest is, of course, the American Gothic, heralded already at the close of the eighteenth century by Charles Brockden Brown, but brought to fruition by Edgar Allan Poe and dark romanticists such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Interestingly, Teresa A. Goddu points to a long-standing critical unwillingness to grant the Gothic a place in the canon of American literature. The romance could and was accepted, while the appellation “Gothic” was either changed into “dark” or abandoned altogether. More than that, for many decades critics refused to read the American Gothic in terms other than the psychological impulse and the move “inward, away from society and toward the psyche and the hidden blackness of the American soul” (Goddu 269). Paradoxically, however, the move towards the blackness of the American identity uncovers a crucial feature of the American Gothic, namely its preoccupation with racially coded blackness and whiteness as well as the legacy of slavery (Morrison, Playing in the Dark). Goddu quite rightly points out that the American Gothic is at its core a literature of displacements, as the Gothic interrupts the processes of national mythologization and consolidation through the inclusion of historical nightmares and traumas. In this, “the gothic discloses the instability of America’s self-representations [and] its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity” (270). For Goddu thus, the American Gothic’s main function is to speak the unspeakable (270). In contrast, for Charles C. Crow, the American Gothic is “a literature of borderlands,” a particularly well-suited phrase for a nation obsessed with the Frontier, the limits, the boundaries and divisions between I and not-I (2).

Although the Gothic can be defined in different ways, the definition that speaks to me most is hinted at by Spooner in her essay on the affinities between crime and Gothic fiction. Although Spooner mentions the concept of “Gothic vestigiality” only in passing (“Crime and
the Gothic” 246), I find it the most important characteristic of the Gothic, which is based on the preoccupation with horrible family secrets and the idea that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children. Coupled with a penchant for the “melodramatic imagination” (Ascari 58) and thirst for the sensational, the Gothic remains an open-ended literary and cultural formation rather than a well-defined genre. More of a sensibility that utilizes the Burkean sublime, the Freudian uncanny and the grotesque and abject, the Gothic suffuses many of twentieth-century genres and subgenres and, as Botting argues, is perhaps most easily discernible today in horror cinema, which is a perfect medium for the displays of sensationalism, shock and awe visuals, stock figures and generic formulas (Limits of Horror 162-163). Another important feature, which reappears under different guises in a number of contemporary analyses of Gothic production is the focal place accorded to artificiality, hyper-reality, simulacra and simulations (such as Disneygothic [sic] described by Botting in Limits of Horror), and fake historicity. For specifically twentieth-century Gothic works, Lucie Armitt emphasizes the importance of the two world wars (together with their cultural, political and moral consequences) and, more recently, growing anxieties concerning monster figures that threaten children and family safety (Twentieth-Century Gothic 2-3). For Armitt, Gothic forms remain pertinent to twentieth-century cultural productions thanks to the popularity of psychoanalysis and postmodernism as well as technological advances, which keep Gothic monsters alive (Twentieth-Century Gothic 148).

The working definition of the Gothic for this thesis emphasizes, first and foremost, the idea of Gothic vestigiality, understood as the return of the dark and threatening past framed in the context of familial relations, as, after all, “all Gothic stories are family stories” (Crow 15). Bearing that in mind, I will be exploring the weight of family relations, especially relationships between parents and children, romantic relationships between adults, and

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19 This can be traced back to the first Gothic text, Horace Walpole’s literary hoax from 1764, The Castle of Otranto, which at the time of its first edition was supposed to have been written between eleventh and thirteenth century in an ancient Catholic family. See Townshand, 10-14.
friendships, which constitute alternative kinship networks. This perspective is discussed in more detail in Kate Ferguson Ellis’s *The Contested Castle* (1989) and in Anne Williams’s *The Art of Darkness* (1995). Botting sees the Gothic as “a transgression of the paternal metaphor,” which is “both constructive and disruptive” and involves both a challenge to and “preservation of limits” (*Limits of Horror* 29). Following Lacan and Foucault, the paternal figure is the one who “decides and polices the boundaries of legitimacy in meaning, behavior and identity” (*Limits of Horror* 30), and the Gothic, from its very inception, was heavily invested in the family romance in which paternal figures are either cast as villains, tyrants and impostors, or are painfully absent. For Botting, the transgression of symbolic boundaries and frameworks of cultural legitimacy are most clearly visible in the threats to the institution of marriage which abound in Gothic fictions: “forced marriages, stolen virtue and bodily violations” all interrupt the symbolic exchange of women in patriarchal societies, a flow of goods, and transfer of power and offspring (*Limits of Horror* 34).

Williams notes the critical propensity to fall back on the “fictions of ‘family’ as a source of metaphors” not only in terms of reading fiction, but also in terms of applying theory and constructing critical exegesis (*The Art of Darkness* 11). Looking back at Gothic scholarship up until the mid-1990s, Williams considers the critical “scandals” that are concerned with drawing lines and setting up zones of il/legitimacy and propriety/proprietorship in critical theory, especially in relation to the canon and literary excellence. Secondly, a significant intrusion of the Gothic into horror fiction is often signaled by excess, transgression as well as the uncanny and the grotesque. The third and final element, which stems more from the American Gothic variety than the European one, is an uneasy relationship with the past, historical trauma, cultural erasure as well as an obsessive preoccupation with borders, limits and boundaries.²⁰

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²⁰ For a good overview of American Gothic see Crow (2009), Lloyd-Smith (2004), and, to a lesser extent, Armit (2011).
Following Williams, I agree that the Gothic exceeds the ramifications of a “genre” or “mode,” or “tradition”; however, for the sake of clarity in this dissertation I have decided to use the term “Gothic” as a way of signaling a specific sensibility, a literary expression, a set of conventions and a thematic cluster, rooted in both European and American traditions of Gothic romances, but also referring to its direct descendants and third cousins such as Victorian and Edwardian ghost story, the Southern Gothic, neo-slave narratives, contemporary horror and the neo-Gothic.\footnote{“A ‘definition’ of ‘Gothic’ thus outlines a large, irregularly shaped figure, an irregularity that implies the limitations of language-appropriate for the category containing this unspeakable ‘other.’ Although I began with the term ‘genre,’ so many refinements and ramifications must be added to the usual sense of that term that it becomes unsatisfactory, for ‘Gothic’ is a ‘something’ that goes beyond the merely literary. Similarly, it is more than a ‘mode’ or a tradition, or a set of conventions” (Williams, The Art of Darkness 23).}

**American Kinship**

A common cultural belief considers biologic familial relationships as the most durable and relevant in one’s life, a belief further reinforced by a plethora of “customs, rituals, and laws that privilege familial relationships over nonkin ties and determine who may be defined as family” (Muraco 1313). The image of a heteronormative nuclear family is seen as “pivotal to the constitution of and regulation of the normative citizen subject, which encompasses western, white, middle-class, Christian values and morals, and is the foundational structure of western societies” (Davies and Robinson 39-40). In Counted Out, Brian Powell et al. highlight Americans’ general unwillingness to call non-heterosexual, non-married kinship structures “a family” (20). It seems that having children for cohabiting couples increases the likelihood of being seen as a family by outside parties, but the general consensus still places high value on marriage and heteronormative behaviors.
Bonnie Fox, in her overview of trends in family life, lists several important changes precipitated by late capitalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For instance, young adults stay with their parents for a longer period of time because of financial insecurity and lack of well-paid jobs. Cohabitation is on the rise, while “increasing income and class inequality has produced a growing social-class divide in marriage rates” in the United States (206). Smock and Greenland point out another interesting phenomenon – increased rates of voluntary childlessness among women. Stacey, in her In the Name of the Family, suggests that new “postmodern” alternative family arrangements have grown in popularity over the last few decades and the previous male-breadwinner heteronormative nuclear model is being superseded by other models.

Andrew J. Cherlin, an eminent family sociologist and author of several studies concerning American family and American marriage, notes increased divorce and remarriage rates as well as later marriage and childbearing outside of marriage. Still, marriage as an institution is far more important to Americans than to other Western nationals, and the number of marriages in the US has remained relatively high for the last few decades (Cherlin “American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century,” Cherlin The Marriage-Go-Round). Hence the paradox: “the relatively high value placed on marriage in the United States coexists with an unmatched level of family instability and large numbers of single-parent families” (“American Marriage” 50). Cherlin also notes two important changes in the makeup of a marriage institution. The first, a switch from an institution to companionship was effected in the early twentieth century, whereas the second, a change from companionship to an individualized model, took place in the 1960s (“American Marriage” 40-41).

General trends notwithstanding, class and racial-ethnic differences are much more visible now than in previous decades. For instance, even though most American women

22 Stephanie Coontz, in Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage (2006), argues that the beginnings of companionate marriage could be located already in the late eighteenth century.
postpone marriage, better-educated women postpone not only getting married but having children as well, while poorer and less-educated women become single mothers much more often (Cherlin, “American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century,” 37-38, Smock and Greenland 578-579, Bianchi 325). Children are also more likely to experience growing up in single-parent households, blended families or stepfamilies established both through remarriage and cohabitation (Bianchi 325). Types of mothering bifurcate along class lines, as better-off women opt for time-consuming mothering, while working-class and low-income mothers believe “being there” carries more weight than extracurricular activities and dancing classes (Bianchi 326). Annette Lareau in her study of social class and family life calls the former model “concerned cultivation” and the latter “natural growth” approach (quoted in Bianchi 329). Marriage rates have been steadily declining in black communities more so than in white communities since the 1960s. And, Cherlin argues, because of fewer job opportunities for men without college education since the 1970s, less-educated men have become less “marriageable,” which is often given as one of the main reasons behind low marriage rates among the lower-income Americans (“American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century” 39-40).

It is worth stressing that American families have always been in a flux and a number of “family demographic revolutions” took place between 1950 and 2000 (Bianchi 324). Stephanie Coontz, in The Way We Never Were, persuasively argues how the “Ozzie & Harriet” 1950s family model, often cited as the ideal American middle-class family, was actually a demographic and socio-cultural anomaly. And as Nancy E. Levine points out, alternative families are nothing new, although academic interest in them is surely something of a novelty.

Davis and Robinson argue that family is “a discursively constituted space, which is dynamic, unstable and historically and culturally located, encompassing a variety of social,
cultural, economic and symbolic meanings” (42). Interestingly, Davis and Robinson link the nuclear family discourse to that of Butler’s performativity in the sense that it is through “the repetitiveness of the performance of family” that this category is actually constituted and naturalized (42). Butler’s handy definition of kinship, which Davis and Robinson also reference, is worth quoting in full:

If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few). Kinship is neither a fully autonomous sphere, proclaimed to be distinct from community and friendship—or the regulations of the state—through some definitional fiat, nor is it ‘over’ or ‘dead’ just because, as David Schneider has consequentially argued, it has lost the capacity to be formalized and tracked in the conventional ways that ethnologists in the past have attempted to do. (*Undoing Gender* 102-103)

A seminal publication, Kath Weston’s *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991), triggered the still-ongoing discussion concerning the definition of kinship among gays and lesbians. Weston moves away from the dominant kinship framework (delineated by David M. Schneider in his 1968 *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*), which used to be predicated “on the basis of genetics and procreative sexuality” (Levine 379). What is more, studies show that there is a lot of overlap between family’s and friends’ functions and such elements as trust, intimacy, mutual care and respect are mentioned as characteristics not only of families, but friendships and romantic relationships as well (Muraco 1313). As Muraco notes, friendship is perhaps “the most flexible and most tenuous” of the three types of relationships (1313). Muraco also points to the possible metaphorical use of family language to describe nonbiolegal relationships, as social scripts concerning such ties are often insufficient or nonexistent (1320).
“Fictive kin” is a term used quite often in connection to nonbiolegal networks of people who rely on each other for emotional and financial support. And yet, the term is quite problematic for two reasons: first of all, as Margaret K. Nelson (2014) has so astutely pointed out, it is predominantly used in connection to African-Americans and other marginalized groups and minorities, and, secondly, its very name calls into question the depth and truthfulness of such networks. Interestingly, scholars analyzing gays’ and lesbians’ extended networks (which in every other case would fall under the fictive kin definition) prefer to talk about such relationships in terms of choice (Weston) or intention (Muraco). Nelson suggests that most family sociologists still adhere to the mid-twentieth-century Parsonian model (according to which the nuclear family is the most effective form of companionship), or they look for SNAF, that is Standard North American Family rather than any alternative models (“Whither Fictive Kin?” 214-215). A new term, “voluntary kin” has been introduced by Braithwaite et al. (“Constructing Family”), but as of yet it still refers to white rather than people of color. Elsewhere Nelson has argued for more precision as “fictive kin” remains an umbrella term not at all suitable for describing “the breadth of kinds of relationships, varied settings, and different populations” (“Fictive Kin, Families We Choose, and Voluntary Kin” 260). Still, Nelson’s proposed typology of kin relationships is too detailed and would fare better in a sociological or ethnographic study.

In “Family Matters,” V. Spike Peterson comments on how the Global North has historically benefitted from the establishment of heteropatriarchal families/households, which are not only sites of “intense emotional investments” (a fact universally acknowledged) but also “sites of economic decision making” (605), which have cushioned and supported the

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23 The Parsonian model refers to Parsons and Bales’s famous study from 1955, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, which reinforced early twentieth-century model of a romantic love and marriage, in which woman’s needs were subordinated to that of the man’s. SNAF was first coined by Dorothy E. Smith in her 1993 article “The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an Ideological Code,” published by *The Journal of Family Matters*. Both of these models are functionalist approaches, which can be defined as follows: “The functionalist approach to family holds that mother, father, and children have normative and essentially different roles according to generation (e.g., being a grandparent or parent) and gender (e.g., being a mother or a father, or a daughter or a son)” (Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra, “Feminist Theory and Research on Family Relationships”)
development of capitalism and neoliberalism. What is significant about Peterson’s essay is her decision to use the verb “to queer” in a new context. For instance, the privacy of typical Western families is *queered* through assisted birth technologies and advances in medicine and the international family law. More than that, as non-normative arrangements (not only in terms of sexual orientation and expression, but also in terms of gender roles, division of work and family duties) are becoming more and more popular, “[t]his queering drama is increasingly global… primarily due to processes that link households, markets, and states within a global frame” (607). Thus Peterson moves away from readings in which the heteronormative hegemony is disrupted by families of people who identify as queer and their decisions, for instance, to set up same-sex households and make use of the ARTs (assisted reproductive technologies). I find Peterson’s short essay illuminating, and over the course of this thesis I will be referring to “queer families” in a similar sense. “Queer” will first of all denote the nonnormative nature of family structure, which may or may not coincide with the actual LGBTQ status of its family members. Families can be thus queered not only through a nonnormative sexuality of their members, but also through particular decisions concerning gender roles and gender expression, the number and role of people involved in a given kinship arrangement, age and occupations of family members, chosen technologies of reproductions, and cathetic attachments.

My own working definition of “family” follows inclusive and intersectional feminist approaches in the sense that I seek to question the validity, idealization and predominance of the heteronormative nuclear model in the US. At the same time, I am interested in other family models as well as nonbiolegal kinship structures and romantic relationships.24 My use of “kin” echoes Colleen T. Johnson’s essay in which she defines kinship as extended family, while acknowledging that the very word “family” might refer to many different social units,

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24 See Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra, “Feminist Theory and Research on Family Relationships” for a more detailed review of feminist theoretical approaches to studying families.
including “an ideal view of what the family should be like” (624). This metaphorical usage of the word “family” is especially pertinent in case of my dissertation as the models and familial structures described in the selected novels should be perceived less as mimetic representations of sociological reality, but rather as idealized or imagined types of families that inhabit popular imagination and imaginary socius. However, I remain cognizant of how words such as “idealized” and “imagined” may be misleading in that they imply a reflective relationship between art and life.

I believe that the relationship between reality and literary fiction is not that of correspondence but of virtuality, as defined by Gilles Deleuze in *Bergsonism*: “The virtual… does not have to be realized, but rather actualized; and the rules for actualization are not those of resemblance and limitation, but those of difference or divergence and of creation” (97). The virtual is not opposed to the real, but rather to the actual; it is a form of potentiality that might be realized in the actual. Even though the virtual is not material and tangible, it is real in the sense that it exists (just like a message on a computer screen exists, to use a rather crude example). Similarly, family relations and familial arrangements created on the pages of the sixteen novels which I analyze in this dissertation are virtual.

**Overview: The American Family and Its Horrors**

I have decided to concentrate on a very broadly understood family life in horror fiction, as this seemed to be an area of studies which has been neglected. Apart from a few studies that deal with the issue of communities (Holland-Toll’s *As American as Mom, Baseball, and Apple Pie Constructing Community in Contemporary American Horror*, 2001, Bernice M. Murphy’s *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 2009), specific tropes that

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25 As already mentioned, family life and family concerns appear much more frequently in studies concerned with the Gothic.

It is worth noting that family issues appear most frequently in studies written with a distinctly feminist and/or queer eye. It seems that feminist scholars are, on the whole, more inclined to investigate questions surrounding family life and relationships, questions which, perhaps unsurprisingly, are tightly connected to feminist activism and feminist scholarly concerns such as gender roles (and the attendant discussion of acculturation as well as biological and environmental impact on human development), sexualities and sexual expression, heteronormativity and patriarchal culture, sexual violence and domestic abuse, reproductive rights and technologies of reproduction, femininities and masculinities as well as limits of binary thinking, corporeality and the maternal, parenthood and familial power dynamics, children-parent relationships, same-sex couples and alternative family structures, romantic love and nonbiolegal kinship, intense friendships and support networks, singlehood and female empowerment, struggles with body dysmorphia, depression and low-esteem. All
of these themes and topics are discussed in the sixteen novels selected for this dissertation. Obviously, male writers engage such topics in their fictions too, which is why I need to emphasize that female writers should not be read or interpreted exclusively through familial imagery, which historically has been always associated with women and femininity in the West. That would be a gross oversimplification, indeed.

It might be simply a question of degree and preference. After all, writers tend to write about things which are close to their hearts and which correspond to their experiences, knowledge, personal likes and dislikes. No-one questions the fact that male writers of horror usually write about male protagonists, and so it should come as no surprise that most female writers follow the same pattern and write mostly about women. Out of sixteen novels analyzed herein, only five have male protagonists (a male child in the case of Massie’s *Sineater*). While researching women’s horror fiction, I have read several dozens of novels and hundreds of short stories, and even though I am aware that the works I found may not constitute a conclusive sample, the gender ratio of protagonists was similar to the one presented in this dissertation: around three-quarters of works by women writers had female protagonists. However, the fact that female protagonists appear more frequently in women’s horror fiction and that certain subjects are covered more readily by women writers does not necessarily translate into a different style of writing, one that is somehow more “feminine,” in the culturally encoded sense of being subdued and understated, psychological rather than physical, Gothic rather than horrific, less gory and more emotional. As already mentioned, each writer and his or her work are involved in a much more complex machinic assemblage in which gender is a critical element, but not the only (or the most important) determinant.

One of the main reasons why I decided to focus on family life, in all its glory, bodily messiness and psycho-emotional intricacy, was to see if such topics could be universalized just as easily as the themes of community vs. individual, inner demons or cosmic terror,
question of heroism and social marginality, rites of passage, etc. are unconsciously cast as universal (and almost genderless) in studies that deal with predominantly male writers. I have come to believe that such universalizing gestures cannot and should not be attempted, especially at a moment when fixed gender roles and patriarchal culture are, in fact, doing quite well in the Global North. For this reason, I find it vital to investigate the specificities of life experiences recreated and discussed by women writers, with a special emphasis placed on the protagonists’ inter- and intra-actions with the surrounding world, human and non-human agents, their own bodies and their own selves.

From a more pragmatic point of view, I hope that my work will contribute to the debate concerning the scope and shape of the American canon of horror and Gothic fiction, and, specifically, women writers’ place in it. I have decided to employ, first and foremost, feminist literary criticism, poststructuralist gender and queer theory as well as classic literary theory. In the four chapters that follow I concentrate on selected literary devices and distinct thematic clusters in order to showcase the plurality of critical perspectives, new developments in major theory schools, and the ways in which generic definitions of horror respond to such changes.

The first chapter, concerning haunted houses, focuses on the application of the uncanny in both the Freudian tradition and its various twentieth- and twenty-first-century redefinitions. Because the haunted house trope is so strongly associated with horror fiction, all four novels – Kathe Koja’s *The Cipher* (1991), Nancy Holder’s *Dead in the Water* (1994), Caitlín R. Kiernan’s *The Red Tree* (2009), Poppy Z. Brite’s *Drawing Blood* (1993) – seem to fit the horror definition quite easily. Perhaps one could question only Koja’s *The Cipher*, whose generic affiliation is more difficult to pinpoint due to its unusual setting, characters and (lack of) resolution. But as already mentioned, Koja’s debut novel was the first publication to open Dell’s Abyss line, which in itself speaks volumes about its horrific heritage. And one cannot
overlook the fact that Koja’s *The Cipher* tied in with Melanie Tem’s *Prodigal* for the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel in 1991.

The second chapter investigates monstrous corporeality through the critical lens of the grotesque. Combining the traditional literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Wolfgang Kayser and Brian McElroy with contemporary feminist criticism of Mary Russo and Barbara Creed, I analyze the monstrous and the grotesque, specifically in connection to the maternal and the female/feminized body. In contrast to the previous chapter, all four novels analyzed here – Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* (1989), Caitlin R. Kiernan’s *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* (2012), Elizabeth Massie’s *Sineater* (1992) and Mary Murrey’s *The Inquisitor* (1997) – push the boundaries of what is understood as traditional horror fiction. Of the four novels, Massie’s *Sineater*, fits the conventional definition of horror best because of its critical recognition, as it won the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel in 1992. Murrey’s *The Inquisitor*, which deals with modern-day witchcraft, also fits horror category well because of its gruesome and disturbing subject matter. In contrast, Dunn’s novel, *Geek Love*, although famous in its own right, has always managed to escape any attempts to tie it to a specific genre. The author, who sadly passed away in May 2016, is often included in the “best-of” lists of science-fiction and fantasy writers, horror writers and feminist writers, but each time the question of genre is left unanswered. I have decided to include Dunn’s *Geek Love* for two reasons: first of all, its generic ambiguity is a perfect example of how genres emerge out of reading practices rather than simply out of a critical consensus, and secondly, Dunn’s investigation of female grotesqueries and the abuse of female reproductive bodies within a patriarchal society deserves an in-depth analysis within the framework of horror studies. Similarly to Dunn’s novel, Kiernan’s *The Drowning Girl* is difficult to classify as it does not follow any preconceived horror plots. If anything, it uses metafictional devices to comment on horror narratives and the place of women and their bodies in such tales, which, incidentally, is
precisely the reason for its inclusion in this work. In all probability, Kiernan’s novel could be referred to as dark fantasy rather than horror, but, as already mentioned, such divisions are based on degree rather than actual difference.

In the third chapter I take a closer look at the most (and perhaps least) horrific supernatural creatures associated with horror fiction – the vampires. Even though they began their journey as quintessentially horrifying entities in the early nineteenth century, contemporary vampires have become so romanticized in pop culture that it is difficult to discuss them within horror scholarship.²⁶ Vampires may still be associated with horror narratives, but the majority of today’s vampiric narratives belong to different genres: supernatural teen romance, Young Adult, erotica, dark fiction, urban fantasy, etc. In this chapter I refer to this cultural diffusion of the vampiric as well as the politics of exclusion and abjection, especially in the discussion of Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (1991), a curious novel, which is as much a classic Gothic story as a conscious feminist and lesbian literary project. Apart from Gomez’s work, which I included both for its deliberate political rewriting of vampire narratives and for its chilling effects, the other three novels are Elizabeth Engstrom’s *Black Ambrosia* (1986), Poppy Z. Brite’s *Lost Souls* (1992) and Melanie Tem’s *Prodigal* (1991).²⁷ Even though the level of the macabre and the gory varies wildly in these three novels, they were all published by horror lines, with Brite’s *Lost Souls* nominated for the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel and Tem’s *Prodigal* tying for the same award a year earlier with Koja’s *The Cipher*. Because all four novels, as perhaps all vampire fictions, engage with the issues of nonhuman corporeality, exchange of bodily fluids, body politics and formation of kinship, the critical tool used in this chapter is Julia Kristeva’s abject and its late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century reformulations.

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²⁶ This has led to rather confusing situations, in which I have been asked if my dissertation on women’s horror fiction includes Stephanie Meyer, the author of the *Twilight* series.
²⁷ Melanie Tem passed away in February 2016.
In the last chapter I return to the question of haunting; however, a haunting disengaged from a haunted house and, instead, connected with particular people. Using Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology and the theory emerging from spectrality studies, I analyze Audrey Niffenegger’s *A Fearful Symmetry* (2009), Ania Ahlborn’s *Within These Walls* (2015), Sara Gran’s *Closer* (2003) and Tananarive Due’s *The Between* (1995). Of these four writers only Ahlborn and Due are habitually identified as horror writers by their publishers, reviewers and themselves. Gran and Niffenegger, however, usually work in different generic fields and thus their work is more difficult to categorize. Niffenegger’s novel, for instance, engages most clearly with the Gothic tradition and the Victorian ghost story model. Interestingly, read as a neo-Gothic or dark fantasy novel, *A Fearful Symmetry*, with its elegant cover and big publisher, does not seem to differ so much from, for instance, Tem’s *Prodigal*, a rather subdued novel, which has always been included in the horror genre and was originally published in Dell’s Abyss series. The fourth novel, Gran’s *Closer*, deserves a special mention, as it is the only analyzed work which is heavily laced with humor and irony. Comic relief, elements of pastiche and ironic meta-awareness have accompanied horror narratives for decades, which is why I find it important to include Gran’s scathing satire about modern-day yuppies. Additionally, its horror affiliation becomes clear once the reader realizes it is a gory demonic possession narrative.

These sixteen novels cover almost thirty years of American women’s horror writing with Engstrom’s *Black Ambrosia* (1986) being the oldest, and Ahlborn’s *Within these Walls* (2015) the youngest work. What is remarkable about these three decades is the variety represented by these writers’ literary output and their professional backgrounds. Some are professional horror writers (e.g. Tem, Kiernan), while for others (e.g. Gomez, Dunn) their Gothic/horror novels were one-time events. Some have achieved fame and popularity (e.g. Dunn, Niffenegger), while others have been academically recognized (e.g. Brite, Gomez).
Some are fairly well-known only to horror fans (e.g. Kiernan, Brite, Due), but others have been almost completely forgotten even in horror circles (e.g. Engstrom, Murrey). Most are middle-class (e.g. Due, Koja, Niffenegger), but some are struggling financially as authors (e.g. Kiernan) or have struggled in the past (e.g. Brite). Twelve are white and two are black. At the time I first started thinking about writing this dissertation, Poppy Z. Brite self-identified as transgender. Today, Poppy Z. Brite, the writer, is no longer active, and Billy Martin, the artist (formerly known as Poppy Z. Brite) prefers the male pronouns.28

Since information about these fourteen authors is rather scarce, and sporadic interviews do not help much, I tried to steer clear of relying on the bits and pieces related to their personal lives that I actually managed to find. And yet, even with a rather limited access to these writers’ biographies, it is clear that they represent a very diverse set of horror writers whose professional background ranges from journalism, science, social work, radio and television, to education, arts, and academia. The sixteen novels, which I have selected for analysis and which were written over the last three decades, however dissimilar in themes, topics and styles, all prove the enormous versatility and flexibility of contemporary horror production by women writers; versatility which is sometimes occluded by critical attachment to rigid and exclusionary genre definitions.

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28 I have decided to retain the surname “Brite” and the female pronouns in the discussion of Lost Souls and Drawing Blood for two reasons. First of all, Brite’s early novels formed an important (and critically acknowledged) part of women’s horror writing of the early 1990s, and I did not want to lose that connection. Secondly, as Martin himself admits, he no longer identifies as a writer and feels no connection to the characters he (as Brite) created. See also, http://docbrite.livejournal.com/2010/06/09/
Chapter 1
Uncanny in the House of Fear

Introduction

The haunted house trope, the focus of this chapter, plays a crucial role in the discussion of queer families undertaken by women horror writers, as the uncanny effects of spatiality constructed in such narratives help delineate the disintegrating perimeter of traditional family structures. This theme, however, requires further clarification in view of the fact that in a number of Gothic and horror texts alike a rather fine line separates a classic ghost story from a haunted house one. While selecting works for the present chapter I have decided to consider two arguments: first, the subtle, but palpable, differences between a haunted house tale and ghost story, and second, the symbolic importance of a house for narrative development. All four novels analyzed herein exceed the ramifications of a classic ghost story, as their haunted houses are not merely extensions of malevolent spirits and they either acquire a presence of their own or function as distorted reflections of protagonists’ deteriorating mental states.

It should be underlined that a “haunted house tale” may actually be a misnomer, as it is commonly used to describe both the instances when the house is haunted by a supernatural presence, and when the house itself executes the haunting. A careful reader of Gothic and horror fiction might want to interpose to suggest that, in fact, it may be indeed futile to try to differentiate between the two, because in many cases the thin thread separating the haunting entity from the haunted place snaps all too easily under the weight of baffling events that further complicate the initial distinction. Perhaps a classic piece of horror fiction which exemplifies this taxonomic dilemma is Stephen King’s The Shining (1977) (and Stanley Kubrick’s movie adaptation from 1980), in which the ghosts haunting the Torrence family act
on behalf of the ominous Overlook Hotel, and thus to call *The Shining* a ghost story does not give justice to its plot and its execution.

It is possible to trace haunted house motif’s journey from a mandatory element of classic Gothic fiction to an adornment or even a background component in later texts of the nineteenth-century English literature. Charles Dickens would avail himself of the theme in several of his short stories, and perhaps, most famously, while crafting the eerie and ghastly atmosphere of the Satin House in *Great Expectations* (1861); Charlotte Brontë employed this trope to intensify a sense of unease during Jane Eyre’s stay at Thornfield; and, on a rather lighter note, Jane Austen poked fun at the exploitation of the haunted house motif, as well as Gothic romances, in general, in *Northanger Abbey* (1817). The theme would then reappear in countless ghost stories; usually as another element of a mystery, which revolves around ghosts and specters. On the other side of the ocean, the haunted house motif received a more material treatment, with Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne locating the haunted house at the centre of their most famous works – “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) respectively.

Dave Bailey in his study of haunted house texts, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (1999), argues that both Poe’s and Hawthorne’s works “displace the supernatural focus of the text from the figure of the ghost . . . to the house” (21), thus providing the very first matrix on which future American writers employing the haunted house would rely. In both stories the houses acquire a daunting aura, and come to personify the degradation of generations that currently dwell within their walls. In the Ushers’ residence the corrupting influence might be connected to the siblings’ incestuous desires, whereas in *The House of the Seven Gables* Colonel Pynchon’s spirit seems to be pacing the corridors of his once great mansion, thus reminding his descendants of the collected weight of familial sins. Of course, both Poe and Hawthorne leave the doors open as to the ultimate
interpretation of the events they describe, and suggest rational explanations—unreliable
narrator and Roderick’s mental illness in Poe’s story, and the ancestral guilt which haunts
younger generations in *The House of the Seven Gables* (an idea discussed at length by
Hawthorne in “The Preface” to his Gothic romance).

Commenting on modern haunted house tales such as Robert Marasco’s *Burnt Offerings*
(1973) or Jay Anson’s *The Amityville Horror* (1977), Bailey argues that these have eschewed
the “ontological uncertainty” of their late nineteenth-century predecessors in favor of a more
straightforward embrace of the supernatural (6). Gone is the careful ambivalence that
characterized classic ghost stories such as Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), in
which the satisfactory explanation of events might just as well be psychological or paranormal
in nature. In contrast to traditional ghost stories, in contemporary haunted house narratives
ghosts and specters are either treated perfunctorily or abandoned altogether; it is the semi-
sentient house that comes to the forefront and channels whichever forces that might be at
work. Thus, I would draw a line between a classic genteel ghost story (or a Victorian ghost
story) and a haunted house narrative when either the house takes over the function of the
ghost completely or the house becomes fused with a malevolent spirit to such an extent that it
becomes impossible to disentangle the two.

Since haunted house trope is recognized as one of the earliest Gothic and horror motifs,
a closer look at Gothic spatial arrangements seems a logical step. As already mentioned, the
two early strains of the Gothic—Radcliffian Female Gothic and Lewisite Male Gothic—
describe contrasting plot scenarios, which revolve around protagonists’ relations to and with
the house. In the former, the heroine needs to purify the house of the corrupting influence of
the villain, or, if the house becomes a tyrant’s lair, she needs to escape it in order to establish
her new home elsewhere; whereas in the latter, the house remains out of reach for the fallen
men, who as exiles from the hearth continue to attack what they can no longer claim as their
own (Ellis xiii). It is possible to trace these two early perspectives in later works both in the European and American literature. However, Ellis suggests that in fact “[b]oth the Radcliffian villain and the Lewisite protagonist act out a counterscript in which men rebel against the feminization of the home. But unlike the male heroes of American literature, who go off into the wilderness together to escape the constraints of the female sphere, the English Gothic villains either usurp the castle or try to destroy it from the outside” (xiv).

Ellis reads the Gothic as an unyielding criticism leveled at the separation of spheres, which causes both sexes to struggle and chafe against the constraints imposed on them by social expectations and gender role division. Yet, in the American interpretation of the Gothic, it is man’s conflicting relationship with nature that comes to the fore. Richard Slotkin’s well-known concept of the regeneration through violence serves to shift the emphasis from the household onto the wilderness, where evil forces (of human or inhuman origin) await the solitary male hero. Hence, in Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) the house becomes polluted only after the blasphemous knowledge has been (un)willingly acquired in the woods. In this reading, the contested familial space is supplanted by dangerous liminality of the wilderness, which threatens not only the house (which stands in for civilization) but, above all, the integrity of male identity. Not surprisingly, a host of literary critics perceive this semi-sacred errand into the wilderness (of one’s land and of one’s soul) as the backbone of many foundational myths sustaining and supporting American identity, a highly contentious and rather provisional concept in itself.29

Of course, Ellis’s account, whose sole focus is the European Gothic fiction, cannot provide us with a thorough analysis of its American counterpart. But as Dave Bailey points out, the house conceived as a marker of social status has become a perfect tool for examining the corrupt and ideologically moot concepts underlying American capitalism. The role of the

29 For a detailed analysis of the myth and symbol school of post-war American criticism see Chapter 3 in Reising.
house as a valuable instrument of social criticism can be easily discerned in the works of such disparate writers as J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Charles Brockden Brown, Henry David Thoreau, William Dean Howells, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, Upton Sinclair, Margaret Mitchell, Toni Morrison, and even Robert E. Heinlein (Bailey 8-14). The “symbolically charged houses” verge on the Gothic in the sense that they function as more than mere houses; they are transformed into status symbols, conductors of intense desires and extreme loathing, painful reminders of the by-gone splendor and affluence, and tangible containers filled to the brim with family secrets, grief and loss. Still, it would seem that Bailey overinvests the genre with subversive potential of providing an effective and efficient critique of social reality. As already mentioned in the introductory chapter, it remains contestable whether horror as such can be treated as an innately subversive genre. Horror texts, while undeniably often guilty of breaching literary and social decorum, rarely offer truly in-depth analyses of societal ills. And As Russell J. Reising reminds us, American novels that focus on the awkward triad of the social, the public, and the political have been rarely addressed by the more traditionally-oriented literary critics who, for the most part, prefer fiction that explores inner struggles and personal failings of a (typically) male WASPish ego.

As already discussed, the idea that the house constitutes more than the sum of its parts can be traced back to the Gothic origins of horror fiction, particularly, the importance placed upon the setting perceived in terms of heroine’s hopes (to establish/protect a home) and fears (to escape from a house-turned-prison), or hero’s desire (to usurp a homely space or return to it). Conversely, the social element alluded to by Bailey can be linked to both the bourgeois roots of the Gothic romance (and the novel as such) and to the distinctively American preoccupation with a single-family house, which functions as a status symbol, class marker, and marker of domesticity and/or domestication. Another reading leads us to contemporary
psychoanalytic theories concerning different family plots, symbolic exchange, power relations, and, Freudian pièce de résistance, the uncanny, which, as we shall see, remains closely connected to the middle-class origins of horror.

**The Unhomely House**

In *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* (2008), Jo Collins and John Jervis invoke Martin Jay’s words that the uncanny has become the “master trope” of the 1990s (1). In fact, one could say that the uncanny was (re)discovered by the academia in the last three decades, an argument more fully developed by Anneleen Masschelein in her 2011 study of *Das Unheimliche*. A term proverbially difficult to define, the uncanny resides somewhere between fright and unease, between a fleeting recollection and a lost memory, between an unsuccessful repression and an incomplete reemergence. Considered “an outgrowth of the Burkean sublime, a domesticated version of absolute terror, to be experienced in the comfort of the home” (Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* 3), the uncanny’s original and best-known incarnation is that of haunted space.

The following discussion of the uncanny serves to shed more light on this elusive concept. Firstly, the uncanny can be understood as an essentially bourgeois fear, and because of its link with the middle classes, it is also intrinsically connected with the house, which in turn encompasses a number of middle-class fears and phobias. Secondly, the uncanny can be seen as a bridge linking literature and architecture, or more precisely, Gothic and horror fiction with haunted spaces. This tie proves that the uncanny can be used as a critical tool capable of unearthing family secrets and unraveling mysteries deep within a house (understood as a spatial structure and a family line). Lastly, the uncanny can also signal
Foucauldian heterotopic space, a theme to which I will return at the end of the present chapter.

Since the uncanny has its origin in the concept of a compulsory, but unwanted return, it is crucial to return to the critical birth of the uncanny, that is, Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1919). In the wake of several highly imaginative re-examinations of the uncanny, Freud’s eponymous text has lost some of its founding myth allure, and yet it is still stands as a master-narrative of the uncanny. Freud, obviously, did not invent the uncanny, but being the father of psychoanalytic discourse, he is credited with developing a sub-discourse on the uncanny. In a strictly Freudian sense, the uncanny (Das Unheimlishe) is something that should have remained concealed but returned, or was returned, to the plain of our conscious existence (Freud 944). Freud plays the part of a literary critic who dissects the uncanny by assembling and then examining several examples of events which might evoke or provoke this feeling; he enumerates, among others, castration anxiety, primary narcissism, omnipotence of thought, and repetition compulsion. All things considered, these are either materials repressed during infancy or atavistic beliefs inherited from earlier and more primitive times; therefore, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 930). Interestingly, in Freud’s view, heimlich and unheimlish are not opposites, as the latter does not denote a contrasting notion, but rather something repressed by the prefix un-. According to David Farrell Krell, the prefix un- does not only operate as a marker of repression and concealment, but it also remains “utterly superfluous” in purely semantic terms, as the German “heimlich,” understood primarily as homely and familiar, already encompasses its very negation, namely, secret, hidden and occluded (51). In spite of its own semantic futility, un- comes across as a defining feature of the uncanny by underlining its narrative structure: a move from an incomplete repression to an unfinished materialization.
A similar argument could be extended to fear, which functions as a cornerstone of the uncanny, and without which the uncanny would dissipate into a mere sensation of déjà vu, puzzlement, or surprise. Without the sensation of dread and apprehension, without the fear of things associated with death and darkness (which, in popular understanding, contradict life and light) no horror texts would ever be written, published, and read widely. And yet many readers instinctively seek out texts which scare and unsettle them, thus confirming the inference that themes and plots which seemingly go against the current of everyday life are, in fact, firmly embedded in it, even though they have to be repressed for the sake of people’s mental comfort.

Nicholas Royle in his landmark study of the uncanny elaborates on Freud’s essay, and defines the uncanny as a crisis of that which is deemed proper and natural (1). The uncanny thus becomes “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar” (Royle 1). In his engaging and rather cleverly-devised study, Royle touches upon a number of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in philosophy, arts, as well as literary and cultural theories, all of which partake in the study of uncanny, and continue to expand and update this term to meet the ever-shifting needs and expectations of the academia. The uncanny, thus, turns into a nomadic concept which saturates Marx’s work on alienation, mechanical repetition and, of course, “a specter haunting Europe” (1). It reappears in Derrida’s later analysis of Marx’s works and deconstruction as such (which could be read as uncanny philosophy in itself); the uncanny suffuses Heidegger’s philosophy of being not-at-home (Unzuhause) and of perpetual homelessness as well as Wittgenstein’s fixation on the strangeness of everyday existence.

From a strictly literary perspective, Royle sees Russian formalism and ostranenie, Brecht’s alienation effect, and Todorov’s investigation of the fantastic as all working within the realm of the uncanny. Freud’s “The Uncanny” remains, however, central for Royle.
Leaning heavily on Bloom’s study of canonicity, Royle reads “The Uncanny” as a canonical text precisely because of its uncanniness and strangeness as well as its unceasing ability to surprise successive generations of theorists. Interpreted as an ubiquitous über-theme, the uncanny transforms into an electronic glitch that keeps revealing information that ought to have remained hidden deep within the psychoanalytic field, but which continues to resurface in other domains and other analytic regimes as well.

Terry Castle, for instance, locates the birth of the uncanny long before its apparent discovery by Freud in his 1919 essay (which, somewhat ironically, started out as an re-examination of Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny.”) Castle argues in *Female Thermometer* (1995) that it was, in fact, the eighteenth century that saw the formation of the uncanny in a larger cultural field, as the uncanny constituted a peculiar side-effect accompanying the elevation of reason and rationalism (8). The uncanny, thus, became “a sort of theme-index: an obsessional inventory of eerie fantasies, motifs, and effects, an itemized tropology of the weird” (Castle 4), which provided safe haven for every item rejected or obfuscated by the Age of Reason. Castle contends:

> What I argue here . . . is that the historic Enlightenment internalization of the spectral—the gradual reinterpretation of ghosts and apparitions as hallucinations, or projections of the mind—introduced a new uncanniness into human consciousness itself. The mind became a “world of phantoms” and thinking itself an act of ghost-seeing. Literature allegorized the change: in late eighteenth-century Gothic fiction . . . the self-conscious debunking of stories of ghosts and apparitions coincides with an uncanny “specialization” of human psychology. (17)

The uncanny understood as a by-product of the Enlightenment appears also in Botting’s *Limits of Horror* in which he points to the religious roots of the pre-modern uncanny suggesting that before the Enlightenment the uncanny “had a religious and social place and retained sacred and untouchable associations” (7). The uncanny, as we now know it today, was called into being by modernity, which effectively divorced it from its earlier religious
connotations and facilitated its transformation into a dark, yet inevitable outgrowth of industrial expansion, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the secularization of everyday life. Rosemary Jackson, in her brilliant study of modern fantasy, also refers to a secularization of the uncanny and points to the vacuity associated with the uncanny as expressed in Heidegger’s writing (38): with God’s place remaining empty, an alternative region, that of the uncanny, emerges nearby. Jackson, then, traces Heideggerian notion of the uncanny to Otto Rank’s *Idea of the Holy* (1917), and adds that “[t]hrough secularization, a religious sense of the numinous is transformed and reappears as a sense of the uncanny” (38).

According to these critics, whatever was repressed, cloaked, and lost along the way during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries re-emerged under the guise of the uncanny. In the broadest possible sense it was the sense of the *numinosum* that had to be suppressed in order for rationalism to begin its reign. Thus the supernatural, the weird and the unexplained were relegated to the back-room of the human mind, where they have resided ever since together with unspoken desires, taboos and other “ghostly” manifestations of the numinous and the unconscious. But modernity too manufactured its own hysterical by-products such as an irrational fear of fragmentation, mechanization, and dissolution of the self; a dread of losing certainty of uniqueness, and of losing control over one’s life; a panic concerning new scientific and medical developments that threaten the integrity of the body with invasive and involuntary transformations. Finally, cityscape appeared as a wholly new and frightening space capable of terrorizing urban dwellers through its labyrinthine structure, dark alleys, unsafe districts and off-limits zones, suffocating tiny flats and menacing edifices. This last cluster of fears and anxieties becomes crucial for the discussion of the uncanniness of a (family) house.

Anthony Vidler, whose book-length study of the architectural uncanny remains a classic in the field, sees the uncanny as “a dominant constituent of modern nostalgia, with a
corresponding spatiality that touches all aspects of social life” (x). The uncanny, in Vidler’s formulation, was first associated with fears of the rising bourgeoisie, who did not feel quite at home in their newly-built or freshly-acquired residences. Many of the emerging middle-class anxieties centered on the house precisely because it was the place that reminded the new class of their apparent rootlessness and lack of time-honored family ties, which contrasted sharply with centuries-old aristocratic blood-lines. Moreover, Vidler argues that “[s]pace as threat, as harbinger of the unseen, operates as medical and physical metaphor for all the possible erosions of bourgeois bodily and social well being” (167). Therefore, the ideological underpinnings of transparency and light in architecture (and life in general), which were devised to eliminate secrets, shadows and suspicions, were inevitably complemented by “the invention of a spatial phenomenology of darkness” (Vidler 169).

By the end of the nineteenth century the uncanny was linked to the unprecedented growth of great cities, which were overflowing with ominous ebbing masses, and in which intrusive technological innovations were being aggressively woven into the very fabric of everyday existence. The uncanny was, thus, “disrespectful of class boundaries,” and “was increasingly conflated with metropolitan illness,” and its explicit embodiments such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia, which could assault anyone anywhere at any time (Vidler 6). These two mental disorders, typically associated with urban landscape were first identified in the nineteenth-century Europe following the unrestrained urbanization of the major cities. At the beginning of the twentieth century the uncanny emerged as a discourse utilized in psychology and philosophy to bring closer “a distancing from reality forced by reality” (Vidler 6). As the interior of the house ceased to provide enough space to contain the uncanny, it spread to the interior of the mind, and thus, could be further reflected and sublimated onto the entire city, country, or even world. Consequently, in the wake of two global wars and the Great Depression, the notions of estrangement, homesickness,
homelessness, defamiliarization and exile came to epitomize modern condition for many contemporary philosophers.

Still, even with the modern uncanny spilling over whole streets, neighborhoods and regions, it was the house that has steadfastly remained both the rudimentary holder of the unhomely and the main locus of its manifestations. What is more, in the face of pervasive Heideggerian homelessness of the modern era, an intensified nostalgia for a family house and the homely came to represent human attempts to make sense of the world and to construct new ways of feeling at home. Alex Clunas, following Gaston Bachelard’s seminal work, The Poetics of Space (1958), postulates that houses are, in fact, “places that disclose by enclosing: by setting boundaries, they create perceptual and ontological horizons that allow the figuring forth of the world” (173). Accordingly, houses are akin to literary works in the sense that they too can be read, and they can be used to interpret the surrounding reality. In the words of Mezei and Briganti “[o]ur imagination, our consciousness, needs to locate itself in a particular space, to find a home, to articulate its homelessness, its longing for home, its sickness for home (nostalgia). Thus novels and houses furnish a dwelling place—a spatial construct—that invites the exploration and expression of private and intimate relations and thoughts” (839).

Reading the House in Horror Fiction

Moving away from architectural studies and onto the field of literature, we can see how two middle-class inventions—the novel and the bourgeois family house—were aligned during the ascendancy of the English domestic novel, in which not only the narrative coils around the house, but in which the house itself is quite often gendered female (Mezei and Briganti 837). Essentially, the emphasis on private, at times almost secretive, family life together with the establishment of a child-centered existence for women coincided with the rise of middle-class
and their attachment to neatly-separated public and private spheres (Mezei and Briganti 838-839). Personal space of middle-class families had to be fiercely protected as it was the only anchor in an otherwise hostile urban environment, in which the new class had to fight for social, political and cultural recognition on top of economic survival. The house came to symbolize a refuge both from the Jacobin terror directed at the conspicuously luxurious upper-class mansions, and the infectious grime associated with the lower classes and their miserable dwellings. As Mezei and Briganti argue, a careful reading of middle-class houses along with their interior and exterior network of decorative elements could, thus, reveal a dense “semiotic system that signals status, class, and public display” (840).

The Gothic too helped to seal the relationship between architecture and literature. In fact, the haunted house formula harks back to the earliest examples of Gothic fiction, and more precisely, to the mysterious castles of Otranto and Udolfo through which Horace Walpole and Anne Radcliffe, respectively, established a set of conventions which would reappear in other haunted houses. These houses were not only haunted by the threat of external violence, but also by intimate familial cruelty that could erupt within their walls at any moment. As Susanne Becker in *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (1999) rightly points out, “feminine gothics are haunted houses, not only in the contextual sense of ‘experience’ but also in the intertextual sense of continuation and deconstruction of feminine textuality” (66), which emphasizes the heroine’s relationship with her own corporeality and her mother’s body. Thus, houses in early Gothic fiction frequently function as maternal spaces, dark and winding, uncanny in their associations with womb/tomb (Rubenstein 320). And yet for all the associations with the maternal, “[t]he typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned or somehow abjected” (Bienstock Anolik 25) and cannot offer solace or help to her daughter. Another family plot readily investigated by scholars of the Gothic is “the specter of father-daughter incest,” which coincided with “the emergence of the nuclear family with its
attendant intimacy and privacy” (Mezei and Briganti 841). The despotic father or paternal figure often acts as a guardian of familial past, an usurper who uses secrets to manipulate and control those around him. In this sense, Gothic vestigiality establishes a strong link between ancestral guilt and the house (understood metonymically as a family line or metaphorically as a supposedly safe haven). Third interpretation worth mentioning is that of the biblical Fall, during which the original family unit was, in fact, established. Ellis lists three elements of the Gothic revision of the myth of the Fall: “the subversion of primogeniture expressed in the theme of usurpation, the inadequacy of innocence as a defense against evil, and the validity of female rebellion against and autocratic father” (67). These revisions could be also seen as social critiques of a new family model, emerging slowly during the nineteenth century, which advertised aggressively the need for absolute privacy and strict separation of spheres.

The above-mentioned theme, that of a daughter’s rebellion in the face of consuming patriarchal authority, constitutes a meta-textual element discernible in a number of Gothic works written by women. Often understood as Bloomian “anxiety of influence” or “anxiety of authorship,” and brilliantly discussed in Gilbert and Gubar’s 1979 The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, groundbreaking feminist re-examination of the reception of women’s writing, this form of anxiety challenges literary founding myths and power relations between female and male authors as well as authors and readers. Following Wolstenholme’s tactful repudiation of this concept, I do not intend to explore different aspects of “influence,” “anxiety” or “inheritance” between men and women writers as much as existing intertextual (and metatextual) relationships between works written by female authors and their place in the canon of American horror.30 I am also interested in the scope and efficacy of the guiding metaphor of family with regard to the position of protagonists (both male and female) vis-à-vis patriarchy and other systems of

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30 See also Wolstenholme, xiii.
oppression; specifically, their relation with the (absent/monstrous) mother and the (despotic) father.  

All the themes sketched above originated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction; all relate to family life, middle-class anxieties, power relations within the household and familial plots revolving around sexuality, gender identification and questions of agency and dependency. All of the above are also highlighted in haunted house narratives through (though not exclusively) the elements of the uncanny, which point to secrets and traumas requiring resolution and closure. I have chosen four contemporary novels in which all these motifs are present, although to a different degree. For this reason, the four works are subdivided into two groups in line with the issues they tackle most vividly.

The mother, as the protectoress of the hearth, carries particularly strong connotations in haunted house tales, as she is traditionally burdened with the task of keeping the family together. At the same time, narratives may be formed around her absence or, conversely, destructive presence, and the protagonists may suffer either because there is no mother to help them, or their mother is the one they cannot escape. In Nancy Holder’s Dead in the Water (1995) maternal figures abound, and, consequently, readers encounter a number of protective, guilt-ridden, inadequate, substitute, or openly hostile mothers. Mother-like associations with womb, birth, abjection, and reproduction form the baseline of Kathe Koja’s The Cipher (1991). Koja’s novel follows a male protagonist, but this only adds to the overall defamiliarization of feminine abjection with which the hero is continually equated throughout the novel. Both novels reformulate the foundations of a haunted house by relocating the supernatural to a (ghost) cruise ship and an abandoned tenement flat, respectively. In a sense, both these locales are non-places, inhabited by anonymous, interchangeable people only for

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31 Williams has suggested that the partiality for choosing familial metaphors as basic illustrations of interconnected elements may, in fact, contribute to a certain misconstrued vision of the Gothic. For more information see Williams, The Art of Darkness, 11-12.
short periods of time and easily exchanged for other similarly-looking places.\footnote{Marc Augé in his 1995 book, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, talks about airports, bus terminals or hotels as non-places, that is generic, vaguely interchangeable places that exist outside regular temporality. I stretch Auge’s definition to include Holder’s cruise ship and Koja’s half-abandoned tenement house, as in both places people seem to be transient add-ons and their individual existence in unimportant.} Holder’s and Koja’s protagonists try to ward off their feelings of displacement, homesickness and the uncanny by forging relationships with other people and forming new kinship structures so as to manage their loneliness.

Whereas defamiliarization emerges primarily in connection to spatial arrangements in Holder’s and Koja’s novels, in the discussion of Caitlin R. Kiernan’s The Red Tree (2009) and Poppy Z. Brite’s Drawing Blood (1993), defamiliarization refers, first and foremost, to same-sex desire which effectively questions traditional family units, their calcified structures and justification for continuance. With these two novels we move into the territory of the queer uncanny as formulated by Paulina Palmer in The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic (2012). It should be noted that Palmer’s use of the queer uncanny is much wider than the definition employed in this chapter, as she discusses such themes as queer spectrality, transgender doubles, secrets and their disclosure. On the following pages the queer uncanny will signal primarily a gesture to interrogate normative and exclusive notions of kinship through and by spatial structures. In both Kiernan’s and Brite’s works, the house, which should constitute a safe haven from the outside world, turns into contentious space, dangerous and fraught with anxieties delineating the limits of a conventionally conceived family and a modern-day queer family – a family whose queerness is predicated not only on the sexuality, sexual orientation, or sexual expression of its members, but also on their non-compliance with (hetero)normative social expectations.
**Void Dreams in *Dead in the Water***

Nancy Holder’s winner of the 1994 Bram Stoker Award, *Dead in the Water*, presents us with a reconstituted family, formed ad hoc by complete strangers, who bond quickly on their holiday cruiser, and, after it mysteriously sinks en route to Hawaii, on a ghost-ship, *Pandora*. Donna, a policewoman with an unresolved past trauma, John, an ever-worrying doctor and his terminally-ill son Matt form the basic nuclear unit, while supporting characters act as their extended family: quarrelling *nouveau riche* couple, Phil and Elise Van Buren, are embarrassing distant relatives; an elderly woman, Ruth, becomes a warm granny figure; various crew members are cast as wayward cousins, and there is even one crazy uncle disguised as a hippie cook, Cha-Cha. The haunted house is replaced by a ghost-ship, which welcomes aboard the survivors from the destroyed holiday cruiser. Aply christened *Pandora* by Ruth in a dream, it is a ship sustained by the ghosts of dead captains, crews and passengers who serve Captain Reade in return for temporary oblivion, found in the hallucinations of their past lives. Subsisting in this hellish limbo comes at a high price, and with time they transform into zombie-like slaves, who are forced to cannibalize crews and passengers of other ships in order to satisfy their ravenous hunger.

On *Pandora* it is ghosts’ and passengers’ memories and desires that constitute its building materials. That is why the ship is, in fact, an implausible bricolage of different eras, styles, and fashions. With each new sunken ship and new ghost-slaves, *Pandora* acquires not only new “passengers,” but also new furniture, new trinkets, new rooms, even whole new decks. The accumulation of memorabilia and furnishings mirrors the way ordinary houses collect household objects over the span of several generations. The difference is, however, that in a normal house inhabitants may come and go as they see fit, whereas on *Pandora* they are forced to stay. But the splendor of furniture in the cabins and the brilliance of ballroom
chandeliers give way to horrific glimpses of shattered glass, tattered walls, and dreary decorations. Characters begin to doubt whether they are dead or alive, and whether the ship that has rescued them is, in fact, real: “[Elise] had walked down this same section a dozen times. But she had never noticed — never seen — the royal red carpet, the flocked walls, the elaborate crystal lamps hanging from the ceiling. She had never seen how dirty it was, with cobwebs dripping like diamonds from the teardrop coronas of the fixtures; the green mold on the thick oak baseboards” (228). Such moments clearly engage with the déjà vu and repetition compulsion within the uncanny.

Other times protagonists catch shadowy movements in the corner of their eyes. This, however, invariably happens abseits, tangentially, thus echoing Freud’s uncanny. In these moments Pandora unveils her true visage, albeit only for an instance. Donna’s dream furnishes yet another example of such revelations: “Bobbing and drifting, she swam within the ribs of the ship like something that had peeled away from it. A piece of living tissue, floating inside a prison of rib bones. No, no, the ship wasn’t alive. Its ribs were wood, rotting wood. She narrowed her eyes. Rotting, and impregnated with worms. The ribs were a writhing mass of them” (193). In fact, each of the shipwrecked passengers struggles with his or her own disturbing glimpses of the two illusory realities — one filled with death and decay, and one based on their innermost dreams and needs. Donna is the only one capable of withstanding the siren’s song, at least to a certain extent. Her levelheadedness and apparent immunity to the creature (which granted Reade his immortality and power) position her as both Reade’s object of desire and a possible catalyst for a mutiny aboard Pandora.

Seeing and perceiving the ultimate truth develops into a key theme of the novel. The truth, however, is interspersed throughout the novel and remains concealed in protagonists’ scrambled memories, names and dates alluding to nautical history, diaries, letters, and jumbled stream-of-consciousness fragments. Donna and other passengers’ attempts to read
what is hidden behind the enthralling veneer are constantly thwarted by Captain Reade and his crew. Readers too find it hard to reconstruct the whole story, as frequent changes of focalization convey confusing and incomplete messages, and the story ends on a rather ambiguous note, never explaining which of the novel’s final events took place, and which might have been falsely implanted by Reade. *Pandora* becomes a perfect vehicle for the uncanny, where every object, person, and name, though eerily familiar, is simultaneously alien and treacherous. Even the memories turn out to be unreliable, as they constantly evolve and transform in keeping with Reade’s agenda.

Ontological uncertainty which underpins the uncanny is also linked to what Samuel Weber calls “a crisis of perception and of phenomenality, but concomitantly with a mortal danger to the subject” (1131). But while emphasizing the importance of perception, Weber does not connect the act of seeing with castration complex the way Freud did in his work. Instead Weber points to a curious feature of the uncanny which rests on the “desire to penetrate, discover and ultimately to conserve the integrity of perception: perceiver and perceived, the wholeness of the body, the power of vision,” which in turn hints at a basic gesture of rejection of things which are “almost-nothing,” of figures glimpsed only *abseits* and for a fleeting moment (1132-1133). Such a denial, Weber tells us, presupposes a certain kind of narrative which perpetuates this repudiation (1131). Horror fiction employs this tactic customarily in that the narrative refuses to succumb to final knowledge, and delays the moment of comprehension. In the case of *Dead in the Water*, the delayed cognition concerns Captain Reade’s past crimes, his inconceivable pact with a mythological being, Scylla, and the knowledge regarding the creature herself.

Scylla emerges rather late in the novel and remains a deliberately indeterminate character till the very end: “[s]he was a gray, floating mass, like silvery clouds, like lumpy fog; pieces reached at him like shaking eager hands. Sometimes they were tentacles, and
sometimes they were pincers, and sometimes they were fingers” (389). Her body continues to alternate between different forms, as she is forced into the position of a scorned human female, an unforgiving witch, and a horrifying sea-monster; all at the same time. Scylla reunites two easily recognizable female topoi – that of the monstrous feminine and a goddess. On the one hand, her mythological origin (together with the descriptions of her tentacled limbs and pincers) confirm her status as a monster and an archaic mother.33 On the other hand, her identity as a god-like, all-powerful supernatural creature longing for love/worship places her on the side of the sacrum, where, as Jane M. Ussher rightly points out, “fantasies of the divine feminine [can be celebrated] . . . driving all notions of monstrosity aside” (2). Ussher also suggests that the place of an idealized, smoothed-out and hallowed womanhood is a dangerous one, as “the woman positioned there has to remain perfect, in order to avoid falling into the position of monster incarnate” (3). Scylla, however, oscillates between the two images, fusing her lovers’ fears and desires, inviting the male gaze and obliterating it in the same single gesture.

While Scylla acts as the vengeful, but mostly absent, maternal figure, it is Captain Reade, who moves to the forefront as a despotic patriarChapter. The reconstituted family of shipwrecked passengers is destroyed one by one by this angry father figure. Reade was originally a captain condemned to death by his own crew in 1797, after sexually abusing and killing a cabin boy in order “to do his witchery.”34 The frightened crew sets him adrift and throws dead cabin boy’s head in his boat. Days pass, and Reade eats the head; dies, and then sells his soul to a mysterious female power from within the ocean—a mythical creature Scylla, who used to be a beautiful woman but was turned into a blood-curdling monster by the gods. Reade’s madness ultimately betrays Seylla, as at some point he refuses to feed her and be her companion. Instead he traps her deep within the bowels of Pandora, where ironically,

33 Both archetypes are discussed in detail by Barbara Creed in The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (1993).
34 Holder, Dead in the Water, 135.
she is locked inside a metal box. But because her power runs through Reade, and by extension through *Pandora*, Scylla constitutes a part of their shared creation – their ghostly mismatched ship. Enraged by her companion’s betrayal, Scylla calls to Cha-Cha, a Vietnam-vet-turned-hippie, who eventually takes Reade’s place as her new lover/tool/captain. It is then revealed that it was Scylla the Mad Mother who orchestrated the events leading to her escape and change of lovers rather than Reade.

Writing within the tradition of American sea Gothic (Crow 45), Holder portrays the waters as another frontier, an uncanny space where the unknown has to be faced and demons have to be fought. The womblike associations with safety of the ship and calmness of the sea are erased through the figure of Scylla who stands for the destructiveness of female power and female desire. Although she lives in the water, which is said to be the beginning of all life, she does not give life, but devours it frantically. In a strictly psychoanalytic view, her offensive body, made of fog, tentacles, teeth and human hands, is the uncanny sight/site of female genitalia, from which the male gaze wants to escape and to which it wants to return. In a more contemporary reading, which draws from Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque and its subsequent feminist reformulations, hers is the female grotesque body, repulsive and monstrous, fecund and open to intrusions, abjected but also elevated in the carnivalesque spirit through connotations of reversed power and sovereignty. More than that, Scylla’s hybrid body with its leakiness, open-endedness, and the constant threat of contamination belongs to the lower order of things, as it literally resides at the bottom of the sea.

In this familial melodrama the quarrelling parents (Captain Reade and Scylla) fight over their house (*Pandora*) and their children (the shipwrecked family). They want the newcomers to feed and sustain them, the way children are supposed to take care of their elderly parents. In this sense the story told is that of toxic relations within a family, in which separated parents compete for their children’s attention and sustenance. Incidentally, the only way to remain on
*Pandora* in a state of blissful reverie is through eating new passengers’ flesh and devouring their dreams. Cannibalism, thus, stands for incestuous relations, as it basically translates into a metaphorical consummation of the flesh of people within one household in order to perpetuate familial relations in an unchanged form. In the end only Donna and one more crew member manage to escape the collapsing *Pandora*, whose hybrid structure begin to resemble that of Scylla: “[h]er hull was a pastiche of metal vessels from which wooden masts and bowsprits extended helter-skelter like spears stuck in a carcass; a propeller at least a story tall; half a steamboat paddlewheel, the wheelhouse of a tug” (399). Others are lulled or forced into staying. They cannot leave the familiar space of their relived memories in order to (re)create their own familial space elsewhere, and thus are turned into living-dead monsters feeding of one another in a grotesque houseboat of illusions.

This short-lived alternative patch-work family disintegrates rapidly not only because of Reade and Scylla’s mind games, but because passengers’ repressed fears and desires resurface with double force aboard *Pandora*. And *Pandora* just like any other quintessential haunted house is alive, and acts not only as Scylla’s corporeal double, but most importantly, as an embodiment of its dwellers’ deepest fears and yearnings. John does not believe in either his son’s recovery from cancer or a potential relationship with Donna, and ultimately succumbs to despair and death; Elise and Phil plunge deeper into a caricature of a dysfunctional couple locked in passive-aggressive scenarios; Ruth cannot let go of her dead husband and move on with her life; Donna carries with her a trauma of not being able to save a drowning boy, a memory which also makes her afraid to act upon her feelings for Glenn, her police partner. The uncanny properties of the ghost ship – its architectural hybridity, ontological indeterminacy, and instability, as well as a fusion of memories, dreams, and nightmares that *Pandora* stimulates – mark the fissures in its structure as a family house. The uncanny functions in Holder’s novel as an indicator of secrets and traumas within a family; traumas in
which protagonists are unable to cope with death and mourning, and which effectively rule out the possibility of establishing new families or repairing the existing ones.

Back on land, Glenn (Donna’s police partner) finally leaves his wife and children for Donna. But when his wife and kids die in a freak pool accident, and Scylla’s insidious presence is confirmed, Donna decides to leave Glenn and face Scylla in order to protect him. Whether Cha-Cha is not able to soothe Scylla’s pain, or Scylla has been irreversibly tainted by the centuries spent with the mentally unstable captain, or whether the proverbial Pandora’s box has been ripped apart by the events aboard the ghost ship, is no longer relevant. And even though it is clearly suggested that longing for a man’s love is the driving force behind Scylla’s actions, men’s influence on Scylla is, in fact, minimal. And the forthcoming final confrontation, suggested on the very last page, will take place between two women fighting for an end to their shared loneliness. Solidarity and mutual understanding are unfeasible.

Let us return to the conceptualization of space aboard Pandora. Protagonists constantly tread out of rotting sea depths and onto lavishly decorated decks of a picture-perfect holiday cruiser. Their sense of surroundings is warped; their sensory modalities – visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile – are perverted as they move in and out of their fantasies and nightmarish visions. Such a disorienting and unsettling space brings to mind centuries-long fascination with horror vacui. Panic caused by recurring sensations of icy-cold water, visions of impenetrable darkness, and death by drowning suggests dread of spaces devoid of boundaries and clearly-defined end. Baroque architects tried to alleviate this fear by filling empty space with infinite number of spirals, mirrors, and mind-teasing ornaments. In a similar manner, Pandora is filled with a plethora of eye-catching knick-knacks, rarities, curiosa and gadgets that are supposed to take the passengers’ mind off the engulfing dark waters. However, baroque space, or any space cramped with stunning trinkets and optical illusions for that
matter, offers ultimately only a reflection of a paranoid, irrational and splintered self that finds no solace and no comfort in architectural cornucopia.

The example of baroque space implies that there are places that cause people to experience actual physical or mental discomfort, psychosis even. Though this paradox is quite often reflected in real-life architecture, especially, in postmodern designs and the modernist “l’espace indicible,” it is in horror fiction that we can encounter its finest manifestations. As already mentioned, haunted house narratives differ from traditional ghost stories in that the house, as it were, perpetrates the haunting, and either becomes an extension of some hostile supernatural creature(s), or, even more strikingly, the house itself functions as a malevolent being. And while Holder’s Dead in the Water exemplifies the former type, Kathe Koja’s Cipher leans towards the latter type, and presents us with structurally impossible space – an architectural and emotional void – which can neither be explained nor appeased.

Unhomely Funhole in The Cipher

Kathe Koja’s debut novel goes against conventional mechanisms of horror fiction by eschewing a number of typical approaches to plot structure, style and characterization. First of all, The Cipher does not offer a traditional discovery plot outline with clearly-defined antagonists and monstrous figures. According to Noel Carroll’s classic horror formula, human curiosity and morbid fascination with “cognitively threatening” monsters function as raison d’être for all horrors. Therefore, almost all horror narratives (both literary and cinematic) pass through similarly engendered stages: onset, discovery, confirmation and confrontation (Carroll 34, 16). Carroll thus proposes a theory based on narrative curiosity and quest for discovery: “The disclosure of the existence of the horrific being and of its properties is the

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central source of pleasure in the genre; once that process of revelation is consummated, we remain inquisitive about whether such a creature can be successfully confronted, and that narrative question sees us through to the end of the story” (184). But speculative fiction novels, in the vein of Koja’s early horror works, often challenge Carroll’s theory by discarding the need for explanations and linear progression from the very start.

In his brilliant article on The Cipher, Steven Shaviro situates Koja’s novel in the tradition of the New Weird (following Jeff VanderMeer’s insightful analysis).\(^{36}\) In Shaviro’s view Koja’s work frustrates horror fans’ expectations on several levels: readers cannot easily cast the novel in terms of a struggle between good and evil, there is no Freudian “return of the repressed” and there are no secrets waiting to be revealed, the novel does not yield itself to an allegorical reading, and, finally, no catharsis awaits the patient reader at the end. Shaviro’s work is one of very few academic analyses of Koja’s horror output and he expounds the affective nature of the novel with a special emphasis placed on the sense of smell in a very perceptive and convincing manner. Still, disallowing potential social interpretations seems a bit hasty, as even Shaviro himself notes the obsessively individualistic nature of all the characters, which he attributes to the 1980s neoconservative and neoliberal climate. The fact that the characters “narcissistically shrink into themselves, because any broader engagement with the world would put them in danger” (Shaviro 215) does not necessarily preclude readings in which their narcissism, self-imposed exile and alienation from social networks are all parts of a bigger picture. Somewhat similarly, one could argue that Koja does not forgo the uncanny (and the return of the repressed), as Shaviro suggests, but rather knowingly engages with the modern understanding of the uncanny, which encompasses not only defamiliarization and homely/unhomely dichotomy, but also homesickness, estrangement, and economic precarity.

The main protagonist and first-person narrator of *The Cipher*, Nicholas, together with his on-and-off girlfriend, Nakota, stumble upon an abandoned room, in which Nakota notices a strange-smelling and sinister-looking hole in one of the walls. The Funhole, as Nakota christens it, belies the organic/inorganic distinction and constitutes an ontological impossibility – a non/presence, a pulsating intensity, a living blackness, which, after all, is simply an absence of other colors. Almost immediately Nakota sets forth to experiment with the Funhole. Her fascination is the driving force behind each test, each attempt to engage the Funhole, with Nicholas remaining involved only to the extent of keeping Nakota happy. When her obsession escalates and she becomes frustrated by Nicholas’s lack of enthusiasm, she leaves him in search of find more pliable and eager followers. The novel ends with a series of inexplicable events, in which Nicholas finally succumbs to Nakota’s wishes to explore the dark potentialities of the Funhole.

Throughout the novel Nakota instigates, both directly and indirectly, various experiments with the Funhole, but these tests represent a quest for thrills and desire for transformation rather than a need to quench cognitive unease that the Funhole triggers. Nakota is less interested in understanding the Funhole than in witnessing its power and ultimately undergoing some form of materialist conversion herself. The Funhole becomes a quintessential uncanny site bridging gaps between different orders (organic/inorganic, dead/alive, human/non-human), and thus offering its followers a macabre carnival of radical transfigurations. Boundaries between death and life are suspended, when a severed hand is animated briefly inside the Funhole. Inorganic matter, such as Randy’s sculptures and Malcolm’s death mask, come to life near the Funhole. The line between human and animal is crossed, when Nicholas shoves Malcolm’s head into the hole, and half of Malcolm’s face turns into a viperfish monstrosity. The distinction between oneself and Other is also questioned, when Nicholas accidentally places his hand in the Funhole, and, as a result,
develops his own miniature Funhole on his right palm. Finally, during the last session with
the Funhole, Nicholas is able move his hands freely through closed doors, thus crossing last
physical barriers between himself and the un/reality of the Funhole.

What is perhaps most unusual about Koja’s narrative is the fact that protagonists readily
accept Funhole’s existence instead of questioning its origins or even viability. Arguably, their
offhand manner might be a consequence of their being exposed to a reality in which clear-cut
distinctions between organicism and inorganicism crumpled in the wake of radical medical
interventions, and profound cybernization of life. Vidler states that “the body, itself invaded
and reshaped by technology, invades and permeates the space outside, even as this space takes
on dimensions that themselves confuse the inner and the outer, visually, mentally, and
physically” (The Architectural Uncanny 147). From this perspective, the Funhole becomes a
manifestation of organic matter’s vengeful assault on the inanimate matter, which challenges
various spatial and environmental divisions, but which, at the same time, does not surprise
Koja’s blasé protagonists.

The questions of Funhole’s origins, substance or meaning are never openly addressed.
The Funhole is simply described as “that negative place” (4). Alternatively, its connections
with darkness are emphasized: “Black. Not darkness, not the absence of light but living black.
Maybe a foot in diameter, maybe a little more. Pure black and the sense of pulsation,
especially when you looked at it too closely, the sense of something not living but alive, not
even something but some—process” (3). For Nakota the Funhole stands for “an avenue to
change. To transcursion” (292). For Nicholas, however, the Funhole comes to represent
merely emptiness: “a negativity, and absence, a lack. A depression, that’s what a hole was, no
matter how dark and lively, no matter how ultimately full” (138). At some point it is revealed
that Nicholas functions as a conduit, a catalyst. Without him there is no Funhole, only an
ordinary hole in just another decrepit flat. It is Nicholas who “activates” the Funhole, and for
that Nakota resents with the fire of a thousand suns. She believes she should be the one endowed with whatever the Funhole has to offer, because in sharp contrast to the ever-passive and apathetic Nicholas, she actually welcomes and appreciates the prospect of a transformation: “We all know it’s me who should be in there . . . I’m a perfect candidate for a change. A becoming” (339). But when the Funhole finally lets Nakota into the locked room, Nicholas inadvertently kills her trying to save her from getting into the hole. Nicholas knows that “for her there would be no transformations, no ultimate transcursion to fulfillment: she was just another insect, just another fucking bug” (352).

As the novel ends, Nicholas’s body gets coated in a gooey substance flowing from his stigmatized hand. He readies himself for the final experiment – entering the Funhole: “I was becoming a process . . . But to become your disease? To become the consumption itself” (323)? In the last sentences of the novel, Nicholas hints that the Funhole may be, in fact, a physical representation of his own personal void. He muses dispassionately: “what if it is me? What if somehow I’m crawling blind and headfirst into my own sick heart, the void made manifest and disguised as hellhole, to roil in the aching stink of my own emptiness forever” (355)? Even though this particular reading is neither particularly favored nor repudiated, it is the only hint of an explanation that readers receive over the course of the entire novel.

Conversely, earlier in the novel Koja plants a suggestion of a monster, which appears in a video tape made by Nakota by lowering a video camera into the Funhole. Still, the continuously transforming record reveals only “the ecstatic prance of self-evisceration, a figure carving itself, re-created in a harsh new form from what seemed to be its own hot guts, becoming no figure at all but the absence of one, a cookie-cutter shape and in but not contained by its outline a blackness, a vortex of nothing” (56). The non-figure frightens Nicholas even more than the Funhole itself, yet he averts his eyes seconds before the black silhouette turns to face the camera. Interestingly, at a later point in the narrative other
characters begin to glimpse Nicholas on tape, as if he was already present in the Funhole un/reality. Nicholas, though, continues to see the same terrifying non-entity engulfed in nothingness.

Dread of nothingness and *horror vacui* are intimately linked with the idea of exploring the abyss and looking for its unattainable borders. The Funhole, presented as an abyss incarnate, inspires both panic and desire by projecting images of hell and heaven, by suggesting unnatural configurations, and by inviting penetrative gaze into itself. That Nicholas has a cheap reproduction of Hieronim Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* hanging in his otherwise depersonalized flat functions as a sardonic counterpoint to the “delights” offered by the Funhole. The sexual nature of the Funhole is likewise stressed in a number of episodes in which Nicholas either masturbates or has sex with Nakota next to the Funhole. In one of the more disturbing episodes in the novel, Nakota, still in the initial phase of experiments, puts a living mouse into the hole. The rodent explodes leaving only a foot and mutated head, which oddly excites the two, and when they finally have sex in Nicholas’s apartment, they use the mouse head for fondling and kissing. But the head is only a stand-in for the third participant, the Funhole, which in Nicholas’s “fleshy dreams” becomes a vagina-like organ (29). Thus Nicholas’s happiness at his reunion with Nakota is short-lived, as he sullenly realizes post factum that they were not fucking each other, but the Funhole.

As already mentioned, the emptiness of the Funhole is mirrored figuratively through Nicholas’s own self. After an aborted suicide attempt, Nicholas dwells on his own cowardice and worthlessness: “It’s so easy to be nothing. It requires very little thought or afterthought” (121). The nothingness professed by Nicholas may account for his unique relationship with the Funhole, as the way he accepts everything life throws at him and the manner in which he floats with the current of his mundane existence make him a perfect receptacle for whatever negativity the Funhole might bring him. He becomes the only truly reliable disciple of the
Funhole who will not turn away or escape, as he years no enlightenment or secret wisdom the way Nakota, Malcolm, and other Funhole devotees do. And even though others eagerly declare readiness for the ultimate sacrifice, their offerings are tainted by a burning desire to be transformed or to gain something from the Funhole, be it fame, knowledge, or nirvana.

Words used so far to describe people gathered around the Funhole – followers, devotees, disciples – suggest a certain sectarian model. And this is precisely the mode of choice for almost all the relationships in *The Cipher*. It is no secret that religious sects resort to a language grounded in familial terms, and words such as brothers, sisters, children, parents, fathers and mothers are used to cloak a wide range of abuses and mistreatments. In *The Cipher* the miraculous Funhole functions as a temple around which a number of power relations are formed, and just like in a typical sect, the vast majority of these are either toxic or bogus. While Nicholas reluctantly plays the part of a prophet and a stigmatic, Nakota appoints herself a high priestess, brings in new accolades, and finally forms her own alternative clique. In this dysfunctional family, Nakota seems to be calling the main shots, and by dispensing attention and sexual favors manipulates Malcolm and Nicholas. On the one hand, it is possible to construe Nakota as a typical femme fatale: self-absorbed, egoistic and manipulative, while the other two female characters – Nora and Vanese – are cast in the roles of nurturing maternal figures. On the other hand, however, Nakota’s cruelty, fierceness and her pronounced disregard for things culturally constructed as feminine (i.e. clothing, intensive body care, makeup) might suggest a curious reversal of traditionally-defined gender roles in horror fiction. This becomes even clearer when we contrast her “unfeminine” behavior with Nicholas’s utter passivity, which is culturally coded feminine in Western societies. Nakota, instead of remaining a submissive female victim, takes the lead and pushes the narrative forward, whereas Nicholas accepts his fate almost without a murmur up until the very end. It is only when the Funhole physically abuses, taunts and pushes Nicholas to a breaking point
that he attempts to save Nakota. Still, he can “save” Nakota from the Funhole only by killing her in the process.

Even though Nicholas is the key to the Funhole, it is Nakota who seems to be the key to the story. Strangely enough, very little is actually revealed about her. The excess of names she goes by – Jane, Nakota and Shrike – suggest a multi-faceted personality to which Nicholas has only a limited and, by definition, an incomplete access. Nicholas’s first-person narration presents her as a jarred presence, “a leech” and “a queen of heat and brutal desire, of everything crooked and twisted and wrong” (269, 342). Her greedy desperate fixation on the Funhole, her jealousy and insensitivity are all Nicholas’s descriptions. Nakota is unable to counter them, as her voice is muffled throughout the narrative. And yet he loves her more than anything and is willing to assume some sort of responsibility for the Funhole just so that he can keep an eye on Nakota and her followers.

Their self-destructive, toxic relationship stands in sharp contrast to that of Randy and Vanese. Even though the other couple come from a similar background as failed artists with dead-end jobs, somehow they manage to make their relationship work. Nicholas admits that even their flat has “a home look to it” with pictures of friends, Randy’s art, decorations and old “friendly furniture” (277), which is something he will never have. At one point in the narrative, Nicholas half-jokingly, half-teasingly asks Vanese to be his mother, because she worries so much about his well-being and about the whole mess that he has inadvertently caused. A part of him seems to long for solace and support, but, on the whole, he is disinclined to reach out to anyone. The only person he asks for help, or, to be more precise, a return of a favor, is Nora, an old acquaintance, at whose place he crashes for a few days while contemplating suicide. In the end, he is unable to end his life just like his unable to let go of Nakota. As maternal figures, Nora and Vanese prove that being in a relationship does not have to hurt. In contrast, Nakota frankly declares that “[i]f it doesn’t hurt, you’re not doing it
right” (146), thus presenting a sadistic-masochistic vision of love. The epigraph by Ben Hecht, “Love is a hole in the heart” (356), links the Funhole and its attendant horrors with the pain and misery of being in a relationship. The dread of inner emptiness, which plagues Nicholas, and the fear of unspeakable becomings, which the Funhole represents, speak to Nicholas’s incapability of developing and committing to a relationship. He is afraid of not being able to offer anything substantial, but he is also terrified of being changed and transformed by what happens when he looks into the hole in his heart, which the Funhole might actually mirror. Ultimately, the only way out is through.

It is also worth noting that instead of middle-class protagonists, whose very banality makes them easy to identify with, Koja creates characters subsisting on the fringes of society; self-avowed outcasts living in poetic squalor, constantly scrambling for money to buy food, beer, and cigarettes. Yet judging by their education and less-than-obvious art references thrown about, they must have benefitted from middle-class privileges at some point in their lives, and they are now living in poverty by choice rather than out of necessity. The fact that Koja’s protagonists are members of self-styled white underclass (comprising alternative artists and art groupies) changes the way the uncanny operates in The Cipher. No longer a type of unease and anxiety associated with the bourgeois house, the uncanny surrounding the Funhole points to the homesickness and homelessness associated with modern human condition. Thus a cozy middle-class haunted house turns into an abandoned storage unit in a decrepit tenement building, while a traditional family unit haunted by Gothic vestigiality is replaced by unlikable individuals dogged by their own inadequacies, nihilism, and emptiness.

The choice of social outcasts and disaffected youth as protagonists has often placed Koja’s early fiction alongside Poppy Z. Brite’s horror works. Both authors were, in fact, lauded as the best female voices of a short-lived splatter-punk movement in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s they were joined by Caitlin R. Kiernan, dark fantasy/horror writer, whose
elegant prose also revolves around outsiders, aspiring artists, and angsty jouth. Similarly to Koja’s novel, both Brite’s *Drawing Blood* (1993) and Kiernan’s *The Red Tree* (2009) follow characters who do not really fit, and who are trying to eke out an existence outside normative systems and middle-class expectations of propriety. In contrast to *The Cipher*, however, both novels deal with non-heteronormative desires and make use of what has become known in recent years as the queer uncanny.

**The Queer (Uncanny) Desire in *Drawing Blood***

Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: Literature of Subversion* argues that the works of the fantastic form a “literature of desire,” which “represent[s] dissatisfaction and frustration with a cultural order which deflects or defeats desire, yet refuse to have recourse to compensatory, transcendental other-worlds” (176, 178). It seems only fitting then that narratives of queer desire, which in contrast to heteronormative desire is not only deflected, but also forcibly removed from the cultural field, have flourished in fantastic genres and fantastic elements of otherwise realist texts. Still, as Jackson reminds us, the modern fantastic “replace[s] familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich*, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny,” and hence, exhibits an evident penchant for the Gothic and the horrific” (175). Thus works that combine queer desire with the fantastic quite often fall into the category of speculative fiction, horror, Gothic and fantasy.

In her study of the queer uncanny, Paulina Palmer argues compellingly that since the uncanny is never witnessed directly, but rather tangentially, and since it explores the interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar, as well as the homely and the secretive, it is a perfect tool to investigate experiences of queer subjects living in a heteronormative society, who are often forced to tackle issues of (dis)closure, identification, monstrosity, and normalcy on a daily
basis. She cites Sarah Ahmed’s work on queer phenomenology and the “slantwise” relation a queer-identified person bears towards heteronormative society as well as their need to constantly renegotiate the categories of the known and the unknown (3, 5). Following Jackson’s definition of the uncanny as an agent of unveiling and rediscovering anxieties rendered invisible in a cultural field, Palmer points to the questions of invisibility, transgression and excess represented by queer experience. Another important aspect mentioned by Palmer is the spectralization of the homosexual, a question discussed at length in the ground-breaking essay collection, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay theories*, edited by Diana Fuss in 1991, and in Terry Castle’s book-length study of “the apparitional lesbian” from 1993. From a classic phallogocentric perspective, associations activated by the figures of a gay man and a lesbian woman point to disorder, threat of contamination, and menacing excess. Palmer argues that the uncanny, understood precisely as “a signifier of excess,” is able to “uncover the unfamiliar beneath the familiar and, by challenging the conventional view of reality as unitary, to prompt the subject to question mainstream, ‘common-sense’ versions of it” (7).

Further examples of the queer uncanny provided by Palmer include doubling, performance, mimicry, all of which are frequently used by queer theorists to explore parodic commentaries offered by queer community on heterosexual relations and identifications. Other themes underpinning both the uncanny and queer life include uncertainty and ambiguity. Out of all these examples there emerge a number of commonalities between Gothic or horror narratives of the uncanny and the expressly queer take on the uncanny.37 However, in contrast to earlier literary analyses of homosexual and queer desire in well-known Gothic and horror works, Palmer is not interested in unearthing possible queer desire.

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37 For more on the links between the Gothic and homosexual desire see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).
readings of canonical texts, especially when they are in no way explicitly concerned with a homosexual, lesbian or, more generally, queer desire.

In a similar vein, I would like to concentrate on contemporary works which include queer characters and which openly address the issue of queer desire and its destabilizing effect on a traditionally defined white middle-class American family rather than on works in which the said desire, homosociality or homoeroticism have to be disclosed via a queer reading. As already mentioned in relation to Koja’s *The Cipher*, many protagonists of contemporary horror works by women writers subsist on the borders of social acceptability, with many living precariously outside the bourgeois parameter altogether. It would seem that the inclusion of non-middle-class protagonists should be fairly unproblematic for horror fiction writers who, after all, constantly cross boundaries of literary decorum, as they flatly reject realist limitations of fiction, introduce taboo subjects, and immerse their readers in frequently graphic, sometimes obscene, and always disturbing imagery. It is also worth remembering that contemporary horror fiction has not managed to completely shed the stigma of lower-grade literature (despite its meteoric rise to popularity and limited critical acclaim in the 1970s and 1980s), which partly explains why leeway accorded to horror authors seems to be much wider than for realist writers. Still, the likes of Stephen King, Dean Koontz or Peter Straub doggedly continue to concentrate their literary efforts on creating likable middle-class characters living in perfectly plausible middle-class and mostly white neighborhoods. Horror fiction with protagonists from non-middle-class strata, with people of color and non-straight characters remains a rarity on best-selling lists, even though it emerges more and more often in women’s horror fiction.

Of course, mere inclusion of non-normative characters does not automatically translate into less predictable plots or more pronounced break with horror conventions. Certain culturally approved values and lifestyle expectations do trickle down (and travel up).
Accordingly, the majority of horror works revolving around lower-classes, the unemployed, the under-employed, various modern-day vagabonds and other self-styled outsiders, do in fact retain a number of middle-class fixtures, only some of which may be challenged or queered along the way. Hence the importance of staying in a monogamous relationship, of establishing a family, of finding a safe space that could be called home.⁵⁸

In Poppy Z. Brite’s novel *Drawing Blood*, the haunted house is the narrative center of the entire story, and the novel begins and ends with main hero’s – a young illustrator Trevor – journey to a dilapidated house in the town of Missing Mile. It is a house in which his mother and little brother were butchered by Trevor’s father, Bobby, who afterwards committed suicide, leaving Trevor the only survivor. Twenty odd years later, Trevor ends up with Zach, a hacker on the run, and a child from an abusive household too. It is their first serious relationship, although Zach, in contrast to Trevor, has already been involved with a number of lovers in New Orleans, his home town. The question of being gay or homosexual is not, however, addressed, as neither them nor their newfound friends in Missing Mile seem to be interested in labeling their relationship. Trevor and Zach create their own alternative family unit, not because they are linked by their sexuality, but because this is the only family they were able to establish in the face of their traumatic pasts.

The abandoned run-down house Trevor revisits two decades after the original tragedy is virtually seeped in the uncanny: impenetrable shadows, rusty bloody stains, eerie green light from the overgrown plants. Brite employs several stock Gothic motifs, such as Bobby’s ghost in the bathroom where he hanged himself, or the fact that electricity is still working, even after all these years. In one particularly blood-curdling moment, the house literally presents Trevor with the very hammer his father used to kill his mother and brother. In another instance, the house makes Trevor change the comic story he has been developing. The story

⁵⁸ Of course, there are novels which break with the middle-class conventions and expectations in their entirety, the best example being Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), a love story of two men, psychopathic serial killers, and their gory path to self-annihilation.
he wanted to do on jazz musicians, Charlie Bird Parker and Brown, ends in a gory bloodbath though Trevor envisaged the original ending in a much more subdued and understated way. Later, the house rips his Bird and Brown’s story to pieces, but Trevor approaches this situation with profound calm: “Birdland gave it to me. What can I say if it wants it back” (203)? And when a similar story is mysteriously sent in Trevor’s name to a comic books publisher, Trevor suspects it to be another of Birdland’s manipulations.

The house becomes a portal to a different reality, called Birdland (named after one of Charlie Bird Parker’s songs), which was first depicted by his father, a famous counter-culture comic book artist, and later by Trevor himself. Its phantasmagoric sets and characters are taken from the sketches and comic books of the two artists, father and son. Birdland functions a stand-in for the house, but it is also presented as the rotten source of the evil dwelling in the house. Through hallucinogenic mushrooms and hardcore sex Trevor is able to slip into the perverted reality of Birdland, where he ultimately finds the house as it was twenty years ago, and talks with Bobby asking him why he killed his family, and, more importantly, why he chose to spare his older son. It seems that this giant time-loop, in which Trevor at the age of twenty-five is also the ghost that visited his father twenty years earlier, is what saved Trevor, the five-year-old child, in the beginning. However, after confronting the past and talking with his father, Trevor decides to repeat his father’s deeds and murder Zach in order to solve the irresistible “puzzle of the flesh” that once so mesmerized Bobby (323). As an artist, he feels obligated to explore Zach’s totality by breaking it apart: “I just want to know how you're made,’ Trevor breathed in his ear. ‘I love you so much, ZaChapter I want to climb inside you. I want to taste your brain. I want to feel your heart beating in my hands’” (326).

The events in the house remind Zach of a computer program which loops endlessly: “He’s taking me to his hell, Zach thought, and he's going to eat me there, he's going to rip me apart looking for the magic inside me, and he won't find it. Then he'll fulfill
the condition of the loop, he'll kill himself. What a stupid program” (328). From a critical standpoint, such a loop might be read as a transgenerational haunting, a phrase coined by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their studies on the transmission of the Holocaust trauma between generations. A concept based on the return of the repressed posits that secret knowledge is unwittingly passed down to others, and might be hidden in, what Abraham and Torok call, the crypt, which stands for “a psychic space fashioned to wall in unbearable experiences, memories, or secrets” (Schwab 78). Birdland functions precisely as such a family crypt, a supernatural manifestation of a psychological trauma, to which Trevor, as his father’s son and successor, has an ancestral claim. Thus, the haunted house operates as a site of a violent return of repressed knowledge. And the vision of the uncanny is at its strongest when it signals the onset of a transgenerational haunting. This haunting commences the very moment Trevor realizes that Bobby drugged him with Seconal, so that he would sleep through his family’s murder and his father’s subsequent suicide. The question that exasperates Trevor is whether it was done because his father did not love him enough to take him to Birdland with him, or because he loved him too much. Or whether as a fellow artist Bobby wanted Trevor to relive the trauma, and maybe to comprehend it one day, and then duplicate the murder-suicide.

The uncanny in Drawing Blood emanates also from the repetition compulsion, which can be distinguished on several levels of the narrative. First of all, Trevor follows in his father’s footsteps career-wise, and compulsively draws the same characters his father once created. Secondly, he relives the traumatic events by re-reading coroner’s reports of his parents’ and brother’s autopsies and by re-drawing their massacred bodies time and again. Thirdly, Trevor returns to Missing Mile for the twentieth anniversary of the murder-suicide, and moves into the rundown house, where blood-stained mattresses and bloodied walls are constant reminders of the morbid events. Finally, Trevor comes extremely close to
succumbing to a compulsion to acquire the same secret knowledge of a loved one’s body that his father was after twenty years before. Trevor feels this urge swelling inside him from the moment he meets ZaChapter. And when Trevor accidentally hits Zach, he fears that he may not be able to stop hitting him because “the softness of Zach’s lips spreading and splitting open against his hand felt so damn good” (205, original emphasis). And though the repetition compulsion should override the pleasure principle, in Trevor’s case the two seem to be intertwined, just as they were for his father.

Another uncanny component of Drawing Blood is art, which functions as a distorted imitation of life. Comic-book drawings acquire uncanny overtones as they gradually take over Trevor’s life. On the one hand, his artwork is firmly rooted in the actual world, as his original Bird and Brown’s story would indicate. On the other hand, however, his drawings grow steadily alienated from reality, and the closer he gets to Missing Mile and his family house, the darker and more visceral his art becomes. Art is described as an uncontrollable and treacherous force, which Trevor manages to overcome only at the last possible moment. Ultimately, he fights the temptation to equate Zach with mere physicality which can be studied, dissected, and then artistically re-created. In a way he also resists Birdland which, as his father’s ghost explains, is merely “a machine oiled with the blood of artists” (325). Trevor’s final gesture – the breaking of his right hand – symbolizes his rejection of the transgenerational haunting passed to him by his father. The addiction to drawing and the talent he supposedly inherited from his father are countered by the choice Trevor makes to spend the rest of his life discovering Zach’s wholeness slowly and respectfully.

Birdland, which stands not only for the uncanny house itself but also for uncanny art of two generations of artists, exemplifies Weber’s definition of Das Unheimlishe understood as a crisis of perception. The creatures populating black-and-white streets of Birdland are two-dimensional cartoon characters, while Birdland’s spatial arrangements defy laws of physics
effortlessly. Additionally, Birdland posits danger to Trevor’s identity, as it threatens to turn him into Bobby, a failed artist, a murderous husband, and a negligent father. After all, Bobby turned against his family, when his artistic abilities seemingly dissipated and he suffered from a prolonged artist’s block. Unable to take care of them or himself, Bobby decided to breach his beloved ones’ liminal borders in order to learn how they operate, the way their hearts beat, the way their blood flows. Only after killing them he was finally able to sketch his wife, tracing every broken bone and every wound he crafted with a hammer. Predictably, Trevor exhibits obsessive-compulsive need to draw all the time, as he associates inability to draw with his father’s descent into madness.

Poppy Z. Brite (who at the time of writing and publishing *Drawing Blood* still identified as a woman writer) composed a classic haunted house tale albeit with a distinctly queer twist. By juxtaposing images of uncanny haunted house with queer desire, which is culturally marked as strange, alarming and uncanny, Brite effectively collapses the distinctions between positive and negative connotations of the two concepts. A haunted house is depicted as a somewhat disturbing, but still blatantly romantic backdrop for a homonormative love story of redemption and forgiveness. Uncanny space, previously literally covered in blood and darkness, is thus reclaimed and redeemed by Trevor and Zach, who come to represent a living example of the goodness that queer desire has to offer.

The centrality of a conventional family (a nuclear family) is challenged by queer desire, which functions not only as a destabilizing agent, but also as a counterweight to traditional family ethos, and, in Brite’s fiction, also as its visibly better and healthier alternative. Brite contrasts several alternative families with a traditional family model represented by Trevor’s and Zach’s dysfunctional parental homes. Apart from Trevor and Zach, Brite introduces Eddy and Dougal, Zach’s friends from New Orleans, who come to Missing Mile to warn Zach and help him escape. An extended family of both straight and gay teenagers is shown gathering at
a local music shop and in Sacred Yew, Missing Mile’s rock pub, where young outsiders are not only welcomed but also frequently helped out by an older generation of hippies and ex-members of counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. All of these groups come together to help Zach and Trevor escape Missing Mile, and not even once do they stop to question each other’s intentions or to inquire further into the whole situation. In fact, in a somewhat naïve and idealistic gesture, everyone who is not a federal agent tracking Zach is portrayed either as an open-minded queer or as a liberal straight, without any exceptions.

Similarly to Brite’s *Lost Souls* (1992), which is discussed in the third chapter, the universe of *Drawing Blood* is populated almost exclusively by androgynous men, disenchanted youngsters, teenagers on the run (often escaping their oppressive middle-class homes). Almost every one of them is white, the notable exception being Eddy, an Asian-American female stripper hopelessly in love with Zach. Curiously, the only other important person of color is Charlie “Bird” Parker, whom Trevor and his father draw in their comic books, simultaneously displaying acute understanding of the 1930s and 1940s systemic racism. Still, one cannot escape a feeling of certain jarring artificiality in how Brite constructs her literary worlds. They all seem insular and insulated, geared towards a very specific demographic – white Goth kids from comfortable middle-class backgrounds, who will hungrily list all the music references and who will appreciate gender-fluid masculinity, teen angst and subversive sexual expression, if not identity.

Arguably, the naiveté of Brite’s representation of queer desire and the exclusively positive aspects of the queer uncanny she underscored in *Drawing Blood* have been rarely reflected in later works by other women writers, whose novels include lesbian and queer characters. The best example is Caitlín R. Kiernan’s 2009 *The Red Tree*, which is also one of her most-accomplished works to date. The main difference between the two authors’ novels is the range of diversity accorded to the main characters. In Brite’s novel the two protagonists
are rather simplistically portrayed as two fragile and traumatized boys who even while being haunted by their inner-most demons are easy to sympathize and empathize with. Kiernan’s first-person narrator, Sarah Crowe, might inspire some degree of pity and sympathy, but her snappiness and bitterness, coupled with little cruelties she inflicts on others, and her inability to muffle the “paranoid woman” inside her head, who thwarts Sarah’s meager attempts to establish stable relations with other women, make Sarah a much less obvious, and much more complex and better-formed character than any of Brite’s creations.

**Madness of The Red Tree**

The fact that queer fiction of the last decade has become less apologetic and less interested in affirming identity politics has been seen as a welcome change and a sign of literary maturity in terms of self-perception. In all likelihood, Kiernan’s Sarah Crowe would not appear in early 1990s queer fiction, when the communities were not only fighting for recognition and acceptance, but were also confronting a whole cluster of damaging stereotypes and misconceptions. In a somewhat improved cultural climate (though arguably still far from perfect), Kiernan was able to publish a deeply personal text which reworks a haunted house narrative in order to highlight the questions of intertextuality of horror, uncanny art and lesbian (queer) desire.

Bearing an uncanny, but unmistakable, resemblance to Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), Kiernan’s *The Red Tree* is an account of a mysterious manuscript and of a haunted house infamous for its architecturally unfeasible interior. Sarah Crowe, a despondent fiction writer, leaves Atlanta after her lover’s, Amanda’s, suicide, and moves into an old house called the Wight Farm in rural Rhode Island. There she discovers an unfinished manuscript written by the house's former tenant, a folklorist and anthropologist, who grew
obsessed with an ancient red oak growing merely 75 yards from the back door. When another tenant, Constance Hopkins (a painter) moves into the attic, Sarah’s grasp on reality begins to slowly unravel. With a series of inexplicable events both inside and outside the house, Sarah finds it increasingly difficult to concentrate on a long-overdue novel, to cope with Constance’s shifting moods, and, most importantly, to deal with unresolved guilt over her lover’s death and her part in the events leading to it. It should be also noted that the novel begins with Sarah’s editor’s affidavit in which she describes her visit to the house and the red tree. The editor cannot, however, confirm any other details concerning Sarah’s stay there, not even the presence (or lack) of another tenant during that fateful summer. And as the editor did not have the key at the time of her visit to the Wight house, she was unable to prove or disprove the existence of an impossibly large man-made cavern in the basement that Sarah claimed to have found. Readers only learn that Sarah’s journal is being published posthumously, and that it was mysteriously sent to the editor a month after Sarah’s funeral. The manner and exact circumstances of her death are not revealed at any point, but the editor does refer to Sarah’s manuscript as “the pages of a suicide’s long ordeal and confession,” and mentions “a coroner’s inquest ruled [Sarah’s] death to be a suicide” (6, 14), thus suggesting that Sarah killed herself the same way the previous tenant, the folklorist, did couple of years before.

The novel’s intricate *mise en abyme* structure is reflected on several thematic and narrative levels, clarification and elaboration of which unfortunately exceed the spatial limits of the present chapter. Suffice it to say, Sarah’s experiences with the tree, the house and the manuscript can be interwoven in several different ways. In a more rational reading, everything that happens to Sarah after she discovers Charles Harvey’s manuscript is a reflection of her nervous breakdown, which could have been triggered by her unspecified chronic neurological disorder and Amanda’s suicide. In this reading, Constance, too, becomes a figment of Sarah’s
imagination, an amalgamation of Amanda’s ghost and a Californian painter, Bettina Hirsh (whose story was included in Harvey’s manuscript). Such an interpretation is supported by the fact that when Sarah enters Constance’s attic for the last time, she finds it completely empty and showing with no signs of anyone having been there in months. Of course, since the real Constance Hopkins refused to talk with the editor, the question whether Constance was there or not cannot be answered with any certainty. What is more, in this interpretation Sarah’s frequent nightmares function both as echoes of past events and reinventions of myths and anecdotes she reads about the house and the tree during the day. Lastly, Amanda’s work as a photographer/manipulation artist exploring the dark recesses of the human mind is translated into images of lycanthropes and assorted were-beasts gathering round the tree for cannibalistic orgies and human sacrifices.

The in-house references to memories and dreams are constantly rehashed and reformulated, thus making it impossible to differentiate between visions of the past, hallucinations, elaborate metaphors and pure fiction. Small details accumulate hinting that Sarah might be the only “real” character of Kiernan’s novel, and all the other people mentioned by Sarah are just reflections of her own self, her guilt, and her love-hate relationship with Amanda. For instance, Constance acts as Sarah’s guilty conscience by coming back to the subject of Amanda’s death, even though Sarah flatly refuses to talk about it, and, additionally, in Sarah’s nightmares Constance and Amanda merge into one figure. Constance might be also a ghost or a spectral projection of Bettina Hirsh, whose suicide led her fiancé to murder several young women and bury their heads around the red oak in the 1920s, according to Charles Harvey’s unfinished manuscript. Bettina killed herself in California, but kept haunting the red tree in her fiancé’s nightmarish visions, whereas Constance, a New England native, came to the Wight Farm after a short stay in California. At one point Sarah finds Constance’s canvases signed “B.Hirsh.”
Sarah’s own ghost story from her childhood keeps coming back to her in distorted visions – an image of a naked black-haired woman drowning silently in a pitch-black pool. Another inexplicable piece of the puzzle is Sarah’s a memory of a film fragment she saw the very night Amanda overdosed. In the half-remembered, half-dreamt scene a woman in a window is watching another woman sitting in a tire swing hung from a large tree. And even though the woman standing in the window loves the other one, she does not warn her about a creature slowly moving towards her which in Sarah’s mind resembled “a bear, a wolf, a dog, and a man crawling forward on his hands and knees” (359). It is possible to read this painful memory, which stayed on with Sarah to remind her of Amanda’s last moments, as a suggestion, an acorn from which the entire red tree madness sprouts when Sarah moves to the Wight Farm.

In fact, Sarah’s journal could be an elaborate fabrication, her own way of dealing with the unspeakable – the responsibility for Amanda’s suicide. In a telling fragment near the end, she admits to having embellished her account of Constance/Amanda dream:

I can’t begin to fathom why I bothered to add so much embellishment to what little I could truly remember. Half of it - at least half - is simply made up. I understand why I once fabricated dreams for an insistent therapist, but why bother here? I can’t even say that I was lying to myself. I knew full well what I was doing when I did it. My best excuse would be to claim that it was some sort of defense mechanism kicking in, that I was falling back on the old habit of storytelling as a means of keeping myself calm or giving voice to fear, something of the sort. (353-354)

This might suggest that Sarah’s haunted house tale was in fact her slow and meandering way of coming to terms with what happened, and facing the events that led to Amanda’s death. It is only at the very end that readers learn the particulars of Amanda and Sarah’s relationship, and Sarah is finally able to give the account of their final quarrel. Amanda’s harsh words

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39 Incidentally, Constance hair is jet-black.
seem to be precisely what Sarah wanted to escape: “I do not even know who you are, Sarah. You write, but you hate writing. And then you blame everything and everyone around you because writing is all you have . . . . [Y]ou never let a day go by that you don’t remind me and the whole damn world how utterly miserable you are, and how you expect us all to be miserable right along with you” (357). Early on, in one of her first nightmares in the Wight house, Sarah ponders the way Amanda’s ghost participates in the creation of the twisted creatures in her dream: “Perhaps, even, Amanda’s song has somehow created them, weaving them into being from nothingness. Or no, not from nothingness, but fashioning them from the fabric of my own fear and remorse and guilt” (38). But Sarah is also aware of her own complicity, and she suggests that the “abominable things” that surround Amanda in her dream and which are ready to rip her to pieces may be “only shards of me, stalking towards her in the gloom” (37-38). Thus Sarah continues to punish herself on behalf of Amanda for pushing her lover away, for not giving her what Amanda needed, for not being the person that would have saved Amanda. In this reading, the haunted house acts as a catalyst for the grieving process, as it forces Sarah to finally mourn Amanda. And yet Sarah is unable to let go of her guilt, which is why instead of establishing a relationship with Constance or moving back to Atlanta, she chooses to follow the white rabbit.

In a different reading, however, Sarah does not lose sanity over her part in Amanda’s suicide. Nor does she create an elaborate fantastical tale to avoid dealing with her failed relationship and painful past. Her choice of this particular house seems no longer accidental. Everything in Sarah’s life, including Amanda’s suicide and Amanda’s uncanny artwork, has led her to the Wight Farm where she is confronted with an ancient female power. In Harvey’s manuscript the “stories of murder, witchcraft, lycanthropy, cannibalism, and a miscellany of other unpleasantries” revolving around the oak and the house date back to the early eighteenth century (76). Still, Harvey managed to unearth even earlier references concerning Native
American deity called Hobbamock, a creature alternatively referred to as “divil” (sic) and God, which was somehow connected to the tree and altar-like stone next to it (115). On two separate occasions Sarah experiences the uncanniness of the red tree: “I felt, with sickening conviction, I was gazing through or around a mask, that I was being allowed to do so that I might at last be made privy to this grand charade . . . . I saw wickedness dressed up like a tree, and I had very little doubt that it saw me, as well” (158). After seeing a rabbit’s mutilated body left near the tree as a sacrifice, which she suspects is of Constance’s doing, she realizes that “the insects and the maggots . . . were also there to serve the tree, in a cycle of life and death and rebirth that I could only dimly comprehend” (305). When all elements are pieced together, however haphazard the end-result might seem, the tree emerges as an ancient monstrous being and a portal to a different reality. In Sarah’s final nightmare Constance/Amanda suggests to her that the oak is a goddess-like entity; she even hints at Hydra, a creature from Greek mythology. Constance/Amanda also intimates that the tree is “a door, Sarah. And like all doors, it tends to swing open, and so care must be taken to mind the hinges and the latch. It must be kept locked, and someone has to keep the keys” (339).

In this dream Sarah brings Harvey’s manuscript as an offering to the red oak, and is thus allowed to take part in devilish bacchanalia.

The densely distributed references to both American and European histories, mythologies, legends, folklore, movies and classic works of fiction reveal an exquisitely woven web of metatextuality. And the third and final reading points precisely to this metatextual quality of Kiernan’s text. The Red Tree is literally overflowing with references to other authors and works, most prominently perhaps, to H.P. Lovecraft’s New England-based horror tradition. Some of the references give the impression of minute literary homages, whereas others appear to be sarcastic comments on the repeatability and ubiquity of stock motifs, themes and images in fantasy and horror fiction. For instance, in a brazenly tongue-in-
cheek moment, while discussing their failed attempt to reach the oak to have a picnic there, Sarah and Constance come up with a selection of references to cultural texts concerning picnics because, as Sarah admits, “we had to resort to fictional metaphors and parallels because we were both too goddammed scared to talk about the thing straight-on” (145). References in the whole novel cover a wide range of visual and literary arts, from Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* to Tim Burton’s *Sleepy Hollow*; from the Bible to a Czech abstract painter František Kupka; from Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* to Thoreau’s *Walden*. Lewis Carroll’s Alice is referenced several times, which in a novel about secret burrows, beastly creatures and dream sequences is hardly surprising.

The horror clichés surrounding haunted house scenarios are pretty obvious to Sarah, as she mockingly recites them near the end:

I suspect that I could probably torch the house without getting much more than a stern ‘thank you’ letter from Blanchard. Isn’t that how these haunted-house stories usually end, with a purification by fire? Isn’t that the handy old cliché? I didn’t telephone anyone. I didn’t drive away. I’m not going to burn the house down and sow the charred ground with salt. And I’m not going after the tree with a chain saw or a hatchet or a can of gasoline. The worst I am capable of is following Virginia Woolf’s example and filling my pockets with stones before walking into the local equivalent of the River Ouse. (342)

Ultimately, Sarah opts for the latter. Before heading once more to the tree, she addresses her dead lover directly: “I’m very tired, Amanda, and I need to rest” (363). Readers are left to speculate if the suicide that followed took place near the tree, and whether it was suicide at all.

Apart from citing and revising other authors’ works, Sarah keeps returning to her own texts. In a short story, “Pony,” which she cannot remember having written, she revisits her failed relationship with Amanda. The epilogue, which the editor saw as a fitting commentary on the whole journal, is a fragment from Sarah’s earlier novel, in which a client tries to
wriggle out of telling the prostitute a story she promised her, because the story “doesn’t make a great deal of sense . . . . It’s filled with loose ends, and has no shortage of contradictions. It shows no regard whatsoever for anyone’s need of resolution” (365). In the end, the client consents and begins telling the prostitute a story about a fictional painter called Albert Perrault. Incidentally, the same painter’s works are included in Kiernan’s next novel, *The Drowning Girl*. What is more, Sarah’s “Pony” was published by Kiernan in 2006, long before she even began working on the red tree novel, which she mentions in the “Author’s note.” Another story, “The Ammonite Violin,” which is discussed as Sarah’s work is Kiernan’s original work from 2007, and a title story of her 2010 short story anthology. Thus the intratextual references keep emerging both on the intra- and extradiegetic levels.

The most disquieting reference, one which cannot be inferred directly from the novel, but which can be found in Kiernan’s web-based journals and blogs, is the one concerning Kiernan’s ex-partner, Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge, who committed suicide in the late 1990s, and to whom Kiernan has dedicated a number of novels, including *The Red Tree*. In a novel in which the narrator is a middle-aged lesbian and a surrealist fiction writer dealing with her lover’s suicide, the autobiographical allusions cannot be dismissed easily. Besides, Sarah admits early in her journal that “the short stories and novels [are] only scraps of me coughed up and disguised as fiction, autobiography tarted up and disguised as figment and reveries” (Kiernan 39).

The massive web of allusions, direct quotations and subtle revisions both within and outside Sarah’s journal suggest that in its core *The Red Tree* is a novel about repetition compulsion and unacknowledged trauma that keeps on re-emerging. Notwithstanding various possible interpretations of Sarah’s journal, selected events and characters do recur in all the readings. Amanda keeps reappearing both in fiction and in reality, in dreams and in memories,

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in the figure of Constance, and in Sarah’s fears. Events similar to those experienced by Sarah and Constance are described in Harvey’s three-century-long history of the Wight Farm. Finally, Sarah repeats her failed relationship with Amanda through her short-lived affair with Constance, and then follows in Harvey’s footsteps and commits suicide on the Wight Farm, presumably in the vicinity of the red oak.

On the other hand, however, the same web of cultural references might suggest that the repetition compulsion works in *The Red Tree* in a different way too. Repetition becomes divorced from specific events, and instead becomes attached to the performative aspect of all horror fiction. Thus the events are repeated not because Sarah’s psychological blueprint demands so, but because fiction as such requires specific narrative events to take place so that a given text can fulfill generic expectations. Kiernan appears to be saying that the uncanniness of all weird tales, to borrow S.T. Joshi’s preferred term, comes from the fact that they repeat the same stories, over and over again. For Sarah, and maybe for Kiernan too, there is no escape from returning to the same events and reliving them in fiction. The uncanny signals then not so much the return of the repressed but the return of the inevitable. If we accept Sarah’s confession about her propensity to hide in fiction, to lie and embellish her narratives, we must also accept the fact that in fashioning a haunted house tale she finds some sort of consolation. Even if the house does not give her peace, the writing about it might. Therefore, the uncanny becomes a tool of both exorcising and mourning the past – past understood as both an autobiographical account of a writer’s life and a never-ending conversation with previous generations of writers.

As already mentioned, Kiernan’s novel examines not only the inherent intertextuality of horror fiction, but also art understood as a medium for queer desire. Three characters, Amanda, Constance and Bettina, are artists working in the field of visual arts, and their works deal with the representation of the impossible. Whether the latter two are just aspects or
projections of Amanda seems irrelevant, as it is Amanda’s works that receive the most attention anyway. In a vivid description Sarah recalls the “impossible creatures engaged in unspeakable acts” that Amanda’s photoshop manipulations reveal. She goes on to enumerate:

centaurs and satyrs, dryads, a host of dragons and merfolk, Siamese twins, men and women so completely undressed that every muscle, every tendon, was clearly visible. There were were-wolves, wereleopards, weretigers engaged in acts of feeding and copulation, and sometimes both at once. There were women tattooed from head to toe, endless debaucheries of fairies and trolls and goblins, genderless beings and hermaphrodites, alabaster-skinned vampires, and rotting zombies. Women with the serrate teeth of sharks and men with blind, toothsome eels where their cocks should have been. There were unnamable masses of tentacles and polyps and eyes, escapees from a Lovecraft story or a John Carpenter film, their human elements all but obscured. (54-55)

The somewhat longish fragment is relevant for several reasons. First of all, after seeing all these images Sarah becomes sexually aroused and has sex with Amanda for the first time. Queerness and strangeness of the images are thus equated with lesbianism, which, as Sarah jokingly admits, she was raised to view as deviancy. Secondly, by associating unnatural desires and impossible bodily arrangements with lesbianism, the fragment also functions as an ironic commentary on a culturally inscribed homophobia and the ease with which LGBTQQ characters were (and still are) represented as monstrous figures in visual and literary arts. At the same time Amanda’s disturbing art attempts to recover queerness from its negative associations. Sarah feels that these images are, in fact, “sublime, grotesque, and beautiful” (54). In Sarah’s nightmares Amanda turns into one of the creatures from her own montages and later invites Sarah to participate in a hellish feast around the red oak. One might only guess if this is the true reason why Sarah kills herself; to join Amanda in the dance macabre with other creatures of the night.

One could see The Red Tree as a confession of Sarah’s failed attempts to set up and maintain an alternative family unit, but perhaps even most importantly it is a novel about
coming to terms with the death of a family member. In this sense Kiernan works with the concept of queer widowhood, that is coping with the kind of grief which is not structurally or institutionally supported and is often culturally ignored and/or suppressed. The queer uncanny functions as a vehicle for reworking the past and moving away from clear-cut linearity, especially in a situation where mourning process is blocked and cannot be resolved. As she is not able to move forward and leave her grief behind, Sarah re-remembers and re-creates the past out of her own memories, dreams, visions as well as other people’s stories and art works. The uncanny in Kiernan’s novel, once again divested of its original bourgeois ties, signals, first and foremost, inability to deal with trauma and to cope with death in the family. Repetition and reenactment of the past brings no solace. Instead it turns into a vicious circle of self-recrimination, guilt, and burning need for absolution.

Conclusion

Kiernan’s novel is a story of Sarah’s failed relationship, but also of her ultimate attempt to atone for her mistakes. Similarly, the theme of coming to terms with unsuccessful familial relations and searching for ways to amend them appears both in Holder’s Dead in the Water and Koja’s The Cipher. Only in Brite’s Drawing Blood, a new family is not only established, but it also emerges stronger than ever out of the harrowing ordeal in the haunted house. Nevertheless, Brite’s novel could also be seen as the weakest of the four works discussed in this chapter because of its rather naïve presentation of alternative communities and the relative ease with which queer desire expunges evil and restores peace.

Still, all four novels present interesting reinterpretations of the haunted house formula, in which the haunted familial space becomes a center stage for a tug-of-war competition.

41 See, for instance, Lykke, “Queer Widowhood,” (2016).
between the old and the new kinship structures. Traditional distribution of power and prescribed gender roles within a classic nuclear family unit clash with alternative forms of relationships which embrace patch-work families, extended families, lesbian and gay couples, and couples whose viability is problematized by outside forces such as adverse economic conditions. The uncanny emerges as a tool **par excellence** to examine the condition of modern families as it reveals familial/familiar secrets and points out fears associated with establishing and sustaining family life.

Inability to let go of the past and to resist transgenerational hauntings surfaces as the biggest obstacle to forming and sustaining new relationships. The former refers to specific acts of personal failures: Donna’s unsuccessful attempt to save a drowning boy, Sarah’s guilt over Amanda’s death, Nicholas’s sorrow at not being good enough for Nakota. The latter might refer to parental negligence and abuse, as in Zach’s and Trevor’s cases, but it can also refer to a broader generational helplessness in the face of persisting models of behavior and social expectations.

The uncanny, whose critical career began as an essentially bourgeois fear of the proverbial barbarians at the gate, has grown to encompass the fear of the recesses of the human psyche as well as fear of personal failure, which can be also understood in terms of a financial breakdown. A common theme in haunted house novels (and movies), families moving into dilapidated houses or suspiciously cheap houses cannot leave them once the trouble starts, because their finances cannot sustain another move. Sarah cannot afford treatment of her neurological disorder, while Nicholas cannot escape his impoverished state, which renders them passive and depression-prone. Lacking the safety net of middle-class financial comfort, Trevor, Zach, Nicholas, and Sarah are unable to shrug off transgenerational haunting through expensive therapy. Still, it is not a mere coincidence that so many contemporary haunted houses narratives center upon dilapidated ex-middle-class houses or
rundown working-class flats. In fact, should we follow the premise that modern architecture is becoming increasingly uncanny, we can notice how the contemporary family home unveils “the repressed truth concerning the alienating results of private ownership” (Lewis and Cho 69). The middle class has become its own worst enemy, as middle-class aspirations and expectations have become unsustainable in a new reality. The four novels show how obsolete images of a perfect family life continue to thwart a number of protagonists’ attempts to establish new families and to escape haunted familial space.

It should be emphasized, however, that haunted familial space is doubly difficult to escape. On the one hand, protagonists have to deal with their own baggage of family secrets, social expectations, guilt and personal failures, and the fears of the new and the unknown. On the other hand, Gothic space is distinguished by its peculiar character, and the difficulties it poses for those who cross its borders. Manuel Aguirre cites three common models of the configuration of the Gothic (or Gothicized) space, which comprise the labyrinth, the concentric journey and *mise en abyme* (20). In all of the discussed novels these arrangements are employed: the labyrinthine structures appear in Birdland and at the Wight Farm, the *mise en abyme* can be found in *The Red Tree* and *The Cipher*, and the concentric journeys takes place aboard *Pandora* and in Kiernan’s novel. What is more, Aguirre reminds us that many works consistently and consciously break with the balanced pattern of entering and leaving the two realms. That is, it is much easier to penetrate the irrational sphere than to escape it. This asymmetry is also underlined by the fact that the Other (which stands for the numinosum) colonizes the seemingly safe province of human understanding (Aguirre, “Geometria strachu” 23). In this asymmetry, Gothic space reveals its propensity towards anisotropy, thanks to which internal Gothic geography acquires different spatial characteristics, measurements even, depending on the perspective adopted by the protagonists. This device is quite readily employed by contemporary horror writers, most characteristically
perhaps in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*. Similarly, Kathe Koja in *The Cipher* and Poppy Z. Brite in *Drawing Blood* also utilize this technique. In the former, the Funhole seems to spread indefinitely, even though the actual wall measurements cannot allow it, whereas in the latter a whole new level of reality opens up within Trevor’s house. Anisotropic space also emerges in the picnic episode of *The Red Tree*, in which the two women fail to reach the oak.

The colonization of the non-Gothic reality by the numinous is also linked with the concept of spillage and contagion. Agnieszka Izdebska points to the ease with which the homely space can be invaded, and can be thus robbed of its familial connotations (34). The hazardous spillage of the fantastic transforms an ordinary space into a heterotopia, a “counter-site;” a real space that nonetheless remains outside the order of things (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 24). According to Foucault, both heterotopia and utopia display a “curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24). Whereas utopias are “fundamentally unreal spaces” and “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down,” heterotopias are real and can be found in prisons, cemeteries, or on board ships. Interestingly, the admission to a heterotopic space is either obligatory (as in prison or a mental institution), or restricted through rituals, purifications and specific gestures.

In this understanding, haunted houses are heterotopias par excellence. A specific set of rituals or gestures marks each entry to heterotopia; characters need to find certain objects or perform certain actions in order to cross into such spaces. For instance, Ruth has to christen the ghost ship by first breaking Reade’s champagne bottle; Sarah needs to cross a literal threshold in the basement, and Zach needs copious amounts of drugs and caffeine to follow Trevor into Birdland. And escaping these heterotopias proves to be much more difficult than entering them, as it happens with all haunted houses. Lastly, in all four works haunted houses
are real spaces in the sense that protagonists may die and suffer physical harm while living inside them. And most importantly, haunted houses as heterotopias function as uncanny spaces of the Other, where traumas, secrets, fears and anxieties come to the surface and threaten both the individual self and the kinship structures that have formed within these walls.
Chapter 2

Grotesque Aesthetics:
Monsters and Hybrid Subjectivities

Introduction

If we agree that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* marks the shift from the Gothic mode towards the horror, Frankenstein’s monster confirms that the grotesque has been an integral part of the genre from its very inception. The subtly feminized monster with beautiful “lustrous black” hair and “teeth of pearly whiteness” is made grotesque by the stark juxtaposition of the attractive features with his “watery eyes,” “shriveled complexion and straight black lips” (45). But even looking at earlier, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, “the monstrous, the hybrid and the disgusting are central” to Gothic aesthetics, and since the Gothic relies so heavily on transgression and its correlated affects, especially horror and terror, its affinity with the grotesque comes as no surprise (Milbank 76). More importantly, the grotesque may leave in its wake not only fear and anxiety but laughter as well, and many grotesque monsters are, in fact, able to trigger emotional responses running the whole emotional gamut, from revulsion and terror, on one end, to fascination and a humorous awareness of life’s absurdity, on the other.\(^4\) Emotional responses aside, the grotesque is first and foremost an aesthetic category used to describe a body – body that, for one reason or another, frustrates normative expectations. In classic Western thought, corporeality as such is metonymically and metaphorically tied to females and womanhood, whereas a grotesque

\(^4\) The comic turn in Gothic has been analyzed by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik in their book-length study published in 2004, and they have rightly noted that due to its inherent hybridity, “the roots of the Gothic lie in the comic as well as the tragic” (*Gothic and the Comic Turn 7*).
body is read through and alongside excessive and dangerous femininity and/or destabilizing processes of feminization.

In contrast to the earlier traditions of the Gothic and the medieval carnival, a sympathy for the grotesque monster is now strongly emphasized (Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 69). This sympathy goes beyond a typically Romantic fascination with dark brooding anti-heroes and is underpinned by understanding and empathy as well as a certain willingness to identify with the monstrous and the unwanted. Referring to Fred Botting’s *Making Monstrous* (1991) Spooner emphasizes that for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century subjects the more obvious choice of identification lies with the monster rather than its creator. In fact, one could see Frankenstein’s creature as the prototype of this alignment. Of course, not all horror texts rely on the grotesque aesthetics, and conversely, many works that contain grotesque elements do not fall under the horror or the Gothic jurisdiction. Still, the recent proliferation of horror novels by women writers who employ the grotesque is worth analyzing in more detail, and the ambiguities embedded in the uneasy links between womanhood, female reproduction, and the role of women in traditional kinship structures, on the one hand, and monstrosity, grotesque transformations and horrific abjection, on the other, cannot be overlooked.

The “bodily turn” in horror texts could be seen as a reflection of wider cultural shifts in late twentieth-century Western societies. For instance, the contemporary fascination with the monstrous bodies and the rising popularity of modern-day sideshows and freakshows, neo-burlesque and nouveau cirque can be linked to the “new systems of production, consumption and distribution” which have brought about profound transformations of “the traditional relationship between employment, property, and the body” in the last fifty or so years (Araújo 89). New ways of experiencing one’s corporeality in technologically mediated, increasingly medicalized and economically precarious structures of advanced capitalism necessitate new critical idioms capable of bridging the gaps between the physical and the cerebral. One could
also argue that the growing interest in the material and the corporeal in, for instance, continental philosophy and feminist critical theory reflects the need to investigate subjectivities by going beyond social constructivism and beyond the Cartesian body-mind split. The grotesque, with its emphasis on physicality, irregularity and changeability, is thus a perfect critical tool for analyzing the freedoms granted to and the limitations imposed on female and/or feminized bodies in contemporary American culture.

It is now difficult to imagine any contemporary debates concerning the shape and structure of Western families without taking into account women’s reproductive rights and the role their bodies play in the changing family dynamics. Drawing on Gayle Rubin’s well-known analysis of traditional Western kinship as based on the exchange of women, patriarchal control of their sexuality and patrilineality imperative, it stands to reason that female bodies are positioned at the center of family life. Ongoing discussions concerning abortion rights, the discourse of consent within rape culture, and access to contraception and sexual education continue to bring women’s rights to the forefront of political debates in many countries of the Global North. Which is why female corporeality and sexuality form such important parts of this chapter. I trace how female bodies function within new familial structures as described by Katherine Dunn, Mary Murrey and Caitlín R. Kiernan. I look at how these bodies experience limits of control and independence, often imposed by their male relatives or by their mothers; how the female protagonists handle pain and pleasure, shame and exhilaration, connected to their sexuality and reproduction (which are often presented as spectacles geared towards the male gaze); and how they explore relationships that fall outside the dominion of traditional kinship. In case of Elizabeth Massie’s novel I also consider what happens to male bodies subjected to enforced feminization, a process rather unambiguously presented through the lens of the grotesque.
Interestingly, even though the grotesque aesthetics is involved in and with the body, specifically female bodily sensations, experiences and longings are mostly overlooked by the grotesque theorists. Mikhail Bakhtin is one of few scholars who actually wrote about women’s bodies in terms of the grotesque, but it was not until Mary Russo’s seminal monograph on the female grotesque that this connection has been tackled in more detail. The grotesque, understood as a set of literary conventions or an aesthetics, has proven to be quite a pliable critical tool and has been applied in, among other things, race criticism, postcolonial studies, queer studies or disability studies, but so far scholars have not explored the potential critical usage of the grotesque in connection to the representations of family life, especially in cases when women’s reproductive bodies and their mental wellbeing are placed at the core of such narratives.

Even though the scholarship on the grotesque (female or otherwise), does not consider family dynamics at all, I find it interesting that in the four novels analyzes herein, their authors opted for the grotesque aesthetics to highlight the more disturbing or unusual aspects of familial relationships. In Dunn’s *Geek Love* and Massie’s *Sineater* the focus is placed on interactions between parents and children, and between siblings. In both novels the grotesque mode underlines the entrapment of female (or feminized) bodies in the conservative narrative of reproduction (Dunn’s and Massie’s) and forcefully restrained female sexuality (Dunn’s

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43 This is somewhat different for horror and Gothic writers who quite readily utilize the grotesque in connection to the bodily and/or the feminine. Most obvious examples can be found in the Southern Gothic tradition represented by, among others, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Cormac McCarthy. Grotesque aesthetics has been also utilized by a British novelist, Angela Carter, in her feminist retellings of fairy tales and Greek myths. Contemporary American authors who employ the grotesque in their horror (or horror-inspired) works should be mentioned as well: Chuck Palahniuck, Cody Goodfellow, Jeremy Robert Johnson, Elizabeth Hand, Livia Llewellyn and Alissa Nutting. Their works are notoriously difficult to classify, but their reviewers often describe their output in terms of transgressive fiction, bizarro fiction and slipstream, satire and cutting-edge horror.

novel). In Murrey’s *Inquisitor* and Kiernan’s *Drowning Girl* readers follow adult women striving to establish new relationships, outside the rigidly defined boundaries of the “normal,” yet they remain haunted by the painful shadows of their childhood and family life. In these two novels, the grotesque serves to bring into focus the outlandish nature of their adult relationships, and to emphasize that what spills out of the frames established by social norms, though rendered grotesque, does not deserve rejection.

**Etymological Beginnings**

The physicality implied by the word “grotesque” harks back to its etymological beginnings – Italian “grotto” and “pittura grottesca”; the latter denoting works found in cave-like structures or rooms excavated to reveal murals in ancient Roman houses (Edwards and Graulund 5). More precisely, the term was first applied to the ruins of Nero’s palace discovered in the late fifteenth century, and subsequently it entered the vocabulary related to sixteenth-century painting and, later, the literature of Dante, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, etc. Wilson Yates notes that already at its emergence, the grotesque proved to be troublesome as it defied “the classical style and philosophy of art” in that it broke with a mimetic and harmonious representation of reality (7). The discussion whether grotesque art presents “a violation of the order and harmony” or is “an important artistic form of understanding aspects of human experience” was included in John Ruskin’s theory of the grotesque, in which he proposed the distinction between noble and ignoble forms of the grotesque; the former providing us with new (and horror-evoking) ways of appreciating beauty, and the latter giving us nothing of value apart from idiotic decorations (Yates 9). Still, it was not until the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century that a vast number of
grotesque works (both visual and literary) emerged, which perhaps not coincidentally marked also the peak of the classic Gothic novel.

Yates’s definition of the grotesque is worth quoting in full, as it neatly summarizes a number of points found in many other theoretical works on the grotesque aesthetics:

Grotesque art can be defined as art whose form and subject matter appear to be a part of, while contradictory to, the natural, social, or personal worlds of which we are a part. Its images most often embody distortions, exaggeration, a fusion of incompatible parts in such a fashion that it confronts us as strange and disordered, as a world turned upside down.

When we encounter the grotesque, we are caught off guard, we are surprised and shaken, we have a sense of being played with, taunted, judged. It evokes a range of feelings, feelings of uneasiness, fear, repulsion, delight, amusement, often horror and dread, and through its evocative power it appears to us in paradoxical guise – it is and is not of this world – and it elicits from us paradoxical responses (2).

Historically, the theoretical study of the grotesque can be traced back to nineteenth-century art criticism in the vein of Ruskin’s work on art and architecture, but it is also possible to look further into the past, specifically to the medieval and ancient fascination with monsters and monstrosity, which would serve as a springboard for later formulations of the grotesque.45

However, for the benefit of the present discussion I will limit the critical overview of the grotesque to twentieth-century and later texts. Probably the best-known contemporary analysis of the grotesque was offered by Mikhail M. Bakhtin in his discussion of the grotesque body and the carnivalesque. In *Rabelais and His World* (1941), Bakhtin looks at “the acts of the bodily drama” carried out by Gargantua and Pantagruel, such as defecating,

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45 It is worth noting that the periodization of the grotesque has been and still is an open issue. While some critics look back to antiquity (cf. Harpham), others see its most significant manifestation in the Middle Ages (Bakhtin), while others underline the appeal of grotesque in contemporary times (Kayser). Interestingly, to some critics (such as Ewa Kuryluk and Geoffrey Harpham) the grotesque is becoming increasingly difficult to be sustained in twentieth-century Western aesthetics, which has been playing with the margins for quite some time now. And if concepts of the margins, strategically the best place for grotesque art forms to thrive, as well as the notion of the centre are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain, where will the grotesque appear? (Yates, 3)
copulating, eating, burping, etc. (317). For Bakhtin, eating and drinking, urinating and defecating are significant activities in the sense that “the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense” (281). The grotesque body is thus incomplete and open to intrusions, which stands in sharp contrast to the classical body which is smooth and separated from other bodies, the environment or politics. In Bakhtin’s understanding, in the grotesque, one witnesses man’s triumph over the world, as the world does not conquer man, but the other way round. Seen from a tad different perspective, in Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, the body is at war with itself; it is “an alienated body that denies the unity and wholeness essential to its true nature” (Yates 24).

And it is against such body-spirit dualism that the grotesque reacts. Only by accepting what has been made private, shameful and degraded, one can hope to eradicate this dualism: “to enter into the carnival body, to experience grotesque realism and its laughter, exuberance, and joyful abandon is to recover that which has been lost” (Yates 26). This liberating function of the grotesque underpins Bakhtin’s idea that the grotesque body is “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin 317). Thus those parts of the body which somehow extend the body and breach its boundaries (such as the bowels, the genitals, the mouth, the nose) are of high importance, and this is also why these organs lend themselves easily to exaggeration, exuberance and excess.

Although Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque body and the carnivalesque has continued to exert strong pull on contemporary scholars (Stallybrass and White, Catherine Spooner, Mary Russo, etc.), Bakhtin has been also criticized, most notably for the unproblematic treatment of gender dynamics in his description of grotesque female bodies.\footnote{See for instance, Russo, \textit{Female Grotesque}, 8–13.} A somewhat broader criticism put forward by Milbank concentrates on “a drama of demystification” which the
Bakhtinian theory seems to offer, “as the orthodox, the decorous and the authoritative is ‘uncrowned’ by the carnivalesque energies of the grotesque” (77). Milbank rightly notes that for scholars schooled in deconstruction such an analytic model is quite tempting as “it mimics their own critical procedures. It imitates also the gesture of the Gothic heroine herself, whose flight from tyrannical imprisonment defies patriarchal authority and decrows the power of the supernatural” (77). Ultimately, however, the ostensibly subversive gesture proves ineffectual in that it reconstitutes rather than repudiates the status quo.

Over time the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, as described by Bakhtin, ultimately gives way to the Romantic grotesque which introduces us to “a terrifying world, alien to man,” where man is no longer in control of the world and does no longer know it intimately (Bakhtin 38). Although laughter remains an essential part of the Romantic grotesque, it is a laughter bereft of the previous joy and power to rejuvenate, which characterized earlier incarnations of the grotesque (Bakhtin 38-39). For Spooner, the two traditions are in fact united through the so-called Gothic-Carnivalesque, which brings back some of the uncouth merriment of Bakhtinian grotesque bodies and fuses it with the Romantic emphasis on the individual and the alienation caused by one’s own peculiarities (Contemporary Gothic 69). Writing about the contemporary marriage of the Gothic and the carnivalesque, Spooner argues that within the Gothic-Carnivalesque the liminality rooted in the Gothic finds its expression in the fact that “the sinister is continually shading into the comic and vice versa” (Contemporary Gothic 68-69). In her analysis of the Bakhtinian grotesque, Spooner also mentions the Romantic Grotesque which, after having been stripped of its folk, earthy, joyful and communal associations of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, became “somber and sterile” and communicated “terror rather than laughter,” individual sense of isolation rather than collective body politic (Contemporary Gothic 68). However, Spooner sees in the contemporary Gothic a return of the original spirit of the Carnival with its “preoccupation
with the ‘folk’ grotesque of the circus, with freakish heroes and heroines and with celebration of bodily excess” (*Contemporary Gothic* 68). Of course, just like the medieval Carnival was at times quite easily institutionalized by the authorities to serve as an effective vent-system for the populace’s frustrations, the contemporary grotesque bodies may quickly shed their radical potential and get swallowed and commodified by the mainstream.

Two other literary and cultural critics who investigated the grotesque in detail should be mentioned: Wolfgang Kayser and Bernard McElroy. Bakhtin found Kayser’s 1957 study of the grotesque lacking as, for him, it concentrates only on the Romantic tradition while foregoing the discussion of the ancient, the medieval and the Renaissance grotesqueries (47). Instead, Kayser focuses on the uncanny and on the hostile and alien elements of the grotesque, and in doing so ends up undermining the importance of laughter and the carnivalesque. Kayser describes the grotesque world as a place “in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid” (Kayser 21, quoted in Bakhtin 37). However, Kayser’s focus on the striking fusions of the animate and the inanimate as well as the human and the non-human pave way for the discussion of posthuman hybridity.

McElroy’s study from 1989, on the other hand, points to the affiliation between the grotesque and the Freudian uncanny. He believes that our reaction to the grotesque is based on the uncanny feeling, which, in turn, comes from a certain renewed animistic perspective on life which we begin to see in magical categories once again (5). There is no escaping the fact that the grotesque does overlap with the uncanny to a certain extent, and as Edwards and Graulund have indicated, there exists an undeniable affinity of the grotto with the labyrinth and the crypt, two quintessential Gothic spaces (5). Interestingly, while the uncanny can originate in undeniably bizarre and ghastly vistas such as decaying corpses or cannibalism,

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47 For a discussion of posthuman hybridity see, for instance, MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics* (2016).
the grotesque derives more from the confusion of realities rather than from shocking visual 
stimuli. In this sense, though the grotesque may trigger responses associated with terror and 
horror, it does so by placing the receiver squarely in a liminal zone where the coherence of 
binary oppositions collapses. A scholar of the uncanny, Anneleen Masschalein, also suggests 
that literary works associated with the grotesque cannot be at all times easily separated from 
the fantastic and the uncanny, and perhaps not surprisingly, all these modes share a number of 
motifs such as the automaton, the double, the wax-figure, separate body parts, monstrous and 
other supernatural beings (67).

The Grotesque, the Abject and the Monstrous

As already mentioned, within the framework of medieval teratology, monsters were 
literally the carriers of God-given signs. As the Latin root monstrare suggests, they were 
meant to show, to demonstrate fearsome and awe-inspiring messages inscribed upon their 
odies by the Maker himself. On a superficial level, contemporary monsters continue to be 
used as blank spaces upon which new cultural messages can be recorded. No longer solely 
thological signs of wonder, monstrous bodies have been and still are activated in order to aid 
the establishment of national identities, the regulation and enforcement of gender normativity, 
the medicalization of non-normative physicality, and the institutionalization of prescribed 
ons and standards. Historically, the “categories of otherness,” whether related to race and

48 Yet, inasmuch as the grotesque is imbued with eeriness, it moves past the Freudian oeuvre by focusing 
less on the intersection of unwanted familiarity and unnerving ordinariness, and more on the interplay of 
teriority and exteriority as well as the breakdown of boundaries between different orders. The final reason for 
disassociating the grotesque from the uncanny lies, however, in the very dynamics of grotesque forms which ten mix the lowly with the lofty, and thus, engage with the ironic, the absurd and the humorous. Laughter and 
joy as such are absent from the uncanny, whereas they do appear almost invariably in grotesque narratives. 
Interestingly, McElroy himself also mentions the laughter as he sums up both Kayser’s and Bakhtin’s 
perspectives by stressing that for the former the grotesque constitutes a certain game with the absurd, and 
consequently the laughter which may be occasioned by it is empty and bitter, whereas the latter sees in the 
grotesque the triumphant laughter of the common folk which destabilizes official hierarchy through its bountiful 
spirit of the carnivalesque (145-146).
ethnicity, sexual difference or the non-human, have traversed either an upward or a downward path, with monsters becoming either saintly, angelic beings or the animal, the mutant, the deviant (Braidotti, “Signs” 292). It should be thus emphasized that monstrosity is more of a cultural concept than an objective given, and monsters are not simply born – they are carefully constructed and performed in order to fit certain narratives.49

For the present analysis, I would like to concentrate on the links between monstrosity and the regulation of womanhood and female reproduction, as the interplay between motherhood and monsterhood seems to have gained critical import in recent years. For instance, sociologist Jane M. Ussher draws from psychoanalytic theories to investigate the social implications of the monstrous feminine and the ways female reproductive bodies are managed and regulated. Following Julia Kristeva, she argues that in increasingly secularized societies “art has taken over from religion as a force of purification and catharsis” (2). The female body is idealized (and thus neutralized) through artistic or pseudo-artistic representations. Its dangerous orifices are closed, its “fecund corporeality removed,” or even better, caught momentarily in a nakedness that invites the male gaze while offering no troubling concerns for the viewer (3). Yet, the proliferation of highly negative tropes and themes, from the vagina dentata iconography to a spurned psycho-lover from Fatal Attraction (1987), women’s bodies continue to be the locus not just of desires but of deeply-set anxieties as well. Central to this desire/anxiety dyad is the female reproductive body, which, as Ussher argues, “is central to the process by which women take up the subject position ‘woman’; central to the performance of normative femininity” (4). “The embodied changes” that accompany pregnancy, menstruation or menopause are discursively positioned as the “site of danger or debilitation,” while “the signs of fecundity” are “the signifiers of feminine excess” (Ussher 4). Drawing both from Butler’s performativity theory as well as Foucault’s work on

49 I will return to this issue in the following pages when I analyze more closely Katherine Dunn’s Geek Love.
self-surveillance, Ussher examines a rigid social and cultural framework within which the so-called “natural” female body is regulated, controlled and, if necessary, punished (4). The pathologization and medicalization of the female body so aptly described by Michel Foucault in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* charts the historical and socio-cultural trajectories along which women’s bodies were positioned as unruly and in need of expert (male) attention. To use Ussher’s expression, “the female body [became] potential site of madness, badness or weakness” (15).

The monstrous reproductive body is also an abject body, uncontained and fecund, and “with its creases and curves, secretions and seepages” it is associated with the animal world, whereas the self-contained, unchangeable, “proper” body is signified by the figure of a man or a prepubescent girl (Ussher 7). The latter body is safely separated from the outside and remains clean and unpolluted in Mary Douglas’s understanding of these words. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas persuasively argues that those entities perceived “as ‘impure’ within a given culture are those which trouble a culture’s conceptual categories, particularly the binary oppositions by means of which the culture meaningfully organises experience” (Hurley 139). Kristeva in her landmark work on the abject, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), “asks about the conditions under which the clean and proper body, the obedient, law-abiding, social body, emerges, the cost of its emergence, which she designates by the term abjection” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 192). Although the two concepts – the grotesque and the abject – are to an extent related, they are not synonymous. For Bakhtin, the grotesque female body “is a richly comic body. Not attempting to transcend the flesh, it is invigorated and renewed by its embrace of the earthly,” whereas Kristeva’s analysis of the abject female body highlights the horrific nature of the encounter with a non-Subject that violently transgresses Western organizing concepts of purity and propriety (Hurley 138).
Mary Russo, alongside Barbara Creed and Julia Kristeva, is probably the best-known feminist critic investigating the inner workings of the grotesque aesthetics. Published in 1994, Russo’s *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* is a welcome intervention in the critical corpus of works on the grotesque which, up until Russo’s publication, skirted the issue of gender dynamics or, at best, deployed concepts of femininity and womanhood without much critical awareness. Russo, in fact, points to the history of art criticism on the grotesque, which has consistently located the grotesque on the margins or has deemed it as superficial and lacking depth, thus metaphorically linking it with Western ideas of femininity (5). She offers an interesting take on the post-Romantic grotesque, which by the late nineteenth-century has come to be used not just to describe tangible (and often purely decorative) objects, but also interior states and experiences, thus overlapping with other aesthetic and cultural categories that gained cadence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the uncanny, the strange or the abject (7). Both perspectives – the one centered on the rejuvenating carnivalesque spirit and the one related to Romantic individualism and the uncanny – rely on the body and the bodily, though the Bakhtinian approach to the grotesque investigates the grotesque social body or the body politic, while “in the second case, the grotesque is related most strongly to the psychic register and to the bodily as cultural projection of an inner state” (Russo, *The Female Grotesque* 9).

Still, Russo adds to these perspectives one that returns to the body not in terms of psychic register or body politics, but through a specific, material female body which is portrayed in contemporary arts. She reads “the female grotesque” as a category “crucial to identity-formation for both men and women as a space of risk and abjection” (12). Interestingly, rather than arguing for a distinct male counterpart, Russo contends that in the case of the “male grotesque,” male subjectivity is constructed “through an association with the feminine as the body marked by difference” (13). More to the point, Creed, following
Russo, shows how a male body in horror cinema is marked as grotesque by being feminized: “[the male body] is penetrated, changes shape, swells, bleeds, is cut open, grows hair and fangs” (Creed, “Lesbian Bodies” 87). Consequently, the female body acts as a reminder of the thin line that separates culture from nature, the human from the non-human, as it invades reason with the unpleasantries of a messy physical reality.

One could argue that Russo’s description of the female grotesque as “[l]ow, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral” (The Female Grotesque 1) runs the risk of falling into an essentionalist snare which leaves little room for critical maneuvering. And yet, Russo is well aware that the connotations ascribed to the female body, grotesque or otherwise, are culture-dependent and should be analyzed as such. In other words, the female grotesque can be seen as a critical mode which demolishes the socially-constructed divisions between nature and culture or, at the very least, shows the consequences of nature being negatively coded in this classic binary opposition.

Two things that encapsulate the essence of the grotesque are its multiplicity (Yates 135) and ability to offer conflicting or bizarre mergers and hybrids, but always within a realist framework. Arguably, the registers of the freakish, the hybrid and the monstrous affect the grotesqueries described in the following pages to the largest extent. Still, the grotesque and its assorted registers are routinely employed in the discussion of the bodily almost to the exclusion of the social and the communal. With the notable exception of Bakhtin, who wrote extensively on the body politic and the carnivalesque, most critics interpret the grotesque as a mode of individuation rather than a tool of describing social interactions. Even Russo in her discussion of the female grotesque’s potential for dismantling patriarchal structures, sees the grotesque as a collection of affects, stylizations and experiences of an individual, rather than of a group. In the four novels chosen for this chapter, the grotesque aesthetics is, however, always relational. Although the grotesque is in all four cases firmly inscribed onto the female
or feminized body, the bodily is inexorably joined with the social – female reproductive rights and body autonomy in Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* (1989), alternative matrilineal models of subjectification and radical feminism in Caitlin R. Kiernan’s *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* (2012), the rejection of oppressive familial structures in Mary Murrey’s *The Inquisitor* (1997), and the feminization of male subjects and subsequent disintegration of the community in Elizabeth Massie’s *Sineater* (1993).

In this chapter I purposefully focus on the protagonists’ corporeality, that is, how they experience their own bodies and how their families and communities react to their bodily transgressions. In order to reflect on the familial structures portrayed in the selected novels, I look, first of all, at the embodied practices of female reproduction and female sexuality as they are allowed within the confines of the protagonists’ relationships. Two texts that deal in particular with the maternal body and reproductive rights are Dunn’s *Geek Love* and Massie’s *Sineater*, although the latter engages in a discussion of the reproductive potentialities not only of women, but also of men. The other two texts, Kiernan’s *The Drowning Girl* and Murrey’s *The Inquisitor*, discuss alternatives to traditional patriarchal families; the former by focusing on women-centered relations (both familial and erotic), and the latter by investigating both a militant singlehood and all-female spiritual support groups.

**Freakish Normalcy or Normal Freakery**

As Rosemarie Garland Thomson suggests, freaks have always constituted an interpretative occasion for Western thinkers; their abnormal bodies printed profusely with prophecies and warnings, their awe-striking physicality employed by Judeo-Christian God himself to demonstrate his divine powers, alternatively to delight and to frighten his flock of believers. And “when the gods lapsed into silence, monsters became an index of Nature’s
fancy,” a distorted lens that brought into focus the complexity of human genetic makeup, and invariably, the baffling glitches that continue to plague it (Thomson, “Introduction” 3). The Victorian era, both in England and America, saw a quick proliferation of sideshows, carnivals, spectacles and assorted freakeries, which worked cumulatively to highlight and mold emerging national identities against the backdrop of rampant capitalism and industrialization. The likes of P.T. Barnum embodied the aggressive mercantile spirit of nineteenth-century imperialism and entrepreneurship. Barnum’s shows came to epitomize the plasticity, theatricality and arbitrariness of the freak narrative, as both normative and non-normative bodies were, in fact, randomly given the status of a freak through elaborate and somewhat fantastic or tragic background stories and modes of presentation. Following the Second World War, the popularity of teratology and traditional freak shows waned, and earlier sensations of terror mixed with the ultimate sublime were steadily replaced with acute embarrassment and distaste at what could now only be understood as dismal failures of medical profession.

The constructedness of the freak’s identity has already been tackled by a number of researchers, but it was Robert Bogdan who famously remarked that a freak “is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is not a person but the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation” (35). This “stylized presentation” or, in other words, a performance of grotesque female bodies is what drew me to Katherine Dunn’s 1989 novel *Geek Love* in the first place. As Rachel Adams has noted, Dunn manages to oscillate between “both essentialist and constructivist models of identity, creating a tension that, on the one hand, demonstrates that prejudices against bodily difference are culturally produced, and on the other, recognizes the materiality of the body as it experiences pain or becomes the subject of violence and/or ridicule” (“American Tail” 278). Although the main characters are taught by their parents that true geeks can only be born, not made, the story follows several subplots in which the freakery is, in fact, (re)produced and
deliberately designed. It could be argued thus that the freak show invites the spectators to investigate a typically postmodern anxiety regarding the pliability and manipulability of both history and bodies, and in the case of Dunn’s novel, also the family history and the female bodies.

The present-day frame of the novel focuses on Olympia’s (Olly’s) efforts to secure her daughter Miranda with both a tale and a tail. The former is simply the story of the Binewski family, a gory tale of reproduction and replication of freaks, which is set in the past and of which Miranda is unaware having been raised an orphan in a convent. But the Binewskis’ story, which forms the inner frame of *Geek Love*, serves the purpose of bringing Miranda closer to the latter, that is, her own freakish body part – her tail. Olympia, an albino dwarf hunchback, looks furtively after both her grown-up daughter and her own mother after the annihilation of the Fabulon, a carnival where Olympia, her siblings and their parents lived and worked. Miranda is aware neither of her carnival origins nor of the fact that her neighbors – Olympia and Lil – are, in fact, her mother and grandmother, respectively. After learning that a misguided philanthropist’s obsession might cost Miranda her tail, Olympia gains the philanthropist’s (Miss Lick’s) trust in order to learn the best way to dispose of her, thus saving her daughter from becoming a full-fledged “norm,” as she condescendingly calls able-bodied people. Olympia fears that Miranda may not fully appreciate or even fathom the significance of her tail, and might even renounce the only visible marker of her freakery in exchange of financial security. Afraid that her daughter might lose the tail, she gives her another tale, one that begins with Olympia’s father, Al Binewski, breeding perfect freaks for his carnival, a feat he accomplished by dosing his willing pregnant wife (and Miranda’s grandmother), Lil, with insecticides and drugs, and exposing her to radiation one pregnancy after another. Olympia as a regular albino dwarf hunchback was a disappointment, but as she was endowed with a melodious voice, she could at least serve as a speaker and help her truly gifted, truly special
brothers and sisters: Arturo, the Aqua Boy, a highly manipulative and self-centered control freak who was born without limbs, the Siamese Twins Electra and Iphigenia, known simply as Elly and Iphy, and Chick, a highly sensitive and empathetic telekinetic. Ultimately, the countless tensions within the family implode leaving only Olly and her half-blind feeble-minded mother Lil alive.

The family drama which forms the foundation of *Geek Love* is hardly strange, as it examines rather traditional aspects of sibling rivalry and patriarchal control over the females. What makes Dunn’s novel unique is, however, the proliferation of freakish bodies and the inevitable return to the bodily functions and bodily limits that the freakery dictates. The enfreakment of the body can be understood as a set of cultural rituals that iconize abnormal bodies. Alternatively, it can also be described as a number of social and cultural practices that encompass a wide spectrum of “exclusionary systems” based not only on bodily difference, but gender, race, ethnicity, dis/ability and sexuality (Thomson 10). From a psychoanalytic point of view, by “[e]ncountering freaks, we contemplate the potential dissolution of our own corporeal and psychic boundaries, the terror and excitement of monstrous fusion with the surrounding world” (Adams, “American Tail” 7). We are thus reminded of “the unbearable excess that has been shed to confer entry into the realm of normalcy,” which connects freakishness with that of the expunged abject (Adams, “American Tail” 7).

Kristeva’s abject is met head-on in Dunn’s novel, most noticeably in the scenes in which we learn that the fetuses which did not survive radiation, pesticides and drugs ended up just like their surviving siblings, that is, on display in the Fabulon, in a special tent, placed in large jars filled with formaldehyde. Still, Dunn does not limit her narrative to the ultimate (and the most obvious) instance of the abject – the corpse – but instead gives plenty of examples of the maternal abject, which works on two distinct levels. Firstly, the mothers – Crystal Lil and Olly – are abjected in that they are both stripped of their maternal functions
and are either rejected by their children (Lil) or forced to reject their offspring (Olly). What is more, just like Lil does not fully control her body during pregnancies, Olly cannot mother Miranda, because Arturo renounces her little baby girl. Secondly, the abject is also what is literally expelled from their maternal bodies. They give birth to freakish and abnormal children, who are culturally coded as repulsive and grotesque, and as such must be excluded from the symbolic order.

The affirmative abjection, sometimes employed by feminist writers to show ways of empowering the female body or of resisting the phallogocentric economies of power is also tackled by Dunn. By breaking the symbolic order, the grotesque bodies can destabilize received and hitherto unchallenged notions of beauty, harmony and familiarity. This is shown already in the very first pages of *Geek Love*, when Olly recalls a childhood memory of sitting with her parents and siblings, and listening to their father’s tale of how he and his wife crafted their special children. The pleasant vignette is reminiscent of a typical suburban family evening, up until the moment the reader realizes that the children are in fact circus freaks, and the scene takes place in a carnival trailer, not in a white-picket-fence home with a fireplace. Thus, events and objects usually considered revolting, uncanny and abnormal are shown as constituting the norm in Olly’s life. This ironic tableau craftily unmasks the peculiarity not just of the Binewskis, but of the model able-bodied middle-class family it seeks to mock in the first place. I would argue that by activating the satiric and the humorous, Dunn moves this particular scene from the order of the abject to that of the grotesque.

Other issues tackled by *Geek Love* are the exclusions associated with the grotesque body, which rely heavily on mergers and hybridization. Because a freakish body blurs accepted distinctions (between the “I” and “not-I”, between human and non-human, male and female, civilized and wild, healthy and unhealthy, tall and short, etc.), the spectators are unable to fall back on the well-established boundaries between the self and the other, between
now and then. Still, Elizabeth Grosz states that “[t]he perverse pleasure of voyeurism and identification [with the freaks] is counterbalanced by horror at the blurring of identities (sexual, corporeal, personal) that witness our chaotic and insecure identities. Freaks traverse the very boundaries that secure the ‘normal’ subject in its given identity and sexuality” (“Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit” 64). Thus the freakish bodies produce fear, disgust and terror, on the one hand, and fascination, awe and wonder, on the other. This curious plasticity of the freakish body is also indirectly touched upon by Bakhtin when he describes the grotesque body as “a body in the act of becoming” (317). Interestingly, this definition ties in with the concept of a disabled body which, according to Mitchell and Snyder, is “essentially a body-in-the-making” (628). And precisely because of this distinct resistance to closure disabled bodies “are marked as perpetually available for all kinds of intrusions, public and private” (629).

Such intrusions form the basis of existence for the Binewski children as they are accustomed to placing their grotesquely disabled bodies on display in their father’s carnival, the Fabulon. The state of being-gazed-at suggests a subordinate (and feminized) position for all the siblings, yet readers who expect a classic narrative of dejection, humiliation and horrid details are in for a surprise as all the Binewski children were raised firmly believing that they were, in fact, far superior to able-bodied people or “norms.” They revel in being objects of the gaze, and scorn the “norms” whose interchangeability makes them unworthy of the Binewski gaze. Olly and the rest of the Binewskis are unique and extraordinary, and thus stand in sharp contrast to assembly-line able-bodied people who so desperately try to be different, original, but also faultless and proper.

Al Binewski, a savvy Yankee businessman stumbled upon the idea of crafting his children individually when he visited a rose garden. It was then and there that he decided to breed unique flowers of his own. He persuaded his wife, Crystal Lil, a runaway aristocrat who
chose the life of a circus freak, to forego her budding career as a trapeze artist and to devote herself to a new profession, that of a breeder of freaks. As N. Katherine Hayles aptly sums up the inner workings of the Binewski family, being reared up as special “designer items” while simultaneously being exhibited for profit as deviations and perversities, the children suffer from “a complex mix of self-loathing and megalomania, manifested differently in each child but marking all” (Hayles 414).

Arty, Elly and Iphy, Olly and Chick are thus used to living in a state of perpetual carnival in which their fantastic and grotesque bodies form the focus of the narrative. In the Bakhtinian sense, their repulsive bodies are leaky, open-ended, resistant to closure, contaminated and contaminating. This, according to Bakhtin, is the goal of the carnival: to bring down what is lofty, metaphysical, abstract onto the visceral, material level of everyday existence. But Dunn emphasizes that such joyous and unbridled degradation does not necessarily impart equality to its practitioners. Terry Eagleton has suggested that carnivals function not merely as a vent, but rather as a tool of social control orchestrated by those in power to provide the hoi polloi with a chance to vent their anger at economic and social discrepancies without actually giving them a platform to enact any changes. And this is especially true of women in Geek Love, who even in this topsy-turvy circus reality must adhere to the roles imposed on them by the phallogocentric society.

It is also crucial to take note of the risks inherent in the concepts of abjection and the carnival which “share a tendency to take the body and subjectivity as ahistorical, transcendent givens, collapsing the feminine into the maternal, and taking the maternal body as the key image of embodiment as such” (Chedgzoy 460-461). Therefore, the socio-historical context of Dunn’s novel needs to be theorized as well. After all, the emancipatory aspect of the Binewskis’ decision to exist at the fringes of able-bodied people’s life is called into question.

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by the fact that the exile was imposed on them by normative social standards and limited access to employment in the “norms’” world. That is, the likely attempts at exoticizing and valorizing the grotesque should be checked by considering the restricted scope of actions that Dunn’s characters actually enjoy in their lives. Even the most manipulating sibling, Arty, remains utterly dependent on others both physically and emotionally, while the rest are unable to escape or change their existence, as they simply have nowhere (and no-one) else to go to.

In this disordered carnivalesque space women’s bodily transgressions do not empower them in any way, but only further expose them to potential abuse. The female grotesque body is transgressive not only in that it posits dangers to others, but also in that it is constantly put in danger (Russo, “Female Grotesques” 217).

Russo, in her seminal study, asserts that the carnival’s potential to overthrow the determinant hierarchies stops short of liberating the female subject who remains enmeshed in cultural and economic ties. In a way the “carnival [has a] complicitous place in the dominant culture,” and thus, it offers no respite from patriarchal power which continues to force female bodies into physical as well as economic submission (Russo, “Female Grotesques” 214). Shirley Peterson also emphasizes the dangers the carnival posits for women, as the spectacle, which forms the very core of the carnivalesque, makes frequent use of female bodies, and therefore creates ample possibilities for further exploitation and violence (298-299). The notion that the carnivalesque space is not safe for female performers is validated in Geek Love through the stories of Olympia, her twin sisters Elly and Iphy, and their mother Crystal Lil. Their limited personal autonomy and room for self-determination are proven time after time by their continued failures to counteract men’s attempts to objectify them, debase them and control their bodies and their economies of reproduction.

Bodily replication in Geek Love proves “harmful and disempowering to the female freak” (Adams, “An American Tail” 280), as women’s biological advantage that allows them
to bear children threatens the male power and must be subjugated. Women are transformed into puppets, receptacles, figures to be molded in accordance with their fathers’, brothers’, and lovers’ ideas. The first instance of such control takes place with Al Binewski’s attempts to turn the fetuses carried in his wife’s womb into carnival freaks by experimenting on Lil’s pregnant body with various substances and treatments. And even though Lil is the one giving birth, Al is the one calling the shots, manipulating and controlling the creation inside his wife’s swollen belly. His son, Arturo, whose very name suggests “his status as artifact and art object,” follows in his footsteps and interferes in the natural order of things so as to bend the reality to his narcissistic dreams of artistry (Hayles 413). He initiates a quasi-religious cult of Arturism, through which he attempts to replicate himself ad infinitum. And as the so-called “norms” join Arturo’s semi-religious movement to become extra-ordinary like Arturo, they are first physically incapacitated through amputations of their fingers and toes (and later arms and legs), but their ultimate sacrifice comes when they are mentally incapacitated through lobotomy, thus becoming perfect followers and Arturo’s ideal progeny sculpted in his image, though unable to surpass him.

But when Arty supersedes Al as the Fabulon’s rightful leader, his own familial power is called into question by Electra and Iphegenia, who not only attract ever larger crowds but also decide to take control of the way their bodies are handled on stage by prostituting themselves in their trailer. In retribution for this apparent insolence, Arty (whose incestuous desire for the gentler and more sensitive twin, Iphy, at least partially guides his actions) hands the twins over to the disfigured Bag Man to be his sexual playthings. When they get pregnant, and the stronger and more aggressive twin Elly hints at an abortion, Arty has her lobotomized so as to deny the twins reproductive rights they might have otherwise exercised. Thus Iphy is left with her twin sister’s limp body and a belly bloated with an unwanted child.
Ironically, it is Olly, the bald albino dwarf hunchback, who partially escapes the patriarchal system of reproductive control by being rendered too unfeminine, too childlike by her disabilities. Her perceived ugliness does not permit her to become another commodified female body that could be desired by men, and more specifically by Arty, to whom she is hopelessly devoted. But because she remains outside the system, she also retains a certain degree of leeway when it comes to her reproductive rights. In point of fact, she cajoles the youngest Binewski – Chick – to use his telekinetic powers to impregnate her with Arturo’s sperm. With this action, however, her mothering both begins and ends, and when her daughter turns out not to be freakish enough to merit Arturo’s attention (and his love), Olly is forced to leave Miranda at an orphanage simply to save her daughter’s life.

The objectification of women is not carried out exclusively by men. Miss Lick, Arturo’s female double, and Olympia’s nemesis is introduced in the present-day frame as the philanthropist who wants to remake women in her own image through the erasure of their sexuality. Thanks to cosmetic surgeries and amputations, these women, Miss Lick’s “projects,” become sex-less, thanks to which they can finally thrive intellectually and economically, unobstructed by sexual relations with men, competition with other women, and yearning for male attention. She sponsors cosmetic surgeries that leave an Italian-Irish woman’s face scarred with acid (thus erasing her non-white ethnicity as well), another woman’s breasts are removed, and a third one has her vagina sewn shut. All the corporeal markers of their femininity are erased. Miss Lick’s goal is to make her “projects” feel and look different from the masses, to make them extraordinary by removing them from the structure of sexual exchange. Conversely, the Arturian disciples are not so lucky: they do not flourish, they wither and die, after being reduced to mere “transcendental maggots.”

While Miss Lick sees Miranda’s tail as an impediment (one of many that need to be amputated or defaced), Olympia sees it as an indelible signifier of Miranda’s true identity,
which she wants to protect. From the very beginning Olympia is obsessed with her daughter’s body, and just after giving birth to her she immediately realizes that Miranda is not special, that is, not freakish enough to attract Arty’s attention and to secure her a spot in the Binewskis’ family tree. In a way, Olympia’s behavior is reminiscent of her father’s behavior as “a midnight gardener” of his mutated fragile flowers, his custom-made children (Dunn 14).

But in contrast to her father, and later her brother, Olympia keeps her distance and does not assault Miranda’s body, thus giving her freedom she and her female relatives were not granted. Hers is the task to protect rather than mold.

The truth is, Miranda’s relationship with her body confounds both Olympia and Miss Lick. Initially, Olympia mistrusts Miranda and associates her almost-perfectly-normal body with stupidity which she has always connected with “norms.” With time, she learns there is more to her daughter than meets the eye. Not only is Miranda an intelligent and accomplished young woman, but she is also deeply ambivalent about her tail, alternating between revulsion and fascination. And even though she is financially secure thanks to a trust fund set up by Olympia, Miranda exhibits herself in a night club, aptly named Glass House, which caters to men who fetishize freakish femininity. But in contrast to other showgirls, Miranda does not hate her “deformity” and does not exploit it for money. And when she is approached by Miss Lick, she does not jump at this opportunity, but rather decides she needs to think about whether to have the tail surgically removed or not. In the end, she agrees to undergo the procedure, but only because in the end the tail does not really function for Miranda as a signifier of her identity.

Neither Olympia nor Miss Lick understand the erotic potential of the tail, as for the former the tail signifies a different realm altogether, a carnival where freaks command awe and fear, while for the latter eroticism is in itself a vestigial tail, an inelegant legacy of the past, of primitive times that needs to be cast off. In contrast to Arty, whose own insecurity,
poor self-esteem and dependency on others manifest in an obsessive-compulsive need to control everyone and everything in his vicinity, Miranda is visibly comfortable with her sexuality, and openly ambivalent about her tail, which does not, in fact, define her.

It could also be argued that in the present-day frame of the novel the women finally take the power over their bodies, their sexuality and their artistry away from men. Whereas Miss Lick and Olympia seem to be locked in the same objectifying and reductive logic that guided their male counterparts in the inner tale, Miranda comes forth as a new type of artist and creator. A skilled medical illustrator with a penchant for the weird and the freakish (perhaps a sign of a Binewski’s heritage after all) she portrays her subjects lovingly and tenderly without trying to amend them or force her vision upon them. And the fact that she refuses to acknowledge herself as an artist proves that she does not want to create an improved or unique version of what she sees but rather humblyaspiresto convey what is already present in front of her.

Miranda’s profession reintroduces the question of control and gaze. As a medical illustrator she seeks to recreate her subjects with dignity and beauty, and her gaze acts as a counterbalance to various instances of looking and being looked at which are explored in the context of a spectacle. A different attempt to recover the gaze, albeit a very unsuccessful one, is undertaken by Miss Lick in her own perverse and ill-advised way. Weese points out that Miss Lick is a voyeur who takes over the treacherous male gaze to which beautiful women were hitherto subjected and which, in her mind, successfully prevented them from becoming successful (356). By transforming these women’s bodies into grotesquely desexualized bodies, she does attempt to level their chances with those of men, whose unfettered growth is predicated on the lack of differentiating and demeaning gaze. The end-result is, however, horrific rather than empowering. A far cry from the joyous physicality and unrestrained
sexuality of the grotesque bodies envisaged by Bakhtin, Miss Lick’s creations seem to be misguided failures.

The spectacle of grotesque femininity is complicated by Dunn in that she portrays the ambiguous displays of freakery which can function at different times as liberating or debilitating. This tension is explored in a scene in a strip-tease club, the Glass House, where Miranda performs, and where during an open audition night Olly is forced onto the stage. She parades topless in front of a sympathetic male crowd, and actually begins to feel quite comfortable and proud of being a true freak, a true object of desire: “How proud I am, dancing in the air full of eyes rubbing at me uncovered . . . Those poor hoptoads behind me. I’ve conquered them. They thought to use and shame me but I win by nature, because a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born” (23). Here, the male audience applauds Olly’s and Miranda’s disabilities and freakishness, and finds them both erotically enticing. This could be read as an escalation of the original forms of display at the Fabulon carnival, where whole families gathered to watch freaks perform on stage. Interestingly, the fascination the freakish body generates is often based on gender ambiguity, sexual ambivalence or deviant sexuality, and this explains why a rather morbid curiosity drives the spectators to examine the freaks closely and to speculate about their sex life or lack of thereof. The sensations of terror mixed with awe and desire, which are triggered by the freaks stimulate an awareness that fixed boundaries and identities can be in fact easily traversed and set anew. New configurations of limbs, orifices, skins, textures, joints and muscles, perhaps even an erotic fusion of species, of the self and the Other establish a forbidden knowledge which is both titillating and frightening for the spectators.

The spectacle of the female body is also closely linked with Joan Riviere’s concept of the masquerade in which femininity functions as a mask donned by women in their daily encounters with men and other women, or in Judith Butler’s reformulation, a ritualized
performance that can be practiced, parodied or subverted, albeit to a limited extent. Drawing on Riviere’s now classic study “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929) as well its later reworkings by Lacan, Butler and Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, Veronica Hollinger posits that when gender is theorized as performative, in a move which re-situates the ‘tragedy’ of the masquerade of femininity and turns it into ironic contestatory practice, we become less dependent upon essentialist ontological categories and, at least theoretically and imaginatively, we can initiate a more radical inquiry into the nature of the individual sexed and gendered subject. The ironic mobilization of feminist mimicry and parody is an imaginative intervention into what must otherwise be read as yet one more oppressive construction/representation of ‘woman’ as artificial, superficial, suspect, and lacking [.] (23).

The pleasure that Miranda and Olly take “in seeing and being seen” underscores the potential positive aspect of “the sensuality of the visual,” which, according to Terry Castle, forms the foundation of the masquerade (Female Thermometer 254). In Geek Love, the masquerade functions, however, not just in terms of femininity which can be worn and modified at will, but also in terms of freakishness which can be changed, reformulated and, most importantly, performed. The masquerade also introduces the question of pretending and passing, which in turn brings us back to the easily blurred distinctions between freakery and normalcy. The borders are porous, allowing (some) freaks to pass as norms and vice versa. For instance, after the destruction of the carnival, Olympia earns her living as a story-teller, thus passing as a normal voice on the radio. In her daughter’s case, the only visible marker, the tail, stays mostly hidden thus allowing Miranda a degree of freedom unimaginable for Olympia or her siblings. Lastly, Olympia’s mother Lil, who first was transformed from a “watercool aristocrat” into a circus geek, ends up becoming a senile old lady no-one would ever suspect of having been a part of a sideshow.

Still, critics who lean towards French feminist theory, and specifically, Luce Irigaray’s writing, perceive masquerade not as a contestatory practice, but rather as “a painful, desperate
renunciation of female desire: the woman experiences desire, but it is the man’s desire, not her own. She desires to be desired; by catering to male fantasies, she becomes objectified as a spectacle” (Craft-Fairchild 54). Catherine Craft-Fairchild emphasizes that the masquerade does not really change a woman’s status, as she remains inscribed in the order of things as an object of the male gaze and men’s desires (53). Mary Ann Doane adds that masquerade may function merely as an “anxiety-ridden compensatory gesture,” which places women in potentially disturbing, uncomfortable and painful positions (38). Such dangerous places are examined by Dunn in *Geek Love* as she traces the ways in which female bodies are controlled and/or put on display.

This dangerous nature of the carnivalesque space is made crystal clear in the double-layered spectacle of female freaks, performing both as females and as monstrous beings. Whether the spectacle can be recovered via feminist theory and whether the women can take control of their own bodies, both physically and economically, remains highly debatable in *Geek Love*. When in the Glass House, Olly scurries quickly from the stage, she is given 10 dollars and offered a deal to perform there more often. The moment she leaves the stage, on which, as we remember, she felt proud and pleased with her body, she is immediately thrown into economic submission – in exchange for the spectacle of her disabled body she will be awarded some petty cash. Conversely, Olly’s sisters and Miranda’s aunts, Elly and Iphy, try to take control of the economic bargain in which they have always been the merchandise but never the selling party. They are perfectly aware that “norms” do not appreciate or even care about their singing or musical skills, about their personality and aspirations. The twins know that the only thing that matters to “norms” is, in Elly’s own words, “How do we fuck? That and who, or maybe what. Most of the guys wonder what it would be like to fuck us. So, I figure, why not capitalize on that curiosity” (232)? And since they have been placed in the roles of entertainers and their joint-bodies have been exoticized from an early age on, theirs is
the decision to go just one step further in order to secure an autonomous space for themselves, where they would be the ones controlling the exploitation of their bodies. They try to wrench the control from their father and their brother, but, suffice to say, the punishment for this perceived sexual as well as economic transgression is further sexual abuse and curtailment of their personal and reproductive rights. In the end, both meet a rather gruesome death, when the lobotomized Elly attacks their baby son and is killed by her twin sister.

Although, at a first glance, the Binewskis might seem to be safely disconnected from the traditional American family imagery, they are in fact a perfect reflection of the middle-class nuclear stereotype. The Binewskis are both its idealized version (in the sense that they are so close to each other and so caring) and its distorted mirror image (in that they end up betraying and killing each other). I would argue that the physical grotesqueness of the Binewski children is used as a smokescreen which hides the true deformity at play in Dunn’s novel, that is, the absolute patriarchal control which operates both within the smallest social unit, the family, and in American society in general. That is why within the confines of a traditional nuclear family, the Binewski women’s reproductive rights are managed by their male relatives, whereas outside the family the controlling male gaze shapes the women’s relations with their own bodies as well as with other people.

The question whether a grotesque female body has the potential for affirmative grotesqueries or effective disruption of hegemonic patterns is one of major themes in *Geek Love*. Dunn seems to suggest that the grotesque female body lacks the power to dismantle the oppressive structures which enmesh it. In fact, as Susan Bordo notes, in the late-twentieth-century socio-political debates, it has become “increasingly difficult to discriminate between parodies and possibilities for the self” (2369). That is why those female bodies which are positioned as grotesque, uncanny or somehow subversive in Dunn’s novel do not necessarily offer a real alternative to the patriarchal hierarchy in their families. *Geek Love* shows how that
this seemingly autonomous gesture of inscribing oneself into the category of the freakish, or agreeing to be construed as bizarre or monstrous, is not unproblematic. The carnivalesque does not automatically guarantee effective substitutes for the existing hegemonic patterns, and it most certainly does not offer a radical promise of liberation for its female practitioners. As long as the potential for empowerment is located exclusively in or on the body itself, women remain locked in an economic and sexual system that arranges their bodies and sexualities to be exposed to potential intrusions, exploitation and abuse within their households and within wider patriarchal structures. Still, as Kate Chedgzoy suggests, the carnivalesque space can in fact help “expose the horror of abjection as a misogynist projection” and it can “provide a political and social framework for the ways in which women’s bodies have been hystericised, idealized, or rendered grotesque” (463). This is especially relevant for the discussion of heavily oedipalized family structures and kinship formation which is predicated on the exchange of women’s bodies and the control of their reproductive powers. In Geek Love, Dunn brilliantly portrays the limits of personal freedoms accorded to women within the Binewski family and their ways of coping with the oppressive rules of the spectacle to which their bodies are consistently exposed. Importantly, the fact that the Binewskis are made grotesque through the process of cultural enfreakment does not have any bearing on their internal family dynamics, which still follows the conventions and aspirations of an archetypal middle-class family, though filtered through a typically Southern gothic sensibility.

The Hybridization of the Lesbian Body

The hysterization of female bodies is one of the major themes tackled by Caitlín R. Kiernan in her 2012 novel, The Drowning Girl: A Memoir. The novel deals with hysterical

51 Fascinating, if somewhat contentious, discussion of the relation between reproduction and women’s emancipation can be found in Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex (1970).
narratives in which the female grotesque challenges prevalent images of lesbian monstrosity and perversity. Kiernan imagines potent matrilineal and women-centered alternatives to the stereotypical monstrous representations of same-sex desires and relationships. Even though historically female homosexuality had enjoyed less visibility than male homosexuality (both in medical and legal terms), with the emergence of sexology, psychology and increasing medicalization of sexuality in the second half of the nineteenth-century, lesbianism came to be represented in increasingly monstrous terms in fin de siècle art and literature. The very specter of lesbianism seemed to double the danger of female sexuality, which was already perceived as unstable and precarious. Thus the stereotype of a lesbian seductress did not arrive in a cultural vacuum, but found a relatively fertile cultural soil among late nineteenth-century poets and novelists. The femmes damnees immortalized by Toulouse-Lautrec or Emile Zola, were created for the male viewers’ pleasure, and this notion of a perilous, albeit heteronormatively eroticized lesbian has persisted till the modern times.

In canonical horror works the female body is either a monster that needs to be exorcised and destroyed or, perhaps even more frequently, a victim that needs to be sacrificed and/or avenged so that the male protagonist’s narrative can be pushed forward. Oftentimes, the thin line between monstrosity and victimization is blurred, especially when female victims’ bodies become truly monstrous in the process of their mutilation, and bodies of the monsters mirror the female body’s uncanny mutability. These two modes – female monstrosity and female victimization – are both deeply scopophilic, as they are constructed to invite the male gaze. One could argue that, after all, in horror narratives not all monsters are female, just as not all victims are women. However, the history of associating monstrosity with womanhood dates back to antiquity, and as Rosi Braidotti notes in Nomadic Subjects, one of such beginnings can be located with Aristotle who posits a normal human body in terms of a male body, whereas the female one is seen as an anomaly, an aberration (224). And, last but not least,
Freud’s ghostly presence seems to haunt twentieth-century incarnations of female monsters (as well as the monstrous female victims), as female genitalia were considered by Freud the ultimate sight of terror and the chief source of the uncanny.

I would like to concentrate on Kiernan’s ways of examining the above-mentioned association of women with monstrosity and/or victimhood, and when it comes to lesbian subjects, also the trope of an overssexualized dangerous lesbian. I am also interested in how the grotesque functions as “a corollary to queerness” in that it questions “the dominant discourses of what is inherently normal or abnormal” (Edwards and Graulund 114). In the queer narratives, such as Kiernan’s works, queer body is often posited as hybrid, but it is also a grotesque body in the sense that, firstly, it is consciously stylized as unfinished and in-the-making, and secondly, it embraces a hopeful and deeply sensual kind of non-normativity. The queer hybridization described by Kiernan in The Drowning Girl shows the ways in which queer subjects resist normativity targeted at their bodies, desires, and texts they produce. The grotesque aesthetics in The Drowning Girl is deployed largely in connection to female madness and lesbian corporeality (two concepts historically often thought together). Kiernan’s skillful use of both affirmative and reactionary modes of the grotesque brings into focus generic limitations of horror fiction, which is unable to convey the intricacies of women’s experiences without falling on age-old tropes of female monstrosity, victimhood and abnormality.

Kiernan’s novel presents two types of families, both structured around ties between women (and thus set apart from traditional family units): lesbian relationships and exclusively matrilineal relationships. Both these forms of alternative kinship are marked by deep ambivalence, separation anxiety and toxic interdependence, yet they also anchor the main protagonist in her struggles to shield herself from a schizophrenic breakdown. And while Kiernan’s protagonist struggles with her own mental fragility, these intensely intimate
relationships are a source of comfort and anxiety, strength and pain. Men are conspicuously absent from the story; there are no fathers to be reckoned with, no male lovers or brothers who influence the main protagonist in any way. Kiernan’s novel does not engage with Gothic threats to a woman’s bodily integrity which come from mad patriarchs and evil tyrants. Rather, the threat comes, primarily, from within (in terms of mental illness) and, secondarily, from crossing problematic boundaries in relationships with other women.

The story in *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir* is told in first person by India Morgan Phelps, also known as Imp – a fitting nickname that brings to mind a mischievous magical creature. India skillfully weaves together two narratives in which she recalls how she met a woman named Eva. The crux of the novel (and the main source of mystery) lies in a temporal paradox – Imp has met Eva for the first time… twice. Early on, Imp admits to being a schizophrenic, and though the readers may assume that her “memoirs” are in fact a madwoman’s diary, she also asserts that she wants to write a ghost story which will be true, though it may not be factual.

Imp recalls how in July she found Eva naked on a river bank, while in the second storyline she met her naked in November, at the side of the road near the woods. In the first narrative the July Eva becomes a mermaid-like creature who seduces Imp, and this story draws inspiration from Imp’s favorite fairy-tale (the Little Mermaid) and her favorite painting of a mermaid by a fictional late-nineteenth century painter, Philip Saltonstall. As Imp has been obsessing about Saltonstall’s paintings, his biography as well as folk- and fairy-tales which inspired his work, Eva’s transformation into a siren-like figure comes quite easy for Imp. In the second story, the November Eva becomes a she-wolf in need of rescue, and this is, in turn, connected with Imp’s intense dislike for the Little Red Riding Hood tale, a dislike which was intensified after she had seen an exhibition by a contemporary artist who
juxtaposed the medieval Little Red Riding Hood stories with the 1946 Black Dahlia murder in a series of pornographic and deeply disturbing artworks.

As Imp is desperately trying to make sense of the two meetings with Eva, the reader witnesses her deteriorating mental condition and ultimately learns that Imp has fabricated the second story – the November Eva (the werewolf Eva) – as a coping mechanism after the traumatic outcome of the first (and the only real) meeting with Eva in July. With the help of her girlfriend, Abalyn, Imp learns that Eva was the daughter of a woman who took her life in a mass suicide organized by a water-worshipping cult in the early 1990s. Eva first stalks Imp and discovers everything about Imp’s obsessions with Saltonstall’s paintings, mermaids and sea snakes folklore. She then proceeds to seduce Imp and manipulate her into helping her to commit suicide by drowning, just like her mother did twenty years earlier. Imp’s subsequent breakdown triggers in her a need to compose one more narrative, one in which she saves Eva rather than helplessly watches her dying. As Imp slowly spirals down into a mental breakdown, she tries to drown herself in the bathtub in order to rid herself of the intrusive thoughts triggered by Eva. Later, during a chance meeting with Abalyn, who left Imp soon after her bathtub suicide attempt, Abalyn tells her that there was always only one Eva. Immediately after Imp goes off her meds and suffers a psychotic breakdown. Abalyn, however, stays with Imp and helps her recover.

This crude description of the plot hardly does justice to the intricate web of literary references, styles and textual devices employed by Imp in her memoir. Letters, short stories, fragments of reference books, folk-tales, metafiction, self-referential jokes, false memories, and real events all mingle in an attempt to make sense of the two Evas, and if possible, to dispose of one of them. A clear theme of doubling and the double emerges in the way the narrative is structured. For instance, Eva, Imp’s doppelganger, is yet another mentally ill daughter of another mad mother. Even Eva’s original name – Imogene May – suggest a
deeper affiliation with Imp whose full name is India Morgan. Not only are there two Evas and two distinct hauntings in Imp’s mind, but also two Evas in real life: the mother who was a member of the water cult in the early 1990s and the daughter who insinuated herself in Imp’s life. More importantly, Imp herself is doubled. She keeps stepping from first-person-narrative in order to chastise her own narrative persona for tardiness or for avoiding the main subject:

And that’s the day I met Abalyn Armitage.

“I think I’ve been telling lies,” Imp types. (20)

The doublings continue in subplots: there exist two mermaid paintings by Saltonstall, not one, as Imp has hitherto assumed. And there are two versions of Abalyn’s past, as for almost twenty years Abalyn carried within herself a certain kind of doubleness, and ultimately required a surgery to align her male-born body with her female gender. Imp muses over the importance of “[d]uality. The mutability of the flesh. Transition. Having to hide one’s true self away. Masks. Secrecy. Mermaids, werewolves, gender” (43).

This series of doublings confuses the traditional Western dyads such as subject/object, active/passive, male/female, and by doing so undermines the heterosexual order which rests on such oppositions. The “lesbian narrative space” (Farwell 98) marks the beginning of such a deconstruction in many contemporary queer texts. In Kiernan’s novel, the doublings also indicate a refusal to engage in traditionally defined horror fiction, in which the narrative is either propelled through monstrous deaths of women or enacted by grotesque, feminized monsters. In fact, almost all the deaths of women mentioned in The Drowning Girl are suicides which are consistently read as the women’s own choices, and Imp, instead of searching for answers or culprits, accepts her loved ones’ decisions. More than that, Imp places her mother and grandmother alongside Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, and Diane Arbus, thus emphasizing the creativity, strength, and self-determination associated with all these figures. Curiously, the only violent female death described in the novel is that of Elizabeth Short, aka Black Dahlia, whose horrid murder, an infamous symbol of misogyny,
becomes a mere fodder for an artist bent on a shocking merger of pornography, the grotesque, and death. The fact that the artist is a man is meant to highlight how instrumentally women’s deaths are treated within a male-dominated art – women’s mutilated corpses are used to excite the audience sexually and instill in them a fear of transgression.

Kiernan, therefore, consistently constructs a lesbian narrative space by refusing to use female bodies in ways associated with typical horror narratives. Thus Eva’s hybrid body is far removed from a freakshow or circus aesthetics (which prompts questions about the gaze and gendered economic relations), and looks to folk culture for stories that offer alternatives to patriarchal narratives of monstrous lesbians. Thus sex scenes in The Drowning Girl are designed to thwart scopophilic intrusions and to frustrate expectations of readers accustomed to either heteronormative lesbian sex scenes or muted and harmless descriptions of cosmic love unions rather than down-to-earth sex acts between women:

Eva Canning laid me out on my bed, filleted me, and she buried her face between my thighs, and her tongue sang unspeakable songs into me . . . . She lapped between my legs, and filled me to bursting with music few have ever heard and lived. She made me Ulysses. She made me a lyre and a harp and flute. She played me (two meanings here). And songs are stories, and so she made of me a book, just as I became a song. (287-288)

The eroticism of their encounter loses nothing of its impact even though depictions of sex acts become increasingly unreal and fantastic, which in turn could be interpreted as a parodic commentary on the idea of the unnaturalness of two women engaged in sex:

Eva writhed in the vermiform coils of eels and sea snakes, hagfish and lamprey. She fastened that ravenous, barbeled mouth about the folds of my labia, rasping teeth working at my clit. She writhed and coiled about me, wrapping me in a smothering, protective cocoon of slime, thick translucent mucus exuded from unseen glands or pores. Across her rib cage were drawn the gill slits of a shark, out of water and gasping, opening and closing, breathless but undying. Her breasts had vanished, leaving her chest flat except for those gills. I gazed into black eyes, eyes that were only black and nothing more, and they gazed into me.
She flowered, and bled me dry.  
She took my voice, and filled me with song.  
Unloving, she left me no choice but to love her. (295)

Through the use of sensual rather than explicitly horrific descriptions of Eva’s grotesque body, Kiernan disallows the attempts to “normalize” the lesbian body and prove that she fits the Western cultural norm of a white, able-bodied, heteronormative woman. The grotesque aesthetics, which Kiernan applies to hybrid subjectivities and corporealities, effectively interrogates the discourse of monstrous lesbianism. At the same time Kiernan does not pull back from the ambivalent nature of hybrid mergers, and she manages to both subvert and recover lesbian and queer femininities through engagement with quasi-mythical, animal-like and grotesque beings. The undetermined nature of Eva’s body is also investigated, as her hybrid incarnations are approximations rather than finished creations. She is mermaid-like and resembles a sea-snake or a she-wolf or a female dog, but none of her bodily transformations ever reaches completion. One could argue that the irony embedded in Eva’s grotesqueness resurfaces in the very idea of the lesbian monstrous body that Kiernan challenges and transforms in her own way. With her body locked in a perpetual state of becoming, Eva could be placed in the order of the Bakhtinian grotesque, although her body incites, first and foremost, awe and wonder rather than laughter:

I cried when Eva told me this, and she wiped my tears away with flickering hands unable to decide if it was best to be paws or hands. She was all of a splendid metamorphosis…. She was fist this one thing and then that other, right before my eyes. She was a kaleidoscope chrysalis of shifting skeletons and muscle and marrow, bile and the four richly appointed chambers of a mammalian heart…. She was never for an instant only a single beast, as I will not accept the deceit that there was only ever one of her, that I must choose between July and November. (211)

Hybridization and radical openness emerge also in the very structure of the narrative, as Imp seems to be unable to follow through with just one story, one identity of Eva, and one identity
of herself. This hybridization speaks of impossible mergers, and, in this sense, Imp’s longing to maintain two conflicting stories reveals her desperate desire for an unattainable blend of identities. The way Kiernan structures the novel is hybrid also in that Imp refuses to follow the traditional rules of writing. She scorns Aristotelian mimesis and decorum; she makes away with the three-part plot structure and questions the arbitrariness of beginnings and endings. She also playfully promises to be a reliable narrator and not to lie, “Which is not to say every word will be factual. Only that every word will be true. Or as true as I can manage” (6). Over the course of the narrative, Imp switches sometimes to the third person, especially when she wants to reprove herself for stalling or digressing, or to offer a metafictional comment on the structure of narrative: “And what about this business with chapters?” Imp typed. ‘If I’m not writing this to be read – which I’m most emphatically not-and if it’s not a book, as such, then why is it that I’m bothering with chapters’” (28)? This refusal to follow traditional narrative paths constitutes yet another break with the phallogocentric regime. Language as such and the stories are suspicious, unstable and unpredictable, and one’s own memories cannot be trusted, which is attested by Imp’s own diaries which are full of false recollections, such as finding a 75-dollar bill in the street. Imp’s research into the two painters (Saltontall of the mermaid creatures and Perrault of the Black Dahlia she-wolf) also reveals the hybridity of their own lives and creations, a bricolage of news reports, folk-tales, dreams, visions, memories, and figments of imagination. Kiernan refuses to uphold the rigid border between the factual and the fictional and allows Imp to investigate her own versions of the past and employ her imagination to fill in the gaps.

Imp muses over the idea of haunting, which for her encompasses the instances of being haunted not only by ghosts, but also by poems, intrusive thoughts, her relatives’ suicides, her own schizophrenia, paintings, sculptures, and even fairy tales: “Sirens are intrusive thoughts that even sane men and women have. You can call them sirens, or you can call them haunting.
Doesn’t matter” (103). Imp’s being haunted by a siren is what inspired her to write a “ghost story” in the first place:

‘I’m going to write a ghost story now,’ she typed.

‘A ghost story with a mermaid and a wolf,’ she also typed.

I also typed. (1)

Imp sees writing as the best tool to exorcise ghostly memories from her past, and in the course of relating her own narrative(s), she even writes two fictional short stories concerning the two painters so as to put her obsessions to rest. However, she remains aware of art’s twofold potential for both the expulsion of specters and for further replication of the original haunting.

According to Imp,

[haunting are memes, especially pernicious thought contagions, social contagions that need no viral or bacterial host and are transmitted in a thousand different ways. A book, a poem, a song, a bedtime story, a grandmother's suicide, the choreography of a dance, a few frames of film, a diagnosis of schizophrenia, a deadly tumble from a horse, a faded photograph, or a story…. Or a painting hanging on a wall. (12)

The question remains how successful her memoir is in comparison with her fiction? Imp admits that her “stories don’t care what I want from them. Stories do not serve me. Even my own stories” (104). The two fictional stories seemed to have helped her a bit, but the burden of Imp’s recovery rests on her main memoir, which she calls “a pocket full of stones” (27). This reference to Virginia Woolf suggests that Imp’s narrative is not only her way of drowning intrusive thoughts, but also a way of drowning a part of herself, but without sacrificing her life.

Imp’s suicidal heritage is not necessarily portrayed in desolate and depressing terms.52 Describing her mother’s suicide, she responds pragmatically: “So, yeah. My mother,

52 Imp’s disease is part of her family legacy, as both her mother and grandmother were “crazy” (as she puts it), and they both committed suicide. The family insanity tree dates back to the great-grandmother’s sister, thus linking all women in a long chain of a “disease,” which may be in fact nothing more than a medicalized term for their peculiarities.
Rosemary Anne, died in Butler Hospital. She committed suicide in Butler Hospital, even though she was on a suicide watch at the time. She was in bed, in restraints, and there was a video camera in her room. But she still pulled it off…. She said she was sorry, but that she was glad I understood, that she was grateful that I understood” (3). That is why it is not Eva’s suicide per se that causes Imp’s breakdown but rather the fact that she was emotionally and psychologically manipulated into falling in love with Eva, then helping her and finally witnessing her death. Suicide is not necessarily judged by Imp as a failure caused by madness, but rather a conscious choice that deserves to be respected, which is something she learnt from her foremothers.

Imp represents, after all, the fourth generation of women whose behavior has been considered abnormal by medical professionals and society in general: “My family’s lunacy lines up tidy as boxcars: grandmother, daughter, the daughter’s daughter, and thrown in for good measure, the great-aunt. Maybe the Curse goes even further back than that” (5). Madness that runs in her family transcends the confines of transgenerational haunting and becomes a transgenerational bond. Past suicides and her foremothers’ madness are not shameful secrets, threatening Imp’s integrity, but source of guidance and information inspiring her life choices. When talking with her psychiatrist about her great-grandaunt Caroline, who collected dead birds and mice in jars labeled with passages from the Bible, she provides alternative explanations for Caroline’s behavior, such as a keen interest in natural history or an attempt to establish a concordance between specific species and the Bible, but “Dr. Ogilvy said, no, she was likely also schizophrenic. I didn’t argue” (4-5). Imp accepts the medical diagnosis of schizophrenia, but she also describes her “disease” as her own way of seeing the world, just like her mother, grandmother and great-grandaunt Caroline had their own ways of seeing the world.
Female madness is thus redefined so as to include non-normative behavior and neuroatypical character traits. It is also a family gift, and when Imp recalls her meeting with the wolf-Eva, she admits that “[m]adwomen can see such apparitions, and our touch can render them corporeal” (215). Her madness is what makes her better attuned to the uncanny, even though the whole time she remains conscious of the constraints of the narrative which underlie her perception of the supernatural and the bizarre: “When moving through fairy tales, one must obey the laws of fairy. When moving through a ghost story, Gothic and Victorian law applies. Here I creep my footpath through both at once and the dictates are unclear, winding together in greenbrier snarls I’ll have to prick my fingers on spinning wheel spindle-shanks to comprehend” (216).

Kiernan’s novel harks back to Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum,” in which a lesbian as a woman seeking other women for support, understanding and love, but not necessarily only in terms of erotic or sensual encounters. Imp longs for the company of women, as she had been raised in one. Her childhood home was in all respects a matriarchy – her father and grandfathers were all dead, gone or simply nonexistent. This is perhaps why the word “lesbian” does not appear in the book, and the word “gay” is used only twice by Abalyn, and only when she refers to her past and the impracticality of contemporary terminology. One could argue that both Eva and Imp are in fact looking for a lost maternal connection. Whereas Imp finally finds comfort in her art and her relationship with Abalyn, Eva decides to join her mother in death by drowning. Imp chooses the exogamous kinship and reaffirms the importance of women-only relations, while Eva chooses endogamy in the sense that she would rather follow her mother than establish a new connection with a someone else.

It is important to note that even though Kiernan emphasizes the matrilineal connections and women-centered relationship, she manages to steer clear of crude essentialism that posits

53 “Someday it’s not going to seem so strange to people. At least, I like to hope it won’t. I like to believe that someday it will be generally understood it’s just how some people are. Gay. Straight. Transgender. Black. White. Blue eyes. Hazel eyes. Fish. Fowl. What the hell ever” (151).
cis-women as the “real” women. The character of Abalyn acts as a reminder of the complexity of gender dynamics, in which being a woman or choosing a woman as a lover transcends physicality. Moreover, while advocating this diversity-embracing project, Kiernan also tackles the potential subversiveness of lesbian eroticism and sexuality. In contemporary popular culture, lesbian subjects are still haunted by their perverse shadows and doppelgangers, which is evidenced by the unremitting popularity of, for instance, lesbian vampires or bull dyke aggressors in cultural texts. With respect to *The Drowning Girl*, the trope of the siren is also worth mentioning, as it was also often used “to represent the monstrosity and degeneracy of lesbian and the ‘new woman’” by late nineteenth-century (male) writers and artists (Palmer, *Lesbian Gothic* 40). Thus by utilizing the mermaid theme and by creating a fictional nineteenth-century painter obsessed with sirens, Kiernan counters this dubious heritage. The images of the fantastic bodies of women that haunt, fascinate and repulse Imp are all creations of male artists, and with time Imp collapses under the weight of these interventions on the female and/or lesbian body. By underlining the creative autonomy of Imp, who is revealed to be both a talented writer and a painter capable of envisioning fantastic worlds and alternative realities, Kiernan posits that the new lesbian textuality and imagery can act as an effective counterpart to traditional male-oriented and man-generated horror texts. The novel underscores the communal work that flows into each and every work of art, as Imp unearths the intricate webs of references, allusions, mythologies and folk-tales which nurture every single piece of art, including Imp’s own creations. Therefore, paintings, novels and ultimately also bodies become queerly grotesque in the sense that they are involved in a rapid and ongoing series of mergers, fusions and coalitions with as well as violent cuts and splits from other cultural texts. The end-results are never stable, sleek and closed off, but open, disturbing and captivating.
Ultimately, lesbian and/or female monstrosity, represented by the mermaid and shewolf imagery, ceases to be a site of disgust, passive victimization or castration anxiety. Instead, Kiernan re-colonizes lesbian desire and transforms it into a field ripe with ambiguities, sensuality and creative possibilities for radical reimaginings of one’s selfhood and one’s familial relations. What is more, exclusive matrilineality offers a way out of heavily oedipalized kinship with its toxic emphasis on law, language and hierarchy. One could argue that after all Imp tries to use the master’s tools to dismantle his house, but her semantic puzzles, inter- and meta-textual games, compulsive repetitions, literary echoes and general textual instability suggest a different kind of language, one closer to Cixous’ *écriture feminine* and the maternal white ink (881). Interestingly, by crafting such an unusual ghost story (or perhaps one should say two stories), Kiernan probes the very boundaries and generic foundations of horror fiction. Both thematically and textually, *The Drowning Girl* differs starkly from conventional horror narratives in which female corporeality and lesbianism are cast as potential threats to the patriarchal order. Instead, grotesque hybrids and material entanglements hint at a different type of dark fiction, one that moves towards ambivalence, subtle subversion and the embrace of the sexual and the feminine in all their guises.

**Transgressing the Self in The Inquisitor**

The ostensibly counterintuitive decision to include Mary Murrey’s 1997 novel, *The Inquisitor*, in the discussion of familial politics stems from the fact that Murrey’s work engages with two important themes: a flight from toxic family relations and a redefinition of female spinsterhood via the figure of a wit. Chapter As Rebecca Traister argues persuasively in *All the Single Ladies* (2016), marriage in America has never been a one-size-fits-all institution. High divorce rates, rise in cohabitation and growing attractiveness of singlehood
attest to the fact that conventional married life is no longer a universal given. It needs to be
underlined that marriage, understood as a convenient, stable and (more or less) satisfying way
of organizing one’s life, finances and personal space, has been always favored by white
middle-class women rather than women of color or working-class women. Not to mention the
fact that up until 2015 same-sex marriage has not been available in all the states. And
although a glamorized version of female singlehood has received a lot of media attention in
recent years, Murrey’s novel investigates singlehood from a historically earlier perspective,
one that casts non-married women living alone either as hysterical madwomen and crypto-
lesbian eccentrics or as powerful witches and guardians of female communities. In the end,
Murrey’s protagonist, a timid woman living alone on the edge of the forest, rejects the two
well-known stereotypes of single women – glossy urban singlehood and cerebral tragic
spinsterhood – in favor of a much older myth of a witch partaking in monstrous rituals with
the devil.

A radical rewriting of the female self with the use of both grotesque bodily imagery and
grotesquely posited human and non-human coalitions suffuses Murrey’s book with an
oppressive air of quiet terror. The Inquisitor follows Priscilla Rogers, a woman in her thirties
who is deeply unhappy with herself, her life, her appearance, and who is fighting the urge to
slip into alcoholism and succumb to food disorders. Not long before the narrative begins, she
joins a women’s circle or women’s empowerment group and starts performing little rituals
such as saving her menstrual blood to nourish her plants, burying her tampons in the forest,
and attending healing sessions. In a bold move, she relocates to a secluded spot near a forest,
where she encounters a male Doberman pinscher with whom she develops an intense
relationship – a relationship which at some point becomes sexual. Thanks to this extreme
bond, Priscilla is transformed into a physically and emotionally stronger woman ready to
confront her neighbor Dave, who turns out to be a misogynist serial killer. At the same time,
he is also a reincarnation of a Roman-Catholic priest of the medieval Inquisition. During their final confrontation, Priscilla turns into a witch whose task is to address the previous wrongs and prevent future ones by fighting the Inquisitor.

The grotesque in Murrey’s novel centers on the figure of a witch, Priscilla’s transgressive relationship with her pinscher (the witch’s familiar), and madness/hysteria entailed in her portrayal. Arguably, the witch, read as a modern-day cultural icon of female empowerment, has been ridiculed and belittled to such an extent that it is somewhat difficult not to smirk while reading Murrey’s novel. In an ironic twist, when readers first meet Priscilla, she basically embodies the “crazy cat lady” stereotype – she lives near the forest with her cat, Maxine, and engages in a number of cultural feminist rituals centering on Mother Nature, the cult of the Goddess and women’s groups. Still, one could argue that the modern witch in Murrey’s version is actually a radical reimagining of a single woman who has decided to renounce the phallogocentric system and live on its fringes rather than in its suffocating center. This gesture is underlined both by Priscilla’s grotesque encounters with the Doberman pinscher, Robin, and by her somewhat disturbing physical transformation which effectively blurs the boundaries between the human and the non-human.

In her novel, Murrey concentrates on two witch tropes – medieval witch-hunts and contemporary women’s support groups (inspired by neo-pagan, Wiccan and Goddess spirituality). Of the two, the former deserves a short introduction, as it brings into focus accusations of transgressive and/or hysterical behavior leveled at women who decide, like Priscilla, to live alone. After all, it is Priscilla’s decision to move outside the city and reside at the liminal edge of the forest, alone and far from her parents, that initiates the dramatic chain of events. In fact, her willful isolation and separation from friends and family as well as engagement in women-only rituals could be read as emblematic of female witchcraft.
The infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*, published in Germany in 1487 is probably the best-known manual concerning witches and witchhunting. The book spelled out the reasons why women were more likely than men to be witches, chief among which was, of course, female carnality and her very corporeality. Margaret Ann Denike applies Kristeva’s and Mary Douglas’s theories on the links between “pollution, abjection, and feminine repudiation” in order to explain how the concept of evil has been often used in the history of female sexuality (15). Denike argues that certain things needed to be pushed violently outside the system of signification for the new Christian center to be reconstituted. In those new margins created by Christianity we can now find cults and religious systems based on polytheism and fertility rites: “[t]he place and law of the One, the One God, do not exist without the violence of negation, the repudiation of the fertility cults and especially the feminine deities of the ancient world, whose fecund bodies threaten to engulf the ascetically purified, rational soul of man” (Denike 20). The abject nature of female witchcraft is met head-on by Murrey in her description of Priscilla’s increasing disinterest in hygiene – she no longer shaves her legs or armpits, stops wiping herself, buries tampons in the forest, does not wash her hair or body as often as earlier, urinates in the forest, uses her menstrual blood to cultivate the plants, etc. Rather than renounce her liminal body excretions, odors or leakages, she embraces them with curiosity and tenacity. Thus instead of following purification rituals, she goes through a series of polluting rituals and unlearns what her parents taught her about the female body and its supposedly abject nature.

Even though Mary Murrey’s work was published in the late 1990s, it resonates well with cultural feminism of the 1970s and 1980s and its focus on gynocriticism. As Paulina Palmer has noted, the figure of the witch is utilized quite often by contemporary women writers to embody the transgressive potential of lesbianism and/or radical feminism. Palmer, in her description of Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), points to the radical potential of the witch,
who just like the contemporary lesbian, signifies a protest against and a threat to patriarchal culture in that she refuses to take part in the heterosexual matrix and creates her own woman-only space instead. What is more, “[h]er powers of shape-changing are interpreted by Daly as representing woman’s ability to transform her psyche and experiment with new lifestyles and art forms” (*Lesbian Gothic* 30), which is precisely what happens to Murrey’s protagonist. Dark rather than playful in tone, *The Inquisitor* portrays the liberating potential of women’s support groups, neo-pagan spirituality and the Goddess mythology, all of which came into the feminist spotlight in the 1970s and 1980s.

Murrey suggests that the semi-religious rituals Priscilla practices can bring together the power and strength that were suppressed and somehow thrown outside the system together with everything that is culturally coded as abject in the female body. Thus after the reverse cleansing rituals, which included a sexual act with Robin, Priscilla’s identity formation is completed. In the course of this she receives help from Robin, even though she is not certain whether he came to her as “some kind of force called up by herself or one of the other witches, one of their companions” (236). He may even be a “devilish” force which was commanded by her predecessors. Murrey actually mentions one of the works responsible for renewing the interest in the Goddess mythology and spirituality in the twentieth century, Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* (1948). In this book, he mentions a 1664 witch trial, during which the witches’ god or chief was called “Robin,” and it was Robin who initiated them into the coven by pricking their fingers (Murrey 106). And while Robin represents a demonic force, Priscilla’s name translates as “the Ancient One” in Latin (Murrey 177), which, taken together, hints at a larger battle between a female witch/independent woman and a male inquisitor/misogynist.

During her final confrontation with Dave, Priscilla becomes so attuned to her witch-like self that she is able to recall flying in the open sky and being “tied to a stake” (200). She also
sees benevolent spirits (such as her beloved Aunt) protecting and warning her when she enters Dave’s house, and she is able to pick up disembodied female voices in Dave’s house encouraging her to resist his mental tricks and reminding her that “he is a psychopath, a sexual killer. A rapist, Priscilla, a rapist” (208). Thus her being a witch is not just about remembering her previous incarnations, but also about being able to hear other women’s voices and benefit from their experiences. This again brings us to the communal experiences of witches or, more broadly, to women engaged in shared rituals.

Priscilla enacts certain ritualistic gestures herself; for instance, she buries her dead cat with the ankh cross, uses salt to establish protected space around it, and sets up a small altar with the statue of Virgin Mary next to her cat’s grave. This fusion of magic, Christian and pagan symbols marks her clearly as a blasphemous witch over the course of the narrative. Initially she smirks at the label “witch” (11), but she comes to accept it at the close of the novel. Since “ritual[s] [are] prominent in all areas of uncertainty, anxiety, impotence, and disorder” (Myerhoff 305), Priscilla turns to them for integration and strength achieved through a sense of predictability and continuity they offer her. Conversely, in Dave’s house she glimpses several conflicting symbols: a large crucifix, an inverted pentagram, and an ominous mask of a dog which resembles a man’s or a devil’s face. His rituals turn out to be predicated on violence and torture, and in order to gain power he needs to sacrifice the women.

Murrey’s narrative proposes that a specific group of men – the Inquisitors – robbed women of their powers, the consequences of which can be still seen today. This account, outlandish as it may initially seem, is not without merit when we look at the growth and expansion of Christianity and especially Christianity’s early interactions with non-monotheistic religions. As Denike notes, an interesting shift occurred when pagan deities and fertility rituals were construed as heresy, and consequently, certain pagan images were
incorporated in the emerging Christian cosmology as representing evil forces and the Devil himself (23). With time, deluded or misguided pagans were transformed into consciously disobedient or possessed heretics who could be held criminally responsible for their actions (Denike 28). It should also be emphasized that the discourse which cast unmarried and otherwise noncompliant women as heretic witches was controlled by learned men – scholars and theologians, priests and the Church Fathers. And because evil deeds came to be associated with pollution, fecundity, “corporeal defilement,” lust and sexuality, all of which were also associated with females, evil as such was coded feminine in many Western cultures (Denike 16). The Inquisitor thus links Christian expansion with the subjugation of women in Western societies and the subsequent consolidation of patriarchy and, in contemporary times, also pervasive rape culture and violence against women.

In The Inquisitor we can find a direct reference to the way “Christianity had split the Goddess: sanitized, purified, and ‘made divine’ part of human nature, and degraded the other part, particularly the power women had, the power of sexuality” (179). The merger of these two sides is facilitated by Robin, who teaches Priscilla about the things she learnt to repress or feel ashamed of, especially those connected with her corporeality and sexuality. Helping Robin kill a raccoon and later taking out his still beating heart as a form of sacrifice finally pushes Priscilla over a certain threshold. She uncovers her house mirrors and talks with her other self, a witch-like ghost, who explains to her that she is actually involved in an age-long battle, which in itself forms just another ripple of the Inquisition but is also a part of widespread violence directed at women: “There is a debt to be paid. How can something of that magnitude be forgotten on a cosmic level? Millions of women were murdered. Evil was released” (174). As already mentioned, in this particular collision, Priscilla is a witch, and Dave, her neighbor is both a Dominican priest of the Inquisition and a modern-day serial killer and a rapist, which leaves Robin an ambiguous a force, which the Inquisitors used to
equate with evil and the devil, but which Priscilla is at a loss to name. He may even be the devil, but not in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the Fallen Angel plotting to take over the world and entrap mankind, but rather in the sense of a destructive power associated with the dark side of the Goddess. He may in fact embody those elements of the Goddess cults that were converted by Christian theologians into pagan and satanic heresies.

Because Priscilla succeeds in re-merging those two sides of the Goddess (the pure and divine, and the destructive and degraded) she is able to confront Dave at the end of the novel and defeat him. During their graphic confrontation, Dave finally reveals his true face, kills Robin, rapes unconscious Priscilla and dresses her in a white childish dress resembling the First Communion garments. Then he adopts the posture of an exorcist who wants to rid her of the unholy spirit inside her and addresses her as “child.” But he is also an Inquisitor who threatens her – the witch – with the punishment she has incurred upon herself by being attracted to Robin, the devil’s familiar. In the end, Priscilla fools him into releasing her and, with the help of Robin’s spirit, she lunges at Dave and severs his carotid by biting his neck and ripping his flesh open, just like Robin had taught her earlier.

The grotesque image of Dave’s throat being ripped open by Priscialla’s teeth is reminiscent of the representations of hysterical women from the infamous series of photographs taken by Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital – faces contorted by pain and anger, limbs twisted by epileptic spasms, and writing, animal-like bodies – which for a long time have inhabited popular iconography of female madness and hysteria. It is possible to read Murrey’s novel as a kind of a hysterical text in which the attractiveness of the trope of female madness is linked to the fact that “[o]n the simplest level, madness offers a woman a socially acceptable excuse for expressing anger and hostility; and, conversely, the expression of these ‘unfeminine’ feelings may be construed as signs of madness” (Showalter, “Killing the Angel” 212).
Priscilla’s hysteria could be read as a return to the pre-linguistic, pre-Symbolic all-encompassing maternal associated with the witches’ communal power. Foucault’s claim that madness is “a lack of language” and “the silence of the stifled” (Felman 14) is reflected in the blurring of the human and the non-human in *The Inquisitor* and the non-linguistic forms of communication which, at least partly, inform Robin and Priscilla’s relationship. Yet at the same time, hysteria seems to arrest Priscilla in just one striking pose – lurching a wild-eyed attack on Dave. Just like Charcot’s subjects were forever locked in grotesque positions and were consequently left speechless under the pretense that images speak volumes, madness poses a similar risk for Priscilla.  

Similarly, Priscilla’s audacity to break cultural and social taboos might be read as both a liberating gesture and an essentialist folly, which only serves to show how enmeshed she really is in dominant discourses, including that of feminist emancipation through the discovery of one’s true feminine self. Priscilla’s increasingly animalistic behavior culminates in her engaging in sexual intercourse with Robin, although to be fair, there are only two sexual acts mentioned in the book. Sex with Robin is, however, closely linked with the master-apprentice relation that she enters in with her dog. In the narrator’s words: “[H]e was teaching her something she hadn’t completely grasped yet” (126). And “she was learning how to break the taboos and rules that growing up in [her family] house taught her to accept; rules that marked out her internal space so thoroughly that she found it difficult even to enjoy her right to masturbate” (125). Not surprisingly, her gradual break with a number of social and cultural taboos, also the ones concerned specifically with the abject: carcasses, blood of...  

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54 It is worth mentioning that especially in the 1970s and 1980s, hysteria was investigated closely by a number of feminist theorists who construed it as a “breaking-point of language, the mute and painful dramatization of an exclusion from speech” (Small 26). Still, in “On Hystericanarrative” Elaine Showalter points to certain risks embedded in the popularization of the term “hystericanarrative”: it seems that just like the late nineteenth century saw the medical hysterization of women’s bodies, late twentieth century witnessed a hysterization of women’s texts. Ultimately, applying the term “hysteric” carries the risk of reducing the heroine’s emotional and psychological makeup to just one narrow definition of the female self, posited through French feminist theory as a return of or to the maternal. And when it comes to Gothic fiction, there is always the added danger of patronizing female experience via the use of hysteria.
animals, dirt, menstrual blood, urine, etc., is interpreted by her family as an indication of a mental illness or even a demonic possession. The fact that she lives alone (and away from other people) and is not actively pursuing romantic relationships makes her only more susceptible to madness/possession in her family’s eyes. Thus Priscilla’s self-imposed exile and her embrace of what her family sees as willful spinsterhood tie her to image of a hysterical madwoman who has to be contained and then brought back, literally and figuratively, into the center.

Just days before the final confrontation, Priscilla is warned by her brother that her parents are seriously considering institutionalizing her, and asking an exorcist to cure her. In the same conversation her brother points out her animal-like behavior: “Look at you! You’re baring your teeth like an animal. Why are you so afraid of the crucifix” (190)? To both Priscilla’s brother and her parents, her animal-like behavior, lack of restraint, wildness are suggestive of anti-Christian, anti-Catholic, even Satanic sentiments which need to be corrected first by incapacitating her and later by subjecting her to cleansing rituals. Priscilla’s grotesquely transformed body brings her an empowering sense of transgression, which is, however, perceived by her friends and family as a sign of hysteria. But in reality, it was Priscilla’s own family who tried to push her into the hysterical mould of a deeply frightened, insecure and codependent young woman. Some scattered references to Priscilla’s having been abused by her father are finally explained when it is revealed that her father mistreated her and her siblings by mocking and ridiculing them so harshly that Priscilla developed food disorders and extremely low self-esteem, while her younger brother attempted suicide at the age of 14.

The abusive patriarchal family has damaged Priscilla to such an extent that it is no wonder she has turned away from them and searched for alternative kinship structures such as women’s groups. Even though the novel does not dwell on Priscilla’s (and her brother’s)
childhood, the little that is mentioned suffices to explain Priscilla’s move away from the city and her attempts to find a different type of familial support. She escapes the oppressive milieu of her parents’ household, in which her self-worth was tightly correlated with her gender performance. Punished for what is construed as an incorrect performance of conventional femininity (for instance, being too fat or too sexual) has made her understandably cautious of traditional family arrangements. Readers can only assume that her younger brother experienced similar abuse, which only serves to prove that in a patriarchal household everyone suffers, regardless of their sex and position.

In the end, it is Robin rather than Priscilla’s female friends who helps her become a strong, independent woman capable of defeating Dave. Priscilla undergoes a visceral transformation which is triggered and sustained by her relationship with the Doberman. First, she loses appetite and starts getting thinner, then she takes up jogging and spends more and more time with Robin outdoors. She goes barefoot to the forest; stops wiping herself or using deodorant; covers all the mirrors and refuses to put on makeup. With time she even joins Robin in eating raw meat on all fours using just her mouth, marking her favorite tree with her urine, rolling in dead carcass, and finally partaking in killing and eating a raccoon. Her image at the end of this transformative process is that of a visibly altered, lean and muscular body covered in blood and bodily fluids, not necessarily hers. In this reading, Priscilla leaves the phallogocentric system which oppressed her through her father’s verbal abuse, the disciplining male gaze, but also her female friends’ internalized misogyny and their attempts at policing the way she looks and behaves. Priscilla’s transgression then acts as a boundary-breaker, a way out of the thick web of toxic dependencies, problematic familial attachments and blocked relationship with her body, sexuality and gender. Still, one cannot but wonder if
such an affirmative evaluation of her transgressive behavior (specifically her relationship with Robin) is not perhaps a tad naïve.\textsuperscript{55}

At the end of the day, Murrey’s novel remains highly problematic in the sense that the only viable place outside oppressive phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality (to borrow Adrienne Rich’s expression) is to be found in the forest and on all fours. This rather simplistic escape from the male-dominated civilized world into a female-controlled wilderness reiterates essentialist concepts of femininity, which have limited potential for actual positive change. What is more, Murrey falls prey to romanticizing certain aspects of femininity, such as supposedly innate feminine intuition or women’s affinity with nature. Priscilla’s drastic gesture of covering all the house mirrors is reminiscent of second-wave radical feminist refusal to participate in the system of internalized male gaze. But by removing herself from public space and the omnipresent male gaze, Priscilla actually becomes even more vulnerable to her neighbor’s murderous gaze.

The grotesque bestial imagery employed by Murrey throughout the book helps to investigate the “ontology of otherness” (Powell 130) as well as the tensions between the human and non-human, between self and the other. In this sense, Robin, the dog, symbolizes unbridled animalistic power of nature, but he is also strongly associated with liminality and hybridity. This coalition, perhaps even a fusion, of species comes to the fore in Priscilla’s relationship with the Doberman pinscher – while her friends and family misconstrue their

\textsuperscript{55} In few select scenes, Murrey approaches the dark eroticism of Bataillean transgression, specifically when describing Priscilla’s sexual relations with Robin, their shared hunt for wild animals and feasting on a carcass. For the duration of these grotesque rituals, transgression does not serve the purpose of breaking (or reaffirming) the boundaries; it is not oppositional or subversive, but rather it seeks to disturb the unity of the self. Chris Jenks describes the instant when transgression meets limit: “There is an inevitable violence in the collision and a celebration in the instantaneous moment at which both limit and transgression find meaning. Limit finds meaning through the utter fragility of its being having been exposed, and transgression finds meaning through the revelation of its imminent exhaustion” (90). Still, in the larger context of \textit{The Inquisitor}, Priscilla’s transgressive gestures are folded back into the system of signification, in which dark erotic transgressions have a clearly subversive function and are activated in order to push Priscilla out of her comfort zone and onto a new level of understanding her own corporeality and sexuality.
relation thinking that she is humanizing the dog, she is in fact becoming “more dog-like” (Murrey 129). Priscilla’s liaison with Robin as well as her physical transformation into a feral woman intimate her attempt to escape into the non-human nature away from her dissatisfying life. Yet the contestatory potential of these grotesque relations is rather limited, as these practices and events are temporal and function as rites of passage only. Priscilla has to cross certain psychological and physical taboos, but only in order to return to another women’s group and, possibly, a heterosexual union in the near future, as the last pages seem to suggest. In the end, the rejection of all relationships (with female friends and male lovers) in favor of self-reliant singlehood is transitory at best for Murrey’s protagonist. Thus Priscilla’s refusal to establish a traditional nuclear family is only initially portrayed as radical and emancipatory. Moreover, the events of the novel prove that there is no safety in self-prescribed isolation for a single woman. On the last pages, we find Priscilla in a Diana-worshipping Wicca coven, now a practicing witch, living with a small Collie puppy and slowly recuperating from the events of the previous year. A male suitor has already appeared on the horizon and the ending suggests that a successful reintegration into the heterosexual matrix is in store for the new and improved Priscilla.

**Male Grotesque Bodies**

On the look of it, Elizabeth Massie’s *Sineater* is the most generically conventional novel of the four books discussed in this chapter. The winner of the 1993 Bram Stoker Award, *Sineater* follows closely the Southern Gothic tradition, as its plot centers on an intimidating matriarch, an isolated backwater community, an explosion of violence, “[a] mansion that will be destroyed, a declining family, a genealogical secret, revenge and murder” (Crow 158). Massie’s novel also seems the most traditional work in the way it presents kinship structures.
But at the same time it could be argued that *Sineater* is the most radical novel of the four analyzed herein, as it applies the grotesque aesthetics to men and boys rather than women. As a consequence, the gendered structure of the grotesque and its associations with femininity and womanhood (rather than masculinity and manhood) are called into question. On the one hand, one could argue that the unwanted feminization that the male bodies undergo in *Sineater* does not really affect gender binary, and the conceptual framework of both genders remains largely intact. On the other hand, however, the radical potential of Massie’s novel could be found in its symbolic break with cis-gendered structure of human reproduction. The female grotesque, as used by Massie, points to the dangers of obsessive attachments, limited personal freedoms accorded to individuals (of both genders) within fundamentalist communities, and the troubling entanglement of two families within larger community dynamics.

Although the story alternates between different focalizers, the main point-of-view is that of a ten-year-old boy, Joel, who lives in a small Southern town, Ellison, in the Beacon Cove community, in the early 1990s. Joel is special, as he is the youngest of the Barkers, a family feared and shunned by the whole community, because Joel’s father, Avery, is the local sineater – a person responsible for cleansing dead bodies of their sins. Yet, in contrast to the earlier sineaters of Ellison, when Avery was forced to become one, he decided not to forgo his plans to have a family, thus becoming the first sineater to have a wife and children. Not allowed to talk to them or even look at them, he visits his home at night, when his children are asleep, and spends his days roaming the forest. The father’s abject position spills onto his entire family – his wife, Lelia, never leaves their little dilapidated farm, his two older children, Petrie and Curry, have never learnt to read or write and have never gone to town by

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56 Sin-eating is a form of apotropaic magic which has never been studied extensively by anthropologists, but which has nonetheless subsisted in some Western folk traditions. For more see, Kvideland, “Sin-Eating” (1984).
daylight, while his youngest son’s (Joel’s) going to school threatens to tear the whole community apart.

When the story begins, a new radical sect starts to coalesce in opposition to Avery and to what is perceived as his growing wickedness (interpreted as his decision to have a family). Missy Campbell (Aunt Missy), who hails from a respected family of lay preachers, leads her flock of believers to turn their backs not only on Avery and his sin-eating practice, but also on everyone who has helped or interacted with Joel or any of the Barkers. Soon, what begins as cruel pranks and little acts of violence escalates and leads to a bloody finale, in which it is revealed that Missy killed her twelve-year-old daughter during a failed exorcism, and as she was unable to cope with the guilt, she relocated her anger onto Avery. Meanwhile, the person responsible for the carnage turns out to be Curry who felt slighted by the community’s increasing lack of faith in his father’s hallowed role, which he was supposed to take over in the future. It is Curry who kidnaps Missy, her nephew (Burke) and a local postman who wanted justice after losing his hand in a bomb explosion. Both Avery and Curry die at the end, and it is the youngest, Joel, who takes over the family business of sin-eating, vowing, however to change the grotesque rituals and dispel at least some of the air of abjection that has hitherto enveloped the sineater.

In Avery’s case, it is more than just his abjection that seems to trouble the Beacon Cove community. It is his grotesque nature that bothers them, and to be precise, his having children, which is seen as irreconcilable with his abject status as the community’s sineater. As Missy explains it to Burke, the sineater having a wife and kids is “a sign of the evil growin’ in the Cove” (Part 1, Chapter 9). Consequently, it is Avery, rather than Lelia who is burdened with the stigma of illicit and somehow transgressive reproduction. Interestingly, the prologue (set in 1979) shows a very Bakhtinian tableau of Lelia giving birth to Joel with terrified Petrie and

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57 All subsequent quotes from Elizabeth Massie’s *Sineater* come from 2010 non-paginated Kindle Edition.
Curry forced to watch, as “a new baby was the family’s business, and it was not a private thing” (Prologue). This is the only scene in the entire novel focalized by Curry and therefore can be read as a critical moment in his life when his future is defined. His younger sister, Petrie, as a woman, will be exempt from the burden of being the next sineater, and it will be Curry’s duty to follow in his father’s footsteps. His younger brother, however, will have independence unavailable to Curry. As it is revealed at the end, it was Joel’s freedom to do as he wanted, to go to school, to interact with other people that hurt Curry the most. Curry as the future sineater and Petrie as another irrelevant female helper at home were not allowed to go to school or socialize with anyone. Joel, however, was exempt from these restrictions, as his role at the Barker household was limited to being just a child, rather than his father’s successor (Curry) or his mother’s main helper (Petrie).

Because of the ban on looking at the sineater, the descriptions of his body veer towards the fantastic, even the phantasmatic. Seven-year-old Curry muses that if their mother died during childbirth, their father would come “ravenous with hunger, slobbering and seething with the heat of sin” and maybe even his saliva would be poisonous (Prologue). When Curry goes outside to yell to his father the sex of a newborn he notices something cautiously moving in the shadows – “[s]omething huge, thick, and dark. The sineater” (Prologue). Already at the very beginning, Avery is presented as something rather than someone, as if his very role in the Beacon Cove community has automatically removed him from the human into the non-human territory. Later on, when Joel is trying to imagine his father, he is able to see only “shadows [that] hint at the shape of a man… A void fills that shape, a void that holds all the vileness and evil that has ever been Beacon Cove. A void not empty, but full of blackness ” (Part 1, Chapter 9). His father is no longer a father but a supernatural force that makes the trees part “for this man-shape” (Part 1, Chapter 9). He is also the local boogeyman, as Burke cruelly reminds Joel at one point (Part 1, Chapter 9).
When Joel steals his mother’s old photograph of Avery, he does not know whether it was taken before or after Avery’s transformation into a sineater, and this makes Joel extremely anxious and afraid to actually look at the picture. Instead he succumbs to yet another grotesque phantasm of his father:

And then the crack of light in his mind pulls open, and the fissure of his imagination widens... and Joel sees the sineater’s boots, the large, threatening curve of taut and angry legs, the large torso, the shoulders, broad and thick and hardened, with arms and hands spread outward, clawed and ready to swipe the face off an intrusive boy.... He sees a neck, large and dark, sweaty and pulsing with rage. A chin, hair on it dense and spiked like the vicious thorns of a sword brush tree. A mouth snarled with crazed anger. Deformed cheeks of leather, flat flaring nose, and eyes [...] (Part 2, Chapter 15)

At a different moment Joel is seriously ill and is lying in bed with high fever listening to Avery’s heavy steps, and he cannot help imagining his father’s fantastic body in terms of its grotesque largeness and non-human features. The triad mentioned by Edwards and Graulund – exuberance, exaggeration and excess – outline the grotesqueness of Joel’s fantasies concerning Avery’s body: “He is tall, oh Dear God, yes. Almost as tall as the kitchen ceiling. And his arms are like tree trunks, knotted with muscle, with hands of leather and nails as sharp as fish hooks. Legs thick and hard” (Part 2, Chapter 5). References to animals form the second tier of Joel’s imaginings: “boots of glistening reptile skin and toes painted with metal caps. His neck like a bear’s and his face” (Part 2, Chapter 5). A similar description of Avery is presented when he attends a wake at which he is refused access to a deceased body. First, Avery sends in one of Joel’s goats with a message tied to its neck. Missy’s followers, however, interpret the unfortunate messenger as a devil’s animal and set it on fire. The goat escapes into the forest and the blaze of the fire lights up the trees so that everyone can see “the shadow of a man, forty feet tall, his arms outstretched in anger and his hands clutching out at the air like giant claws, thrown against an enormous spruce tree. The black head looms. The
arms raise higher, the hands coming together into monstrous, deadly fists” (Part 2, Chapter 25). Joel is paralyzed with fear and watches from his hiding place a silhouette which suggests “the image of the sineater. The claws, the thick and brutal arms, the spiked beard and cruel, twisted, inhuman mouth” (Part 2, Chapter 25).

It is only at the very end, when Joel finds his dying father, that he ceases to fear looking into Avery’s face which “is bearded, the whiskers crudely cut with sort of dull knife. His hair is unkempt, uneven locks framing his forehead. There are lines on the face, although the lines do not so much speak of age as care. And his eyes are blue. Curry’s blue. Petrie’s blue. And yet not. There is a vulnerability there, and fear, and sorrow” (Part 4, Chapter 2). Instead of a larger-than-life monstrous being with claws and spiky hair, Joel finds a sad, fragile man whose life was taken from him by the community which eventually turned their backs on him. We also learn that Avery has been living at the cabin where his father had been burnt to death almost thirty years before. This is where Burke discovers a stash of farm magazines, popular weeklies, all carefully wrapped in a plastic bag. There are also birthday cards and photographs of Lelia concealed in there. Avery’s horrifying aura begins to crumble, as we realize he was a deeply unhappy, lonely man who spent most of his time remembering the happy days before he was forced to become a sineater.

Avery’s grotesquery also fits the order of Russo’s female grotesque, as he is marked by the sign of difference on several levels. He is forced to sacrifice his happiness and his dreams for the sake of his community, but the sacrifice is not noble and heroic as in male-centered legends. On the contrary, it is a sacrifice that is more akin to female servitude, as he keeps helping people but receives from them neither kindness nor respect. What is more, he is associated with earthiness, soil and dirt as he lives alone in the forest, moves stealthily at night and resembles a wild beast rather than a human being. He is also connected to the dark side of procreation and reproduction, because of his insolent decision to have children, the
decision which simultaneously disgusts and fascinates the Beacon Cove community. After all, he is a freak that has been allowed to breed and his children are thus marked by his freakish nature. His body is feminized also in the sense that it is open to intrusions (through the symbolic eating of human excrements – their sins) and leaks (as in the poisonous drool that Curry imagines in the beginning of the novel). And lastly, his is a body that undergoes drastic changes, when for instance, he seems to grow forty feet tall. As already mentioned in connection to the monstrous-feminine, such dramatic bodily transformations in horror texts suggest a feminization of the monster whose body grows, extends, and crosses new barriers just like a female body does during its liminal phases.

Other male protagonists also partake of the female grotesque, most notably, Burke, who is a few years older than Joel and who is sent by his parents to his Aunt Missy to help her out. Upon arriving at Ellison he is forced to join Missy’s sect. While carving a crude star on Burke’s arm to mark his entrance into their congregation, she implores him to: “[t]hink of the sineater and his evil. He is filled with more sin than can be held. He will rise up like the devil and chew us up” (Part 1, Chapter 2). Afterwards, he is given drugs and taken to a shed where he witnesses his aunt’s failed attempt at exorcising her daughter by driving nails into her eyes. This traumatic experience is, however, blocked from his memory and it is only when he is being tortured with nails by Curry at the end of the novel that he remembers what happened in Aunt Missy’s shed.

In Burke’s subplot, Massie examines the power/powerlessness dyad that underpins the female grotesque as well. Burke is victimized by Missy by being forced to partake in her horrific rituals, and in this sense, his scarred body is made grotesque by others, against his will. Yet, the participation in Missy’s rituals does not bring power and strength to Burke, but leaves him deeply ashamed and scared. That is why when he kills a cat just to see if it has a soul, his monstrousness is pitiable and sickening rather than truly frightening. Constantly
plotting a revenge against Missy, the mad matriarch, yet unable to rebel directly, Burke imagines himself killing Avery and capturing his power so that he would no longer be dependent on his Aunt. At one point, he decides to reinvent himself and insists on being called by his first name, as Dave “is somebody else. Someone who can make changes. Someone with guts” (Part 2, Chapter 3). He then proceeds to ask Joel to remove the scarification with sand paper, to which Joel reluctantly agrees. However, to Burke’s chagrin, the sign was carved so deep it cannot be eradicated. He realizes the only way to make the star insignificant is to kill the sineater so that Missy’s followers will recognize his power and superiority over his aunt. He resolves “to see, to catch, the sineater. Because to bring down the most powerful is to become the most powerful” (Part 2, Chapter 3). Dave’s/Burke’s obsession with power results from his own feeling of helplessness and dependence on others, especially on Missy, who abuses him verbally and physically and forces him to take part in her sectarian rituals.

Through Dave/Burke we learn how Aunt Missy has managed to merge several distinct issues in her crusade against the sineater: “People going to listen to false preachers. Changing rituals to suit themselves…. Women dressing in men’s clothes. Kids getting taught about their bodies at school. The sineater getting married and having a family” (Part 1, Chapter 13). Missy believes there is too much sin for the sineater to handle and he has changed into the Devil himself by refusing to follow time-honored traditions. Of course, Dave/Burke does not really believe in Missy’s teachings and what truly fascinates him is the power Missy exerts over her congregation as well as the sway the sineater seems to hold over the entire community, including his Aunt.

As more and more inhabitants of Ellison join Missy’s congregation, her cabin swells with people, and her garden is filled with tents of people who decide to live near their charismatic prophetess. Dave/Burke is reminded of a carnival with “[t]he smells of fatty
meats cooking over the backyard fire…. Sweat. Grit” (Part 2, Chapter 17). He sees Missy’s rituals as one big “monstrous farce,” albeit a carnivalesque farce in which real power resides (Part 2, Chapter 22). In a truly grotesque turn, Missy comes up with a new sin-eating ritual in which the whole congregation is expected to drink the blood and eat the flesh of the dead person whom they want to cleanse of his or her sins. Dave/Burke is forced to follow his Aunt’s example, even though he is shaking and gagging on the blood and the cadaver’s skin:

The crowd swarms over the corpse, making cuts and hunching down to suckle the body like a frantic gathering of obscene hairless kittens over a wrinkled, decaying mother. Fucking coward! Dave’s face buries into the sharp cedar needles on the ground. His body spasms, and without knowing or caring, he wets himself. (Part 2, Chapter 24)

Ultimately, Dave/Burke is too weak to confront both his Aunt Missy and the sineater, and instead is forced to go through the cannibalistic ceremony that manages to mock both the Christian sacrament of communion and the community’s sineating ritual. The earthy image of his broken leaking body lying face-down on the ground is yet another image of the female grotesque applied to a male subject. Dave’s/Burke’s humiliation at the wake is what drives him into the forest where he is kidnapped by Curry and suffers further humiliation and abuse at the hands of his attacker – he is crucified.

While Burke and the postman are being crucified, Missy is left outside the abandoned cabin chained to a tree. Joel finds the three and runs to town for help, but he is turned away by Fitch, a shop owner’s colleague. He then solicits Curry’s help and together they help the three, although Curry decides to leave the postman behind as they are not able to take all three into town at once. He even reproaches Joel for his childish desire to save the postman: “He ain’t your friend. You’re a Barker. You know your place” (Part 3, Chapter 18). It is then that Joel realizes that all the threatening notes were written by Fitch, but he only acted as Curry’s messenger.
Curry admits that he manipulated Fitch into helping him, as he wanted to react to their father’s diminishing importance in the community and wanted to make sure that he, as his father’s successor, would “have the fear that is due [him]” (Part 3, Chapter 19)! Already as a small child, Curry knew that “he was born to keep Avery from God’s holy and terrible burning lake when he dies” and his role in the community was to be glorious and terrifying (Prologue). Seeking power and respect for his family is, however, inexorably connected to his jealousy of Joel: “If I can’t have what my spoiled little brother has, then I want what I can have. If I can’t go into town, if I can’t go to school and learn to read and write or walk in the daylight where other people talk, then I’ll be feared like nobody was ever feared in Beacon Cove” (Part 3, Chapter 19). Begrudging his little brother’s freedom to do as he pleases, Curry wants to set up an example with the people he kidnapped. He slits Missy’s throat but is ultimately stopped by his own father, although he manages to mortally wound Avery before dying.

The two dead bodies of the father and his firstborn son become grotesque in that they become figures of displacement in which an exaggerated fragment stands for the whole. The bodies of the sineater and the would-be-sineater are the body politic of the community – frightening and frightened in equal degrees, filled with a glorious purpose and having no agency, close to God and abandoned by the people. In fact, the shop owner acknowledges the communal responsibility for what is happening, as he curses both the Barkers “for being who they were and… Ellison and Beacon Cove for making them who they were” (Part 3, Chapter 10). In a truly Gothic twist, the vestiges of the past destroy the present. Not surprisingly perhaps, the story of the community’s involvement with charismatic evangelical practices dates back to the Civil War.58

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58 In 1864, Missy Campbell’s great-grandfather courageously stood ground in the church against the Union soldiers and thus cemented his position as a spiritual leader of Ellison. And even though traditional Southern Baptists grew in numbers in the decades to follow, the Campbells continued proselytizing and swaying people to join them in snake-handling, witnessing and poison-drinking sessions. Elaborate wakes centered upon
Baptist pastors of Ellison, understandably, preached against such rituals as snake-handling or speaking in tongues, and tried to convince members of their congregation not to take part in what they thought were such foolish and dangerous practices. But when reverend Mason was transferred to Ellison in 1983, he decided not to deepen the rift between the established church and the Cove community, and instead agreed to their ways, a decision which was welcomed by some, but which made others uneasy. It would seem that it was “the leniency toward the layman rituals of frenzied trance meetings, the snake handlings, wakes and the sineating” that added to Missy Campbell’s growth in power (Part 1, Chapter 9). Ironically, it was Missy’s own father who insisted on Avery becoming the new sineater, since as an orphan he was perfect for the role. Even though Avery tried to hide in the Baptist church, the congregation dragged him out and forced Avery to take over the sineating duties from the sineater who had just died. But instead of living alone in the forest, Avery asked Lelia to become his wife, so that his loneliness would be alleviated.

Missy has tolerated the Baptist church, but considered their religious standards way too slack, and so when her daughter died, she turned to Avery’s to look for a scapegoat. Speaking as a God’s prophet, Missy tries to persuade the Beacon Cove community to turn away from Avery: “We must seek a new tradition. We cannot do as we have always done. The blister has grown to a head. The face on that head is the devil” (Part 1, Chapter 7). Thanks to Missy’s admonitions and apocalyptic warnings, very few people offer Joel even a slightest interest – his third-grade teacher, the postman, the owner of a shop where Curry leaves his woven

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59 Joel learns from his friend’s letters that the friend’s father, who used to be a Baptist preacher in Ellison, left the town and stopped preaching altogether, because he felt responsible for Missy’s daughter (Patsy’s) death. He thought that the “mountain customs were fine because of their traditional value,” but he misread them, and his kindness towards Missy’s backfired (Part 2, Chapter 14). When Patsy accidentally saw Avery in the forest, she returned hysterical and was then locked by Missy in the shed. Reverend Mason assured Missy that she should pray and God will surely guide her. Unfortunately for Patsy, Missy was guided to drive nails into her daughter’s eyes.
baskets for tourists – all three are punished sooner or later: the teacher is locked with a rats’ nest and suffers a stroke, the postman’s hand is blown away by a home-made bomb attached to the Barkers’ mailbox and he is later left to die in the woods, the shop owner’s beloved dogs are killed and then his wife dies in a church explosion. And the school principal is brutally murdered after he has refused to expel Joel.

Witnessing the destruction he has inadvertently triggered, Joel realizes the depressing truth that “[f]or his whole life, Joel will have only his family to be with him. Only his family to attend him. And together, they will cower in the dark and be shunned by day and will cry and shiver and pray” (Part 3, Chapter 1). As his mother reminds him: “We are the least of all, Joel. We got our place, our duty… you have no choice in being a Barker. We was assigned of God, Joel” (Part 1, Chapter 3). Only his sister, Petrie, seems to long for an escape from such a dreary existence, and she is the only one who actually chooses to live elsewhere. Lelia and Curry are, however, resigned to their fate, whereas Joel “ alone, longs for his world to be bigger” (Part 3, Chapter 13).

*Sineater* is divided into five parts – “Joel and Lelia,” “Joel and Petrie,” “Joel and Curry,” “Joel and Avery,” and “Joel” – each one tracing Joel’s relationship with a different family member, delineating knowledge he gathers from all of them, and describing his ultimate separation from them. The final part, simply titled “Joel,” describes his self-avowed isolation. Petrie has left Ellison and is now working as a maid in a motel. Lelia has withdrawn from life and is mourning the Barkers’ violent breakup. Joel no longer goes to school. He has taken over the sineating from Avery, and he has started wearing Curry’s woolen coat, thus symbolically establishing a connection to his late brother, the one responsible for the carnage. He has gone to Missy’s funeral and eaten the potatoes he first placed on her coffin, but he made sure to make eye contact with everyone present. He has decided to let everyone know that “the ritual will not be the same. The sinner will eat in full view. The people may not
welcome him, but their caution will be respect, not fear…. Joel will look at the mourners and they will look at him. They will see the good there, not the evil. They will see the salvation, not the damnation” (Part 5).

In the very beginning it was Avery’s resistance to his community’s religious customs that inspired Missy Campbell’s wrath and provoked the rift in their community. His desire to establish a family, even one that would be ostracized by others, was not acceptable. In the end, his youngest son undertakes the effort to bring the community back together, but to do so, he too must set himself apart. Since Missy, Avery and Curry are dead, the community can begin the process of symbolic healing. The four corpses (Missy’s, Curry’s, Avery’s and the postman’s) stand for the diseased body of the community – disheveled, mutilated and leaking blood. They have to be buried, but not forgotten, as Joel demonstrates by attending Missy’s wake and eating her sins from the coffin lid.

Massie imbues all scenes and encounters with the sineater (or those who want to supplant him) with an air of the grotesque by drawing the reader’s attention to the sineater’s abject role in the community. This is achieved chiefly through the deployment of the female grotesque as theorized by Russo. Although Russo does not elaborate her idea of a male body made grotesque through the application of specific features of the female grotesque, such a transformation brings to mind images of men weakened by a supposedly degenerate effeminacy. The way to understand Russo’s contention is to think outside identitarian politics and look at the feminization of male bodies in terms of the change in the way they are perceived rather than in terms of their inherent qualities. Monstrous male bodies that undergo drastic transformations, that change their borders and pour outside their boundaries are feminized in the Bakhtinian sense – they become leaky, open and perhaps lowly as well. Avery’s and Burke’s bodies are here the prime examples of the how male subjects are made
grotesque by the association with polluting substances (blood and piss), on the one hand, and
traditional feminine functions and actions (reproducing, taking care of food), on the other.

Ultimately, *Sineater* a novel about missing fathers, who are dead (as in the case of
Missy Campbell and her daughter), are forced to leave their families (as in the Barkers’ case)
or are ineffectual (his best friend’s father – the ex-pastor or the fatherly school principal). In
this reading, the grotesque representation of male bodies lacks any substantial potential for
transgression. Instead, broken families of the Campbells and the Barkers mirror the general
breakdown of community ties in Ellison. Indeed, monstrous things happen when there are no
patriarchs around: Missy Campbell kills her own daughter and tries to stir up trouble for the
whole town, whereas the eldest Barker child, Curry, begins killing everyone who might
threaten his own future position in the community.

From a tad different perspective, *Sineater* is also a highly persuasive retelling of the
Southern Gothic narrative, in which the crumbling plantation is replaced with a burnt shack,
and in which the protagonists are “dirt poor” religious fundamentalists rather than dissipated
Old South aristocrats. One element which is conspicuously absent is any mention of race, as
Ellison seems to be a racially unmarked town, which usually translates into a white-only
space. Class is only tangentially tackled, as it is suggested that people who flock to Missy’s
sect and practice lay rituals are uneducated and poor. Middle-class school officials, state
employees and shop owners are presented as sympathetic towards the Barkers, even though
their attempts at including Joel in the community end in failure.

Massie quite skillfully sketches the families’ – the Campbells’ and the Barkers’ –
descent into madness. The narrative slowly unravels to expose murder, vengeance and a secret
concerning the two families’ children – Missy’s dead daughter and Avery’s murderous son.
*Sineater* is also a chronicle of people unwilling to change and actively resisting new ways of
structuring their relationships. Avery triggers this chain of events by opting to establish a
traditional family while working as a sineater. His overtly feminized need of having a spouse and children flies in the face of the old ways, but, what is more important, his decision threatens the future of his eldest son. Curry refuses to accept inevitable changes and decides to scare the Ellison community back into respecting his father and, by extension, also him. It is Joel who welcomes the change and becomes a new, less fearsome sineater. However, the price for this transformation is a new form of isolation for Joel.

The grotesque characters that Flannery O’Connor finds in Southern fiction “seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity.”60 A similar struggle with cumbersome family obligations, demanding religious practices and unfeasible communal expectations suffuses Massie’s Sineater. The grotesque rituals and grotesque bodies described by Massie are at times obscene, but she portrays them with a compassionate rather than judging eye, thus emphasizing the sadness and loneliness of people who are forced to carry the legacy of the past against their will and often against their better judgment.

**Conclusion**

The four novels discussed above utilize the grotesque aesthetics in vastly different ways, thus showing its critical and textual versatility. At the same time, all four authors remain cognizant of the problematic nature of gender dynamics at play. Sexual difference stands at the center of the grotesque, as this form of aesthetics rests on clearly defined borders which can then be crisscrossed, mutated, merged or violently broken via monstrous becomings. And since physical changes and un/natural transformations have been linked with femininity and womanhood in Western philosophy and art, the grotesque body by definition is

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60 All the quotations from O’Connor’s essay come from a html version published at the Department of English at the University of Texas website: http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/grotesque.html (accessed 14.02.2014)
a female and/or feminized body. And while such understanding of the grotesque runs the risk of calcifying gendered structures on which it is based, it can also establish a starting point from which a discussion of gendered norms and restrictions can actually start in horror fiction.

While Dunn’s *Geek Love* tackles head-on the ultimate grotesquery of postmodernism – the sideshow freak, Murrey’s novel looks to the grotesque potential of transgressive female sexuality and women’s spirituality. Kiernan, in turn, focuses on the hybridization of the hysterical lesbian body, while Massie writes about men and boys and their abjected bodies in the tradition of the Southern Gothic. But what connects all four authors is their shared emphasis on the body and the corporeal, which speaks to a larger socio-cultural trend that has emerged in the last two decades. The renewed interest in the bodily not only manifests itself in the investigation of alternative or subversive aesthetics (which in itself is a rather risky supposition), but is also discernible in a cultural fascination with the collapse of identifiable and agreed-upon barriers and binary oppositions. The grotesque rests on such tensions and sudden splits and mergers of seemingly incongruous concepts or bodies. That is perhaps why the grotesque is readily employed by contemporary horror novelists who, in a way, look back at the original classic Gothic texts and their “gleeful excessiveness” (Hurley 142). As a highly self-conscious genre that constantly draws attention to its own conventions, structures and repetition compulsion, the contemporary horror plunges the reader in a world full of blood, gore, mutations, and a complete lack of restraint. Just like Hurley suggests, underneath “the relentless negativism of Gothic horror – its focus on abomination, bodily torment an death” we find an unmistakable dose of self-reflexivity, self-mockery and playfulness (142).

It is no wonder then that grotesque has become such a popular literary trope in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as it freely combines the horrific with the humorous, the awe-inspiring with the abject. What is more, the grotesque sensibility represents an important part of the contemporary take on the age-long fascination with
aberration and monstrosity. The ambivalence embedded in today’s attitudes towards monsters can be traced back to the second etymological connection (apart from “monstrare” – “to show”), that is the Greek word *teras*, which meant “both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 77). Because of its “epistemophilic dimension” teratology is a perfect vessel for the investigation of the psychoanalytic theories of displaced sexual curiosity. The nagging question that accompanies the birth of a monsters concerns the epistemological origins which more often than not mask a deep-seated ambivalence over women’s reproductive power in a patriarchal society. These anxieties typically revolve around a woman’s body, sexuality and procreative powers (Braidotti, “Signs” 290).

This is why this the presented analysis of monstrous and grotesque bodies has invariably led to questions about the female body, its reproductive functions and their possibly transgressive potential, the woman’s place and role in a family as well as social expectations concerning her sexuality and her love life (or lack of thereof). But the grotesque aesthetics can also be utilized to bring into focus the framework of feminization of the male body, which in that process becomes fluid, changeable and oftentimes monstrous. The grotesque body that is either lacking or excessive in its form forces us to reconsider the boundaries of humanity; sometimes by questioning openly the thin line between what is considered human and non-human; at other times by undermining and warping the norms and standards to which we have grown accustomed. In a way, this sense of epistemological instability and uncertainty that stems directly from such explorations may force us to reject totalizing narratives and to remain open to a multiplicity of readings. For this very reason, the grotesque, understood both as a repertoire of cultural tropes and images and as a certain aesthetics or sensibility, comes in handy when discussing modern-day horror texts, especially
those that break with normative expectations concerning the protagonists, their gendered selves and their roles and desires within familial structures.

On the other hand, the grotesque may simply activate a longing for normativity and a nostalgia for the non-monstrous, non-pitiable and non-abject bodies with their smooth surfaces and impregnable limbs. The transgressive nature of the grotesque aesthetics is somehow tempered if one sees the grotesque repudiation of the norm as a gesture of affirmation-through-negation. The age-long dyad, normalcy and monstrosity, remains thus unchallenged. The glorification of the grotesque is not an answer either, as the late capitalist system quickly digests any forms of contestation and transplants their updated versions onto the mainstream. For this reason, the grotesque seems to work best as an analytical tool describing social attitudes towards the non-normative physicality and behavior, and the subjects deemed grotesque by others.

The transformative potential of the grotesque remains thus highly debatable. Still, Edwards and Graulund postulate that there might be something more to the grotesque. I find their remarks worth quoting in full:

> the boundaries between the internal and external, the inside and outside, the private and the public spheres are porous and fluidly transformative, generating fears about the potential violation of borders between the inner and the outer. Fixed territories, then, fall away and they are replaced by a continuing and inescapable series of deterritorializations and reterritorializations. We are left with cultural distortions, a deformed body politic, that are the metaphors for individual, social and political contamination. (57-58)

It is no accident that Edwards and Graulund invoke vocabulary connected with posthumanism and new materialism, namely, the concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in the 1970s and 1980s. The renewed interest in corporeality, vitalism and materialism, visible in a growing corpus of interdisciplinary works proves the need for approaching matter and materiality from new
perspectives and, perhaps, with completely different sets of research questions. The grotesque may, in my opinion, function as a meeting point for old and new discourses and different modes of thinking about the body, subjectivity and human relations (both private and communal). Already a classic in terms of twentieth-century critical theory, the grotesque retains a remarkable ability to transcend the confines of representationism and to revisit bodily experiences. In a way, within the grotesque aesthetics, the body cannot remain locked in constructivist discourses for long. Sooner or later, the body will leak. And, paradoxically, through this uncontrollable leak the grotesque body will point out the socio-cultural restrictions placed on female and/or feminized bodies and the ways in which these bodies have been situated, described and controlled by the dominant discourses of heteronormativity and phallogocentrism.
Chapter 3

Blood(y) Ties in Vampire Fictions

Introduction

While the previous chapter brought into focus transgressive monstrosities and grotesque corporealities, the following chapter concentrates on what is perhaps the single most popular and widely recognizable figure of horror: the vampire. One could argue that vampire fiction is structured along a series of revivals rather than apparent progress, with each new decade discovering new vampires who are supposed to be more genuine than their predecessors, and somehow closer to the original source, which in a truly postmodern fashion remains rather elusive or, perhaps, even non-existent. At the same time, a more conventional linearity can be discerned, as contemporary vampire fiction tends to situate itself in a direct relation to both Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) and Anne Rice’s The Vampire Chronicles (1976-today). Predictably, one is tempted to read these two sources as part of a larger familial metaphor with Stoker and Rice being literary parents whose modern-day children are trapped in a heavily-oedipalized relationship with them, repeatedly rising against these two and secretly desiring their (canonical) power. This familial metaphor, which extends to critics and literary researchers as well as writers and creators of vampire fictions, may seem a bit trivial. But since contemporary Gothic narratives are always already implicated in mockery and self-parody, this critical metaphor is not necessarily passé and may in fact signal a marked propensity towards self-reflexivity in both Gothic fiction and Gothic criticism.

61 In Contemporary Gothic, Spooner argues persuasively that the Gothic cannot boast of having a clear beginning and discernible linear progress, but it is rather a series of constant revivals and resurrections. Already its first recognizable incarnations – the faux-médiéval manuscript of The Castle of Otranto or Horace Walpole’s architectural extravaganza, Strawberry Hill, were fashioned as revivals, resuscitations and rediscoveries of the past original and an original past which, of course, were never there to begin with. Even though Spooner chooses to discuss the Gothic in terms of its literary and high-brow associations, its folk sources and communal continuities point to a different tradition, one not necessarily founded on revivals and returns.
Matrilineality, the maternal and the reproductive body played a central role in the previous chapter, which looked closely at female and/or feminized bodies as well as the themes of desire, reproduction and family life (or lack of thereof). This chapter in turn will concentrate on the ways in which contemporary vampire fictions rewrite the Oedipal plot and how they showcase tensions associated with communality, (self)imposed and the processes of abjection and exclusion. Ever since Bram Stoker described Dracula slicing his chest to feed Mina, familial imagery has been eagerly discussed in vampire fiction either by the authors themselves or by critics analyzing the recurrent images of child-birth and reproduction, suckling and feeding, and taboo sex acts. Not surprisingly, the most popular representations of vampires portray them as preoccupied with establishing hierarchical kinship structures which, for want of a better name, are very often called families. In this sense, it could be argued that queer families have been a staple of vampire fiction for a much longer time than in other horror narratives.

And since the establishment of blood and/or alternative families constitutes the main theme of this chapter, the critical lens used to bring into focus the intricacies of vampiric reproduction will be the abject. In popular understanding, the processes of abjection are located, first and foremost, in the rituals concerning corpses, bodily fluids, excrements and blood, all of which appear in vampire fictions, as the vampire enacts a number of taboo acts related to the abjected aspects of human physiology. In a classic Kristevan formulation, however, abjection is linked above all to the repudiation of the maternal, a violent break with the mother that needs to take place before the child can enter the Law of the Father and begin the process of individualization. Again, the questions of (absent) mothers, motherhood and maternity are strongly present in vampire fictions, as vampiric reproduction often tries to circumvent the mother and deny her role in procreation, but the maternal can never be completely rejected and repressed, which in itself mirrors the very process of abjection.
In stark contrast to other Gothic and horror themes, vampire scholarship is surprisingly extensive. Already in the 1920s, two monographs on vampires and vampirism were penned by Montague Summers. Although they are now rarely referenced by critics, Summers’ studies are a proof of the relatively quick canonization of the vampire in literary and cultural studies. The most relevant scholarly works, however, appeared in the 1990s. Ken Gelder’s *Reading the Vampire* (1994) is a slim but ambitious volume in which the author studies a plethora of cultural meanings the vampire has accrued over the last two hundred years. Gelder analyzes a number of novels, short stories, poems and movies starting from early nineteenth century up until the mid-1990s. Gelder’s study is notable for the inclusion of lesser-known contemporary titles such as *Carrion Comfort* by Dan Simmons (1989), *Dracula Unbound* by Brian Aldiss (1992) and *Vampire Junction* by S.P. Somtow (1984), which do not enjoy the same canonical standing and critical appreciation as their nineteenth-century precursors: *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1816), “The Vampyre” by John William Polidori (1819), *Varney the Vampire; or, the Feast of Blood* by James Malcolm Rymer (1847), *Carmilla* by Sheridan LeFanu (1872) and, finally, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897). He also examines different theoretical and thematic clusters used to approach the vampire and discusses their scope and usefulness: anti-Semitism and imperialism, communism in Eastern Europe, queer readings and psychoanalytic readings (notably Žižek’s readings of vampires as the return of the real), capitalism and Marxism.

Nina Auerbach in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, which came out a year after Gelder’s study, focuses less on vampire scholarship *per se* and more on the links between vampires and the cultural and political landscape of a given era. Similarly to Gelder, she looks at both high-brow (and already canonized) works such as *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, and newcomers such as 1970s feminist speculative fiction and 1980s American cinema. Perhaps the single most valuable insight is Auerbach’s contention that Stoker’s *Dracula*, though now perceived as the
ultimate original, was a considerable departure from earlier vampire stories in that the
vampire ceased to be a mysterious, if somewhat deadly, friend and became a non-human
monster instead. The potentially explosive aspects of doubly unnatural (human-vampire and
same-sex) friendships presented in Polidori’s, Coleridge’s or LeFanu’s works were replaced
by a more rigid relational structure comprising of a master and a servant, a hierarchy
Auerbach finds boring and reactionary (6-7).

Apart from Auerbach’s book, 1995 saw also the publication of Judith/Jack Halberstam’s
Skin Shows, a full-length study of monstrosity in horror and Gothic fiction. Halberstam
devotes a whole chapter to the parasitic sexuality of Stoker’s Dracula, which at the time of
Dracula’s publication was associated with racist conceptions of Jewishness and Jewish
sexuality: “Parasitism, especially with regards to the vampire, represents a bad or pathological
sexuality, non-reproductive sexuality, a sexuality that exhausts and wastes and exists prior to
and outside of the marriage contract” (16-17). The homophobic undercurrent is easy to
discern as well. Halberstam’s main claim – that sexuality came to represent the dominant way
of reading and understanding identity in horror and the Gothic – is especially pertinent to the
figure of the vampire. In Halberstam’s highly original reading, “[t]he vampire is not lesbian,
homosexual, or heterosexual; the vampire represents the productions of sexuality itself. The
vampire, after all, creates more vampires by engaging in a sexual relation with his victims and
he produces vampires who share his specific sexual predilections” (100).

The vampire’s immense capacity for adopting different roles is also addressed by Fred
Botting in Limits of Horror (2008), in which he describes vampires as serving “as a metaphor
of transformation itself, its liminality articulating a space of transition of a cultural, economic
and technological shifts” (43). In a somewhat similar vein, Catherine Belsey adds that
“vampires are consistently citational; they exist in quotation marks, in stories, in passages
transcribed from other texts” (698). In “Hypocrite Vampire…” Botting summarizes scholarly
critiques of the vampire, which see the late nineteenth-century vampire as a vessel for anxieties connected to sexuality, femininity and economy, while the twentieth-century vampire is adopted as a vehicle for “pre-adolescent anxieties or concerns with consumption, body image and sexual difference” (22). To a large extent, Botting reiterates Auerbach’s point that each decade gets the vampires it deserves, and the vampires, because of their inherent fluidity, carry and reflect fears prevalent at a given moment in time.

One has to ask what is so special about the vampire that makes him or her such a vastly popular vessel for non-normativity. Some critics, such as Spooner, Botting or Veronica Hollinger, link the contemporary fascination with vampires with larger cultural shifts, which have reconfigured the way we engage with monsters and monstrosity as suChapter Halberstam in Skin Shows argues that the postmodern Gothic is deeply invested in the figure of the monster, as it is through the often tragic monster’s fate that the readers and audiences are able to witness the hunters’ fall from grace and victims’ less than innocent entanglement in the hunt. Thus according to Sabine Meyer, contemporary monster may “function as a sort of litmus test for the (in)sufficiency of our modes of categorization, representation, and interpretation rather than merely as a metaphor for all things alien to dominant fictions of the norm” (“Passing”). As Hollinger has noted, one of the consequences of the postmodern legitimation crisis is the ongoing process of deconstruction of hitherto fixed concepts. No wonder than that “the vampire is a monster-of-choice these days, since it is itself an inherently deconstructive figure” that traverses the boundaries between human and non-human, dead and alive, monstrosity and normalcy (Hollinger, “Fantasies of Absence” 201). Meyer notes that the postmodern vampire’s ability “to cross generic boundaries… to be good or bad or somewhere in between, to switch back and forth between being predator and prey, colonizer and colonized, traditional villain and utopian savior, makes her/him a compelling and
productive alternative to the idea of the unified, unambiguously identifiable subject encoded and enforced within normative discourse” (“Passing”).

Yet, even though the vampire has achieved an almost “archetypal status for the representation of queer, social and sexual identities” (“Passing”), many of those non-heteronormative representations of vampirism end up reinforcing the idea that homoerotic and homosexual relationships result in disorder, moral chaos and corruption. A good example of such vampire fiction is Anne Rice’s series of novels, The Vampire Chronicles. George Haggerty, analyzing the first novels of the series, reads them as an answer to three major fears of the 1980s: “the AIDS crisis, the crisis over ‘family values,’ and the collapse of the war on drugs with its attendant militarization of civilian life and war on male potency” (10). He argues that Rice addresses “the anxiety surrounding all three of these issues in a way that both poses the gay man as the solution to this problem and indicts him as its cause” (10). Conversely, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges in “Undoing Feminism,” analyze the two 1980s Lestat novels – Vampire Lestat and The Queen of the Damned – as postfeminist and preoedipal texts which opt for the return of the archaic (monstrous) mother instead of the oedipal fantasy of the first novel, in which the feminine was, for all intents and purposes, silenced. Still, Rice’s emphasis on the maternal does not signal a potential radical shift to a more inclusive thematic field; on the contrary, Doane and Hodges point to Rice’s conservatism: Akasha, the vampire queen, once released from her prison and accepted into the symbolic order becomes “savage and power hungry,” a true “feminist monster, a woman more interested in maternal theories than in real people” (433). Thus even though the two novels could comment on the repudiation of the maternal and the feminine in vampire fiction, they ultimately cop out and follow through with a feminist backlash agenda instead. Auerbach, in
contrast, sees Rice’s novels as potential taboo breakers and a welcome return to pre-Dracula
vampire fiction which celebrated non-normative relationships.62

Similarly to Rice’s The Vampire Chronicles, Stoker’s Dracula has elicited a number of
conflicting interpretations and critical (re)appraisals. For instance, Franco Moretti in
“Dialectic of Fear” discusses Dracula not as a representative of the degenerate aristocracy (a
popular late nineteenth-century theme), but as a compelling metaphor for modern capital and
its spread, accumulation and power. Stephen D. Arata, in his influential 1990 article “The
Occidental Tourist,” concentrates on the fear of reverse colonization that Dracula represented
to the British subjects. Applying a psychoanalytic lens, Anne Williams, in “Dracula: Si(g)ns
of the Fathers,” draws attention both to the more traditional Freudian body of scholarly works
which concentrate on Dracula’s role as the Angry Father who has to be defeated by his sons,
as well as a feminist rereading that emphasizes Dracula’s gender anxiety and his role as the
Other. Williams describes a certain duality which makes Dracula both feminine and
masculine in that the repressed (that is, archaic) mother returns as a threatening father figure
(455). In this reading, it is the “dark continent” of female sexuality that Freud refused to
acknowledge that erupts through the mad paternal authority of Dracula.

The above sample of critical reappraisals of Stoker’s Dracula and Rice’s The Vampire
Chronicles proves that, in contrast to other popular horror tropes and figures such as haunted
house narratives and monsters, vampire critical scholarship has always been paying close
attention to the questions of sexuality, relationships, family dynamics, reproduction and
kinship. Despite vampires’ interpretative versatility and the ease with which they cross
generic and affective borders, the family (and its problematic nature) emerges in their critical
evaluations surprisingly often.

62 Discussing 1970s male vampires in Charnas’s and Yarbro’s fictions, Auerbach laments their rigid
heteronormativity, which continued to uphold “the taboos that Stoker institutionalized in the 1890s” (153). Seen
against this backdrop, Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire is for Auerbach a welcome return to the pre-
Dracula original vampirism – full of eroticly charged same-sex friendships and beautiful fraternities of men:
“Amoral aesthetes, Rice’s vampires are beautifully devoid of social consciousness” (154).
Women’s Vampire Fiction

Whether read as a staple of horror literature (Grixti), “a subgenre of popular fiction” (Gelder ix) or a subgenre of the Gothic, vampire fiction has not only flourished in the last three decades, but it has also splintered into new subgenres (such as paranormal romance, vampire erotica or Young Adult supernatural romance) and morphed its way into other genres (for instance, detective fiction, science fiction, weird fiction, etc). This generic indistinctness mirrors the epistemological ambivalence of the vampire: s/he is the UnDead (that is, neither fully alive nor fully dead); in some tales s/he lacks mirror reflection (which obviously violates basic laws of physics which should apply to both the dead and the living); some narratives stress the vampire’s ability to transform into animals (thus crossing the human vs. non-human barrier). However, one form of ambiguity which has been reappearing over and over again since the early nineteenth century is the vampire’s ability to frustrate gender binaries and sexual difference.

Praising the more radical strain of contemporary women’s vampire fiction, Gina Wisker passionately argues that these “women writers explore and enact the practice based in queer theory by defying boundaries, refusing categories and destructively oriented definitions of difference, expressing the carnivalesque” (“Love Bites” 236). Yet, such admiration begs a question about which kinds of queer practices exactly are being used (and maybe abused?) and whether these practices are deemed subversive only on account of being designated as queer. Wisker suggests that

[w]hether used as the worst kind of terror to be exorcised or, in its contemporary form, as potential social/sexual transgressor, celebrated as troubled hybrid offering eternal love, the vampire disrupts polarized systems of thought. It undermines and disempowers Western logical tendencies to construct divisive, hierarchical, oppositional structures. In restrictive, repressive eras, the vampire’s transgression of gender boundaries, life/death, day/night behavior, and its invasion
of the sanctity of body, home, and blood, are elements of its abjection. (“Love Bites” 225)

She thus interprets contemporary women’s vampire fictions as surpassing their bland and repressive predecessors. Yet, her enthusiasm seems a bit unfounded, and her faith in the vampires’ subversive potential and ability to transcend “binaries, boundaries, and divisions” (229) might be too hasty.

The readiness to position vampires as essentially transgressive figures constitutes the crux of the problematic nature of contemporary vampire narratives. With the vampires’ generic as well as genetic ability to question the rigidity of normalized and naturalized boundaries, vampires seem to be perfect vessels for confronting what is understood as normal, natural, and traditional. For instance, Lynda Hall argues that by

[a]ssuming complex voices and bodies from which to speak, the diverse boundaries and sites they defiantly queer, transgress, blur, and interrogate include: race, sex, gender, sexuality, nationality, geography, time, life/death, the inside/outside of the body, sanity/craziness, life/art, and dream/reality. They queer the ‘master narratives’ of ‘normal’ traditional white, heterosexual, male power and redefine the boundaries through taking the agency of writing their own and other’s experiences into reality and visibility. As well as exploding the myth of the ‘family romance,’ they challenge many other assumed norms and oppressive privileges. (394-395).

It would seem that theirs is the tale of victorious subversion and triumphant decentering. However, I am interested less in vampires’ perceived transgressiveness and more in the very limits of situating the vampire as an inherently queer figure as well as privileging the margin as a desired place to be and to speak from, which is an especially tricky territory in vampire fictions penned by women writers.

Anne Rice is probably the most popular woman writer associated with vampire fiction per se; however, one can find a number of female predecessors (such as nineteenth-century authors, May Elizabeth Braddon and Mary Wilkins Freeman) as well as a number of Rice’s
contemporaries were rewriting Dracula’s and Carmilla’s scripts in the 1970s and 1980s. Two titles are worth mentioning here are *The Vampire Tapestry* (1980) by Suzy McKee Charnas and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro’s series of novels about Count Saint-Germain, which she began in 1978. The vampires presented in these novels differ from earlier incarnations in their relative proximity to human life. Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger, in fact, go as far as to underline the “domestication” of the vampire which, according to them, commenced in the second half of the twentieth century (2). Similarly, Jules Zanger, in “Metaphor into Metonymy: The Vampire Next Door,” describes two significant changes to the vampire lore: firstly, the “new” vampire tends to be more family-oriented and communal, and secondly, he or she has lost the metaphysical and/or spiritual edge of absolute evil and corruption, which used to be associated with Stoker’s Dracula. Zanger writes that the vampire has shifted “from solitary to multiple and communal, from metaphoric Anti-Christ to secular sinner, from magical to mundane” (19) and has thus moved from the realm of metaphor into the realm of metonymy. The vampire no longer represents the Other residing in a completely different semantic order, but is now a figure of an all-too-human outsider who nevertheless has not abandoned the shared human semantic field of recognition.

Yet, arguably the most interesting attempts at rewriting the traditional vampire mythology took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a wave of female newcomers flooded the horror market. Considered niche and printed by small publishing presses, books by Melanie Tem, Elizabeth Engstrom, Poppy Z. Brite, Jewelle Gomez, Elaine Bergstrom, Jeane Kalogrides, Tananarive Due, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Nancy A. Collins, Yvonne Navarro, Laurell K. Hamilton as well as short story collections edited by Poppy Z. Brite, Pam Keesey and Aramantha Knight speak to an enormous popularity of vampire fiction (and its various offshoots) among horror enthusiasts. For the present study I have selected four novels published between 1986 and 1992: Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Poppy Z.
Brite’s *Lost Souls* (1992), Elizabeth Engstrom’s *Black Ambrosia* (1986) and Melanie Tem’s *Prodigal* (1991). Although arguably today’s publishing market is much more heavily saturated with vampires than in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it should be emphasized that the majority of popular novels written after 2000 transplant vampires to fantasy, Young Adult or supernatural romance genres and thus lie outside the scope of the present work.

On the look of it, the first three narratives offer strikingly dissimilar visions of vampiric families – affirmative and jubilant in Gomez, disturbing and perverse in Brite, achingly lonely and desperate in Engstrom – all, however, remain implicated in the culture wars of the late eighties and early nineties. Where Gomez is examining a second-wave feminist ideal of a boundless love that traverses not only time, but race and gender barriers as well, Brite is taking the vampires’ obscenely indulgent lifestyle to its extremes in a consumerist extravaganza of teenage nihilism, and Engstrom is probing the 1980s New Woman model of independence and the violent backlash it potentially entails. Of the four novels, Tem’s is the only one in which a seemingly ordinary lower-middle-class white family is placed squarely at the center of the narrative.

What is more, Brite’s and Gomez’s novels expose the limitations of the familial imagery utilized in contemporary vampire fiction and the ambiguous status of queer theory and queer sensibility readily employed to subvert the cultural and social status quo. Their use of abjection centers on the maternal, perverse vampiric reproduction and bodily acts which threaten both the social contract and the stability of particular families. By contrast, Engstrom and Tem showcase abjection connected with the diseased body and the subjects’ failure to enter a community and to be accepted into peer groups and families of choice.
Towards the Abjection

Vampires are first and foremost associated with blood. Unsurprisingly then, the theoretical tool mostly closely linked to blood is abjection: an elusive concept lingering uneasily at the intersection of the material, the psychoanalytic and the anthropological. By far the single most important book on abjection is Julia Kristeva’s seminal study *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* from 1980 (translated into English in 1982), which leans heavily on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Mary Douglas’s structuralist research on defilement rituals and purity/impurity binary in culture. In Kristeva’s understanding, the abject is “the jettisoned object,” one that is “radically excluded” and “draws [one] toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). Yet, the abject is neither an object nor a subject; rather it occupies the badlands of pre-subjectivization. To clarify, Kristeva’s theory of abjection begins with the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. During the semiotic stage, that is the period when the mother responds to the infant’s every desire, the child does not recognize the mother and itself as separate entities. At this stage the child “experiences the world mainly in terms of rhythmic or sporadic movements, sounds without prescribed sense, feelings of pleasure or pain whose origin or cause is indefinite” (Covino 18). The introduction into formalized language takes place in the succeeding phase, which roughly corresponds to Lacan’s mirror stage. In order to leave behind the semiotic world of the mother and participate in the symbolic communication, the child has to refuse and to abject his or her mother: “Thus the sensual and maternal semiotic world is largely supplanted by the symbolic world, which involves turning toward the rules of language, of expression, of codified behavior, of rules and regulations, of conventions” (Covino 21).63 This moment of shifting from the semiotic to the symbolic (during which the process of abjection takes place) or, more

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63 In spite of the seemingly clear-cut divisions, Kristeva underscores that the semiotic and the symbolic are, in fact, closely linked, and the kernel of the latter is already present in the former.
precisely, being at the very threshold of the symbolic is what Kristeva calls the thetic stage. The thetic break occurs when the subject assumes a position in the symbolic. Thus the subject repudiates the non-thetic – all that “is opposed to dominant signifying practice[s]” (Jackson 130) – in order to cross into the symbolic, but what is lost in this movement may be returned through the fantastic in the arts. Such a perspective may thus recover not just non-thetic elements but the abject as well.

Kristeva lists three groups of things/objects/events which might be read as abominable, impure and thus might be subject to abjection in Western culture: certain types of food, bodily transformations and death, female body and incest (93). More generally, however, she differentiates between two types of polluting objects in reference to the maternal: excremental and menstrual – the former originating outside the body, and the latter inside. Interestingly, she does not include tears and semen in this scheme, as, according to both her and Douglas, these fluids’ liminal status does not result in pollution (70). I would argue that such a decisive cataloguing gesture, though tempting in its claim to universalism, unveils a certain structuralist weakness of Kristeva’s perspective.

Robbie Duschinsky offers a persuasive critique of Kristevan abjection by drawing attention to her hazy treatment of such notions as “purity,” “impurity,” “identity” and “order.” He points to the ambiguity of the term “abjection,” which “is taken to mean variously: impure, ineffable, disgusting, horrifying, illicitly desirable, outside of logic, rejected by classification, maternal, continuous (as opposed to discrete)” (“Abjection and Self-identity”). However, not all in-between objects are impure or abject. One of Duschinsky’s most compelling examples is that of blood, which in Kristeva’s work resides unambiguously on the side of the impure, but which may be successfully recontextualized “as semantic support for [the] deployment as symbols of national self-identity” (Klemperer, quoted in Duschinsky). A

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64 Interestingly, Rosemary Jackson, following Kristeva, links the non-thetic elements (that is, those which have no place in the rational scheme of things) with the fantastic: “eroticism, violence, madness, laughter, nightmares, dreams, blasphemy, lamentation, uncertainty, female energy, excess” (130).
similar critique can be mounted in connection to semen, which could be read as the abject in some contemporary vampire narratives.

Duschinsky rewrites Kristeva’s framework so that “purity and impurity discourses assess the qualitative homogeneity or heterogeneity of phenomena, understood as their degree of correspondence or deviation from their imputed essence” (“Abjection and Self-identity”). Such a scheme, arguably better-suited to modern day academic investigations, allows for more nuanced readings of bodily fluids in horror, which do not posit blood or semen as inherently abject or non-abject, but rather look for moments of rapture/rupture in otherwise homogenous systems or for places where affects associated with abjection come to the fore: dread, desire and disgust.

Even though abjection and disgust are not synonymous, disgust often appears in the wake of abjection, and could be read as abjection’s primary affect alongside dread and desire.\textsuperscript{65} The connection to horror studies is worth additional reflection. After all, it is often the “aesthetic disgust” that is taken as a measure of a given horror movie’s or book’s success; success understood as the text’s ability to shock and induce violent physical reactions such as shudder, frown, nausea even. While Kristeva mentions the protective function of vomiting and queasiness, which shields us from the polluted object, she also acknowledges their failure to hide our fascination, which the abject holds for us and which leaves us helpless “in the middle of treachery” (2). Kristeva’s notion of treachery may be understood as one of the reasons why viewers and readers of horror fictions seek out the thrill of disgust quite consciously. Pleasure found in disgust might be “correlated with insights into the instability and the fragmentary nature of the self: ‘Everything seems at risk in the experience of disgust. It is a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation’” (Menninghaus 1, quoted in Kutzbach and Meyer 17).

In her study of disgust, Carolyn Korsmeyer cites psychological research which differentiates between seven distinct groups of disgust-inducing factors: “(1) contaminated foods,” “(2) bodily products” such as spit, vomit, semen, mucus, etc., “(3) related violations of hygiene codes; (4) lower order animals such as vermin; (5) violations of the bodily envelope such as wounds and eviscerations; (6) perverse sexual activities,” and “(7) signs of death and decay” (32). The last one, which is also of paramount importance in Kristeva’s scheme of the abject, stands as the strongest reason for experiencing disgust.\(^{66}\) What is perhaps most interesting about Korsmeyer’s study is the notion that disgust carries a certain allure. She discusses a selection of artworks (ranging from literature, music pieces, paintings, sculptures and installations to television, theater and movies) and states that even though the arousal caused by some of these cultural texts might be quite diffused and evanescent, “whenever a particular visceral queasiness ensues disgust is present, exerting its own brand of aesthetic power” (91). Considering Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Korsmeyer delineates “a profound and transgressive magnetism [which] lingers in desire that is tantalized though never satisfied in images that return the self to its undifferentiated state” (128). The longing for being returned to the former self and for being reunited with the maternal, though enticing and thrilling, constitutes too serious a threat.

Abjection used as a critical tool in cultural studies appears quite often in connection with horror and alternative cinema. Perhaps the best-known full-length publication in that particular field is Barbara Creed’s 1993 *The Monstrous Feminine*. However, recent years have seen quite a few projects in which abjection has been reconceptualized and readjusted by scholars working with gender and queer theory and intersectional cultural studies.\(^{67}\) A 2011 collection of essays, *The Abject of Desire*, edited by Kostanze Kutzbach and Monika Mueller,

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\(^{66}\) One could perhaps add “violations of the social-moral code,” these, however, are linked to moral disgust which relies on socio-cultural frameworks to an even larger extent than prohibitions concerning foodstuffs or levels of hygiene.

\(^{67}\) See for instance the growing field of affect studies, feminist new materialisms, disability studies and crip theory, etc.
is a good example in point. The tri-partite organization of this critical anthology sheds some light on the critical uses of abjection as a theoretical tool. Describing the articles collected in their volume, Kutzbach and Mueller introduce the concept of “affirmative abjection” and point out the distinction between the real abject and the faux-abject. Essays which employ affirmative abjection generate faux-abjects in order to unveil cultural investment in the process of drawing boundaries between the center and the margin, between “us” and “Them.”

The second group of essays examines the anesthetization of the unaesthetic at the intersection of the real and the faux-abject. And the last group of texts is preoccupied with the real abject and its potentially destabilizing role in culture (12). In order to define the afore-mentioned kinds of abjection a bit further, Kutzbach and Mueller summarize Hanjo Berressem’s “distinction between the real abject, which is (perceived as) fundamentally threatening, and the culturally mediated, and thus less intense faux-abject” (11). In the following pages I will be referring both to affirmative abjection (and its sporadic generation of the faux-abject) as well as the confrontation with the real abject, which, in my perspective, is associated strongly with the body.

Lastly, the two theoretical tools used in the previous chapters should also be mentioned, as both the uncanny and the grotesque are in close semantic proximity to the abject. Still, abjection differs from the uncanny in that it is more violent and “is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (Kristeva 20). There is nothing homely or familiar about the abject, even though, paradoxically, whatever has been abjected used to be recognizable and extremely close to us. The abject is then more akin to the Lacanian notion of traumatic events, in which the subject experiences “an unbearable nearness that does not allow for the distancing|separation that is the prerequisite for objectification” (Berressem 21). It would seem, then, that it is the grotesque that could be located semantically closer to abjection. In fact, Hurley, in “Abject and
“Grotesque,” analyzes the two concepts separately as well as jointly through a fused category of “the grotesque-abject.” Yet even though the two concepts might seem similar, I would resist the temptation to merge them, as their differences outnumber their similarities. One of such glaring disparities is that the grotesque relishes gleeful excess, often embraces the comic and often appears alongside the carnivalesque, and it is clearly posited as the Other in the symbolic system, whereas the abject denotes the non-object, the unspeakable and the unrecognizable. And as Lay suggests, “Kristeva’s claim that the horror of the abject lies chiefly in its failure to function as a forbidden ‘other’” (301). It would seem that this unbearable nearness one experiences when faced with the abject does not allow the subject to perceive the abject in aesthetic terms (such as sublime, beautiful, ugly or grotesque) (Berressem 21).

Abjecting the Vampire

Berressem reinterprets the abject as that which, in a vampiric manner, drains power from other bodies: “Abj ects drain life out of organic systems. Foul things tend to be abj ects, for instance, because in foulness, an abundance of life is rotting from within” (44). One could argue, then, that the vampire, by embodying both life and death, is also the essence of the ultimate Kristevan abject: the corpse. Vampires’ UnDead bodies are unclean and polluting also in the sense of their distorted reproduction (without a phallus, without a mother) and abominable desire for blood. Their bodies are not proper, which calls to mind Elizabeth Grosz’s description of abjection as “a sickness at one’s own body, at the body beyond that ‘clean and proper’ thing, the body of the subject. Abjection is the result of recognizing that the body is more than, in excess of, the ‘clean and proper’” (Sexual Subversions 77-78). The impropriety of the vampire existence also hinges on his or her defiance of the boundaries of
what remains recognizably human. In fact, the non-human aspect of abjection is encapsulated by Kristeva’s remark that abjection is a state “where man strays on the territories of animal” (12, original emphasis).

More generally perhaps, the vampire is abject because it disrupts various types of social and cultural order. Katherine J. Goodnow summarizes Kristeva’s notion of horror saying that, first, “horror resides in threats to the boundaries that ordinarily regulate the social order” and, second, that “all threats to boundaries cannot result in an equal sense of horror” (28). This leads Goodnow to a discussion of four distinct groups of the abject, which she applies in her cinematic analysis and which can be also found in vampire fiction. The first things/objects/events, “the abject without and within the body,” are related directly to the two categories discussed by Kristeva: “excrement and its equivalent (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.)” (Kristeva 71) and the bodily fluids and bodily growths and changes that take place on the inside, for instance, pregnancy or cancer (Goodnow 33). In vampire narratives, this type of the abject is often fused together, as the infected body is both dying and visibly transforming into something new entirely.

Goodnow summarizes the second category of the abject as “the recognizable abject and the abject with a clean, false face,” which is connected with the notion of “duplicity and disguise in relation to horror” (37). With reference to vampire fiction, the recognizable abject can be witnessed, for instance, in Stoker’s Dracula with his unmistakably monstrous appearance. Carmilla, on the other hand, disguises herself as a beautiful aristocrat and hence, her abjection comes with “a clean, false face.” This doubling of the monstrous and the abject – one is designated as such from the start, and the other’s duplicitous abjection is revealed slowly – adds to the overall destabilization of categories.

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68 The latter argument reveals a certain weakness in Kristeva’s work – how is one to predict which objects that disturb order will result in horror and which will only be experienced as amusement or fear?
The third group concerns those instances of the abject which remind us of sexual sameness and/or difference. This, of course, is linked to the Freudian fear of castration, with an attendant suspicion that sexual distinction results from genital mutilation. As a result, the suggestion of sameness has a destabilizing and threatening effect. This supposed sameness, in a Freudian perspective, is violently lost by the negation of the mother in favor of the father, or, in Lacanian terms, by the entry into the symbolic and the advent of language. The ensuing fear of feminization is also connected with the reminders of difference, such as birth, blood and menstruation. It goes without saying that all vampire fictions are deeply concerned with primal scenes, birth scenes and exchange of blood, which blur gender distinctions and/or capitalize on the fear of feminization (because of the preceding association of the body with femininity).

The final group of the abject, analyzed by Goodnow, concerns the maternal. In contrast to the “merely” feminine threat associated with menstruation (posited as internal wound) and reminder of lack and separation, the mother also signifies authority (which she had yielded before the father) and the power to reproduce. Thus the sanitized and safe images of birth do not fall into the category of the abject; it is rather the violent, gory and bloody birth scene that is posited as abject. Thus the highly sensual but also safe scene of the Girl becoming a vampire in Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* is a far cry from the blood-spattered scene of Dracula nurturing Mina in a perverse amalgamation of suckling, oral sex and rape.

The last two groups of the abject: the abject connected with sexual difference/sameness and the abject based on the maternal are the ones associated most strongly with familial relations. The critical discussions concerning family in connection with the abject and/or the processes of abjection in the Gothic and horror usually center on Oedipalization and nuclear family dynamics, women’s attitude towards their mothers and the maternal, and their experiences of the transforming female body. For instance, Araújo states that “the female
gothic appropriation of the female body” shifts the emphasis from a necessarily negative gesture of repudiation to a more positive possibility of re-identification with the maternal by stressing that “[t]he rejection of these polluting fluids and substances – reminders of absolute connection with the mother’s body – is imposed socially by means of social rituals (such as religious practice) articulated within the logic of the Symbolic” (92-93). Araújo also points out a certain paradox embedded in feminist rewritings of Gothic fiction—“the subversion of gender discourses remains possible only through the recognition of the inscription of these categories within signification” (93). I would argue that by rewriting (male) Gothic scripts women writers also rewrite the contours and ramifications of the abject. In a way, just like the abject remains a part and parcel of the phallogocentric system of meaning in which the maternal (and the feminine) has to be expelled in the process of subjectification, feminist Gothic and horror reimaginings remain firmly within the frameworks already established by male traditions. I agree with Araújo that by “re-examination of the abject female body” such re-visions “mount pertinent critiques of social constructions of femininity as sustained by male and female Gothic traditions. In doing so, they challenge traditional Gothic roles and parody inherited generic structures and conventions” (104). Apart from these examinations, which revolve around the bodily and the feminine, I would also like to look at female protagonists’ drive towards joining the community and forming both traditional and alternative kinship structures – two themes which reappear under different guises in all four novels analyzed in this chapter.

**Gilda’s Sensual Vampires**

tradition alongside Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. In contrast, Judith E. Johnson contends that Jewelle Gomez’s book is not a horror novel because her rewriting of canonical plots is too extensive and the positive identification with the Other transcends the confines of horror or Gothic fiction and moves Gomez’ fiction out of the horrific realm and into the utopian. Jerry Rafiki Jenkins, in “Race, Freedom, and the Black Vampire,” chooses Alexandre Dumas’ *Le Vampire* (1851) as *Gilda*’s precursor, thus breaking with the white-only literary tradition. Similarly, rather than reiterate the stories of Dracula and his cohorts, Jenkins points to the influence of African, Caribbean and Louisianan vampire mythologies and of twentieth-century black vampires in cinema and literature.

Gomez herself situates her work in the tradition of speculative fiction, which to her mind encompasses diverse works of both SF and fantasy writers such as H.G. Wells, Anne Rice, Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe and Ursula Le Guin (“Speculative Fiction and Black Lesbians” 948). In an interview celebrating the twentieth anniversary of *The Gilda Stories*’ publication, Gomez stresses the influence of LGBTQ and feminist movements of the 1980s on her work and added that *Gilda* could be seen as a direct desendent of the lesbian feminist writer Joanna Russ’s works, such as her seminal *The Female Man* (1975). The Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s was fueled by speculative fiction writers who imagined a world where women had power to change things and to change themselves. Gomez also emphasizes *Gilda*’s debt to Samuel R. Delany’s SF novels; not in terms of style, of course, but in that Gilda embodies a similar queer concept of remaking oneself that has been central to Delany’s oeuvre as well as LGBTQ speculative fiction of the past four decades.69

Gomez sets out to rewrite heteronormative plots which abject the lesbian by positioning her on the outside of heterosexual families. Paulina Palmer, in her study of the lesbian Gothic, points out several tactics and techniques employed by women writers to counter the abjection

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69 See also http://www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/07/12/jewelle-gomez-the-20th-anniversary-of-the-gilda-stories/
that was conferred upon lesbian characters in the past. She specifically mentions the issue of agency and subjectivity ascribed to lesbian characters (either in the form of first-person narration or a focalized third-person narrative, the latter of which is employed in Gomez’s novel). Another tactic simply consists in frustrating the stereotypical depictions of lesbians as loners, marginalized outcasts and misfits by stressing their ties and contributions to the community (Kutzbach and Mueller 52-53), which is precisely what Gomez focuses on. To quote Palmer again, “Strategies of denaturalization and deconstruction, typical of the postmodern, feature prominently in feminist/lesbian culture and literature in relation to institutions such as the family and heterosexuality, along with the reworking of genre and convention” (53).

*The Gilda Stories* is actually a series of chronologically ordered stories beginning in 1850 and ending in 2050. The novel makes a loop, as it follows the life of a black, lesbian female vampire from her escape from slavery in 1850 to her escape from vampire-hunters in 2050. The unnamed Girl, a fugitive slave, is found by Gilda I, who takes her in and, together with her partner and lover, a Lakota Native American woman, Bird, decides to turn her into a vampire with the Girl’s joyful consent. Soon after, Gilda I, being tired of wars and suffering she has witnessed, opts for true death (and ends her life definitely), and the hitherto unnamed Girl takes over her name, thus becoming Gilda II (or just Gilda) for the remainder of the novel. Readers then accompany Gilda over the next two centuries as she adopts a number of identities and social roles: the proprietor of a feminist-inspired nineteenth-century brothel, the owner of a women’s beauty salon in the 1950s, a theater company producer in the 1970s, a blues singer in the 1980s, a cyber-romance writer in 2020, among others. In all those roles, she aligns herself with a black “womanist” culture and acts as an activist, guardian, artist in relation to other black women in need of help or inspiration. Through this Gomez tries to bypass what she and Barbara Smith described in their 1990 essay on homophobia in black
communities as the rigidity of black womanhood stereotypes which are inevitably based on familial relations: a stately wife and/or a single mother (Jenkins 318).

This remaking of herself is enabled and fostered through Gilda’s relationship with other women, both vampire and human. Reminiscent of Rich’s concept of the lesbian continuum, Gilda’s relations with women move smoothly along several crisscrossing axes: mother-daughter, friend-lover, sister-stranger. In this respect, her relationships, both in their emotional and material dimensions, echo Deleuzoguattarian becomings rather than simple linear movements from A to B. Each time Gilda comes into contact with a new community, she allows herself to be the touched and shaped by new intensities, speeds, flows of desire and affective corporealities, which demarcate not only her romantic and/or platonic relationships with men and women but also her feeding encounters with strangers. It is also important to note how Gilda’s coming of age and coming out of her mothers’ embrace thwart a number of presuppositions. As Amador notes, Gilda’s “lesbian inheritance as well as self-determined demise [of the first Gilda] subverts traditional hetero-patriarchal lineage, law and mentorship” (12). What is more, the absent Gothic mother is supplanted not by one but two mothers, Gilda I and her lover Bird, both of whom bestow knowledge and matrilineal inheritance on the Girl. In fact, for Palmer, the figure of an absent mother informs all of Gilda’s relationship with women (123), especially those in which she herself adopts a motherly stance towards them.

Early on, Gilda is schooled by older vampires in the importance of having a vampire (rather than short-lived human) family and establishing it very carefully: “It must be done not simply out of your own need or desire but rather because of a mutual need,” counsels her one of older vampires (69). And even though the vampire family is, in fact, based on blood ties (just like a conventional heteronormative family), Gomez queers this new familial unit by dismantling “the male/female dynamic of gendered norms” (Hall 401). The emphasis is placed on the “individual’s ability to choose and ‘create’ the ‘family’ [which] not only
bypasses heterosexuality and often negates the male presence as a necessary and powerful ‘head’ of the family, but also takes agency in the ‘act’ itself—naming and claiming identity as a family without procreation a necessary component either” (Hall 401).

The identity which Gilda develops is not regulated by traditional kinship, that is by “joining of race and sex in the reproduction of a pure, unsullied, white, straight bloodline”; rather, the identity emerges as “the fabrication of nodes of connection via affinities, affections, tastes, distastes, labors, pleasures, technical wirings, attractions, repulsions, and chemical responses” (Winnubst 14). What is more, “the dramas of relations and kin no longer move down the linear paths of identities and reproductions and weighty moralistic questions about who shall marry whom” (Winnubst 15). The queer family created by Gilda is no longer a place where hierarchical structures are to be recreated in the name of family values or family protection.

Another atypical aspect of the novel is the ease with which Gilda moves from the position of child to lover or mother to sister; for instance, after turning Julius – the very first family member she chose on her own – she writes to her friends and says that “we have delivered a brother for me” (192). Not only does she become Julius’s sister, but also shares her parental abilities with her friends by using the plural “we,” even though, strictly speaking, Julius’s turning was physically performed only by Gilda. Similarly, Gomez’s concept of vampire family “carries queer resonances,” as Gilda’s family repudiates the Law of the Father, and instead structures kinship on “the direct transmission of blood/sexual pleasure” (Palmer, Lesbian Gothic 122). This reconstituted queer family “reflects a genealogy based on the direct exchange of body fluids” (Palmer, Lesbian Gothic 104). Blood in these exchanges is transformed from an abject, degrading and polluting symbol of a rape-like violation of the victim, into a joyous rebirth, an explosion of jouissance (Palmer, Lesbian Gothic 124) and a petit mort. In Kristeva’s original study, jouissance is linked to the rejected maternal body and
the past dyad mother-child; however, in *The Gilda Stories* the lost pleasure is recovered by Gilda’s successful rewriting of the vampiric blood ritual.

Palmer in *Lesbian Gothic* recalls Creed’s study of the monstrous feminine in which Creed links the exchange of blood in lesbian vampire fiction with a reversed primal scene of birth, which redefines mother/daughter relationship in terms of pleasure rather than abjection (103). Palmer, commenting on Sue-Ellen Case’s seminal essay, “Tracking the Vampire” (1991), points to lesbian vampire fiction’s investment in the deconstruction of binary opposites such as fertility/infertility, nature/culture, queer/abnormal by both redefining sex acts and centering on “other forms of creativity besides child-bearing” (104).

Hall analyzes the near-rape scene at the beginning of the novel which, in her view, disrupts a heteronormative sex act in that it is the Girl who finally penetrates her would-be rapist with a knife likened to her mother’s hand earlier in the novel: “He started to enter her, but before his hand finished pulling her open, while it still tingled with the softness of her insides, she entered him with her heart which was now w wood-handled knife” (11). Hall also underlines how “the sensual giving and sharing of blood queers the heterosexual dynamics of male penetration and ejaculation into female receptive parts by stressing the mutuality of the acts and the desires” (418). What is more, as Patterson suggests, “Gomez deemphasizes the connection between feeding and rape so common in vampire fiction and portrays vampirism itself as no longer an exercise of distinctly masculine power” (40). Patterson also praises the skillful reappraisal of lesbian vampiric love and female homosexuality as such, which is no longer presented as a repulsive act of draining the victim and destroying her family. In conventional vampire narratives, the female vampire often poses a threat to the patriarchal heterosexual family by targeting helpless brides, daughters and sisters. In this she is positioned as abject because “she does not respect the dictates of the law which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct” (Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine* 61). Gilda, however, is not a
narcissist lesbian predator searching for her mirror image – a popular portrayal of lesbian vampires in the 1970s and 1980s, according to Bonnie Zimmerman (1984).

Gilda interrupts white male ontologies of desire too, as she refuses to engage in the performance of non-white bodies in pain and/or female bodies in pain, two of the most persistent tropes in postmodern horror fiction. Commenting on the in/visibility of the black body, Jenkins points to the ways in which historically black bodies in pain were staged for white men’s consumption across history (320). Thus blackness has come to be visible through the painful associations. Gilda, however, never hurts (or kills) the people from whom she takes nourishment. More than that, the moment of taking blood, which in classic vampire fictions is heavily laced with patriarchal vocabulary of submission, dominance, hierarchy and sexual violence, is replaced with the concept of a fair exchange. Gilda is taught by Bird to leave something good behind in exchange for painlessly drained blood – a feeling, an affect, an idea that would help the human and set him or her on the right path. Even the stereotypical phallic white fangs are missing; instead a small vagina-like incision is made for sucking/suckling and which is then healed by the vampire’s saliva.

Through these affirmative gestures, Gilda moves away from being a doubly abjected figure of a lesbian and a vampire. Instead, we can see how Gomez “reworks, with perverse displacements, the primal scene of birth” and “by taking a woman as her lover, indirectly embarks on a taboo return to the pleasures of the mother/daughter relationship” (Palmer, Lesbian Gothic 103). Hall points to the absolute reproductive freedom that Gomez ascribes to Gilda:

Gomez… represent[s] female sexual development and adult sexual relationships that ‘queer’ traditional familial, male-dominated scripts. Changes that ‘normally’ happen to ‘girls’ through time—the transition from original love of the mother to directing desire to the father as love object, to husband, and the trajectory into marriage and motherhood— are notably absent, as are children. (397)
In Halberstam’s understanding, queer subjects are those who “live outside the reproductive and familial time” (10), yet Gilda’s queer temporality resides, above all, in her decision to look for alternative scripts of reproduction and family formation. It is through the character of Julius, her child-brother-lover, that readers can observe a queering of family functions, as his person fuses seemingly conflicting attachments, which, surprisingly, do work in Gilda’s vampire family.

Still, although it is tempting to read Gilda as a subversive figure that successfully decenters a number of normative suppositions, the vampires in Gomez’s novel do not offer a mere reversal of the margin-to-center relation or enact a decentering as described by Hollinger (199). Rather, “Gomez envisions her protagonist… as capable of making choices about how to read and how to (re)locate her/self within the complex politics and aesthetics of (in)visibility and enforced normality” (Meyer 4). Gilda weaves herself seamlessly into the fabric of American society, joins several different communities (a theater company, a small town, a black urban neighborhood, etc.) and participates quite successfully in the capitalist system. It is only after people begin hunting vampires for their rejuvenating blood that she is forced to leave the US and go into hiding in South America.

It is Gilda’s “passing” that joins all the strands of her existence into one queerly inflected whole. In her travels she adopts a number of roles, professions, identifications. She shifts effortlessly between being a daughter and a lover for Bird, and a mother and a sister for Julius. Depending on the cultural moment as well as her own desires, she adopts a femme or butch style. She cross-dresses as a man to move freely around the late-nineteenth-century America. Her social statuses change quite drastically over the years (working-class, middle-class, bohemian and, finally, filthy rich). She is happy to dabble in different activities (being a brothel’s madame, a pink-collar worker, an artist, a writer, a singer, a social activist). All these switches, changes and journeys between complex sets of identifications and
disidentifications, performances and roles, underscore the fluidity and open-endedness of her vampiric existence. To quote Meyer again: “The possibility of passing back and forth between aspects of their complex identifications allows Gilda and her community of vampires to increasingly expose the horrors of the normative, to intervene in the unwritten, yet violently enforced, (f)laws of a dominant culture that remains highly invested in controlling the (in)visibility of its Others” (9). In fact, it is passing that allows Gilda “to multiply her/self” (Meyer 5). Hall, on the other hand, connects “passing” to family life as well: “‘Passing’ as family is complicated… by a non-traditional creation of ‘family’ and those who recognize others in family, while others (mortals) do not have that privilege of ‘seeing’” (406). At the end of the day the only three elements that never change and are not subject to “passing” are Gilda’s vampirism, her race, and her devotion to her family.

Christopher S. Lewis, in “Queering Personhood,” links heteronormative families with their tacit racialization of non-welcome others. He writes that “The Girl/Gilda’s practice of family does not concretize the racialized consumption/‘entitlement’ of fathers and sons and thereby disrupts the masculinist policies of gender resoluteness that typically define the practice of family. Furthermore, the Girl/Gilda’s family exists with racial distinctions that are not hierarchical, but rather, cooperative” (455). At the end of the novel, in 2050, Gilda’s family has finally come together to hide from persecution in South America: all her lovers and friends are there (two black lesbians, two white gay men, one straight black man, one Native American lesbian); however, among the various gender, race and sexuality configurations a white heterosexual male remains markedly absent.

Gomez’s novel decentralizes and defamiliarizes not only heterosexuality and patriarchy, but also whiteness and European culture. Patterson links the novel to earlier 1970s and 1980s second-wave feminist prose works that “celebrate the vitality and importance of female communities” (“Haunting Back”). She also points out that most women writers of vampire
fiction (such as Nancy Collins or Anne Rice) focus on the experience of being or becoming a vampire. By contrast, Gomez investigates what it means for Gilda to be a black woman, first and foremost, and only then a vampire. One could actually see this as yet another instance in which the pervasive whiteness of the vampires is taken for granted. In fact, the moment vampires moved to America, their highly racialized background (that is, Eastern-European or Jewish “Other”) was left behind. And even though vampires are still analyzed as the “Others,” very rarely are they discussed in terms of race, unless they are actually non-white.

One could argue that a pronounced lack of an obvious “origin story” in many vampire narratives underlines the anxiety surrounding kinship, racial or ethnic origins, and genealogy trees (Winnubst 12). More that than, the mixing of blood (which supplants sexual acts as a form of species reproduction) brings to mind anxiety concerning purity of blood within kinship structures. From this perspective, Gomez’s novel is also an ironic commentary on miscegenation anxiety, based, after all, on the fear of different species mixing their blood.70

For Auerbach, perhaps a bit ambiguously, Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* is yet another illustration of typical “Reaganesque vampire fiction,” in which vampires function as

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70 Winnubst offers an interesting take on the intersections of racism, sexuality and “othering” in *The Gilda Stories*. In her discussion of the Hegelian (and later also Lacanian) split of the subject, which necessitates the materialization and then disavowal of the Other, she links the male subject in question with both heteronormativity and the privileging of whiteness. The emerging white male heterosexual subjectivity remains haunted by what it has to repudiate – Otherness, which more often than not resides in the body and corporeality which are associated with women and non-white men. Winnubst cites both Irigaray and Grosz to underline that “this body-in-control of the straight white male symbolic is haunted primarily by one substance—fluidity” (6). The rigidity of the boundaries between oneself and the Other must be upheld; no leakage, no contamination, no comingling is to be allowed if the subject is to remain intact. If, as is commonly agreed, the straight white male in the Western world has managed to erase his difference by universalizing it *ad nauseam*, then what remains visible (and threatening) is the racialized, sexualized and gendered difference belonging to the bodies of Other(s). The figure of the vampire, however, “pollutes all systems of kinship, pollutes all systems of blood, pollutes all systems of race and sex and desire that must be straight. He infects the body and thereby *alters the spirit*—no body can transcend the metamorphoses of his bite, not even the straight white male body that is in the flesh but supposedly not of it” (original emphasis, Winnubst 8). Even worse, the vampire cannot become “a legible subject in the straight white male symbolic of Western Europe and North America,” as s/he lacks mirror reflection (8). Winnubst adds that “[t]he vampire, in lacking a mirror reflection, does not even register on the radar of identity-formation: he does not have the necessary condition for the possibility of becoming a subject. But, consequently, nor can he be fully abjected, nor can he be caught, labeled, categorized, and expelled as the Other” (8). This makes the vampire an interstitial figure hovering dangerously in a limbo between a fully-fledged subject and fully-abjected Other (8). Winnubst brilliantly notes that if Dracula’s expulsion from the patriarchal, racist and hetero-normative society casts him in the role of the Other, then Gomez’s conscious refashioning of Gilda as Dracula’s opposite (and his Other) makes Gilda the Other’s Other (9).
“a diluted vision of benevolent endangered species” (184). In Auerbach’s view, queer theorists have rushed to hail the vampires as ideal monsters, because they are able to encapsulate the tensions and ambiguities of *queer*, an elusive concept which is lurking in the shadows, inherently impermanent, incandescent, frightening and alluring at the same time, spilling out of boundaries, and signifying the forbidden fruit. Auerbach’s ironic distance from queer theory is palpable when she describes *The Gilda Stories* as a work “meant to be an enlightened response to the sexism inherent in the lesbian vampire tradition, but Gilda’s virtue defangs her into another paralyzing stereotype: that of the good woman. Gomez’s vampires are inhibited by their self-righteous decade, whose protests dissipate in piety” (185-186). Still, it seems that Auerbach does not take into account other late 1980s/early 1990s vampire narratives which do not necessarily follow this Reaganesque defanging, such as Melanie Tem’s *Desmodus* (1995) or Elizabeth Engstrom’s *Black Ambrosia*, not to mention Poppy Z. Brite’s early 1990s fiction, which responds very clearly to the changes in the LGBTQ communities and the developments in critical theory. One could argue in fact that it is Auerbach who does most of the defanging herself in connection to *The Gilda Stories*. Bemoaning the fact that Gomez’s fiction lacks the special “diffuse menace” of nineteenth-century Carmilla, Auerbach remains locked in the scenario in which lesbian vampires have to challenge patriarchal power and destroy it in order to be deemed effective and threatening. Gilda’s nuanced gender politics and the radical nature of her relationships do not fit the rebellion narrative, which by its very nature has to be adversarial and confrontational.

Auerbach also criticizes Gomez’s vampires for their retreat into “safe places,” thus again valorizing an adversarial kind of non-normative action. She insists that both Anne Rice’s and Jewelle Gomez’s vampire protagonists “have learned identity politics. They live and love in enclaves of their own, scarcely bothering to infiltrate mortal drawing-rooms or bedrooms or boardrooms. In the Reagensque years, they are so clannish and self-enclosed that
they present no threat” (186). One might ask why should the vampires “infiltrate” rooms connected with family life, reproduction and power in the first place? Is it vampires’ responsibility to be the go-to cultural Other which is always supposed to mount an attack on the center from its marginalized position? What about the semantics of “infiltration” which lie dangerously close to that of “passing” and the attendant issues of racialization, exotification and transgressive sexuality?

In theory, Poppy Z. Brite’s 1991 novel, *Lost Souls*, should be the perfect answer to Auerbach’s longing for transgressive and truly dangerous vampires. However, one could also argue that Brite’s perverse, terrifying and abhorrent vampires are in fact mocking the transgressive appeal for which the cultural critics are always on the prowl. Instead of a potent anti-oedipal and non-normative novel, *Lost Souls* is, to a large extent, a travesty of the cultural investments in the subversive powers of the vampire.

**Poppy Z. Brite’s Lost Vampires**

The road undertaken by Poppy Z. Brite differs considerably from Jewelle Gomez in that Brite’s novel is influenced less by cultural feminism and LGBTQ activism and more by the queer detachment from identitarian politics and the postmodern distrust of grand narratives. Even though both novels could be read as reactions to Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles*, *Lost Souls* is more concerned with mocking the queer vampire figure rather than reclaiming him/her as in *The Gilda Stories*. Superficially, out of all four novels analyzed in this chapter it is Brite’s vampires that resemble Louis and Lestat the most. However, all the subtle hints, ironic innuendoes and controlled sexual tension of Rice’s novels are transformed by Brite into
stark explicitness and offensiveness associated with the splatterpunk output of the early 1990s.\footnote{It is also interesting to note how Brite engages with the middle-class yuppie consumerism of Rice’s vampires. Rob Latham in \textit{Consuming Youth} (2002) argues that Brite’s are slacker vampires: dirty, poor, ambitionless, uncultured, a far cry indeed from the satin and silk sophistication of Lestat and his cohorts. At the start of the novel Nothing is trying to distance himself from the commodified Goth scene by searching for a shabby garage band, Lost Souls?, whose pirated tapes he so cherishes. Still, the end of the novel sees Nothing, Twig and Molochai as members of a highly popular snuff-rock band, which, of course, recalls Lestat’s stunt as a mega-star rock singer in the early 1980s. Thus the novel exhibits marked ambivalence towards both the yuppie vampire families drowning in material excess and the slacker vampire with no money and no future.}

Because Brite’s novel mocks rather than respects its literary vampire predecessors, it constitutes a good example of what Spooner calls the Gothic-Carnivalesque. She argues that contemporary cultural Gothic texts are preoccupied with “folk” grotesqueries, which often mock and challenge middle-class sensibilities. At the same time, these works often retain their Romantic/Gothic associations, such as the conflicted tragic hero who suffers from acute \textit{weltschmerz}. Brite’s novel fits this paradigm perfectly, as all the heroes are clearly aware of the Gothic scripts that popular culture has already produced for them and about them.\footnote{For instance, the three travelling vampires (Zillah, Molochai and Twig) consciously dress up, wear Goth makeup, paint their nails black and prefer to roam the night (even though they can move about in the sunlight). They act as vampires are \textit{supposed} to act, rather than as they should act in order to protect their own and their companions’ lives, as in Gilda’s case. The same is true of Nothing, a 15-year-old boy who joins them and who is yet another Goth-child already deeply disillusioned and unhappy with his Goth friends, whose antics he finds pretentious and insubstantial.} The novel remains acutely conscious of its place in the vampiric canon as well as on the horror fans’ bookshelves. The novel’s tone is ironic and self-depreciating, and the narrator keeps winking at the reader. Brite’s skillful collision of dark humor and the macabre calls to mind the Gothic’s intrinsic hybridity which, according to Horner and Zlosnik, can open up a space for “a comic turn in the presence of horror or terror” (\textit{Gothic and the Comic Turn} 3). The two scholars postulate that the comic elements within the Gothic might offer “a position of detachment and skepticism toward cultural nostalgia” (“Comic Gothic” 323), and it could be argued that the generic self-awareness of \textit{Lost Souls} ridicules not only vampire as such but the concept of vampire kinship, which by the early 1990s had already become a staple of vampire fiction. A coven (or a family) of vampires travelling and living together was a recognizable
feature not only because of Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles* but also because of popular Hollywood movies, such as *The Lost Boys* (1987) and *Near Dark* (1987).

Although male homosocial and homoerotic undercurrents were present in the most representative 1980s vampire texts, it was Brite who first pushed them to the fore of the narrative. As William Hughes notes, the male vampire in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century horror fiction has been increasingly associated “with the physicality of homosexual practices,” on the one hand, and “with the expression of a specifically gay identity,” on the other (142). Yet, many of such novels more or less consciously reflect the dominant heteronormative and heterosexist prejudices and stereotypes concerning gay men (142). Brite’s *Lost Souls* is one of very few contemporary vampire narratives which instead of dwelling on the mixture of frustrating guilt and longing for the forbidden gay Other actually presents characters who remain quite unapologetic about their tastes and preferences.

Hughes argues that contemporary vampire novels not only symbolically comment on the cultural anxieties concerning homosexuality, but they in fact “embody the tensions within the homosexual identity, the rationalization of issues within the alternative community” (145). *Lost Souls*, which is basically a road novel, grapples with the questions of solitary existence and community, safety and danger, as the characters move from place to place in search of others like them. Nothing (a 15-year-old boy) leaves his bland adoptive parents and begins his journey towards Missing Mile, North Carolina to find Lost Souls? – Ghost and Steve’s indie band.73 Before he reaches them, however, he is taken in by a travelling vampire trio led by Zillah. Nothing (who is in fact Zillah’s son) is a human-vampire hybrid, and he is initiated into vampirism almost accidentally by the three vampires. Meanwhile, Steve and Ghost embark on a journey of their own to find Ann (Steve’s ex-girlfriend) and later the vampire responsible for her death in labor (Zillah).

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73 The question mark in the group’s name is lost in the affirmative title.
The novel showcases several different relationships, most of which are unstable and even destructive. Both heterosexual relationships end badly for the women: Jessy (Nothing’s biological mother) is abandoned by Zillah and dies after giving birth to her son, Ann leaves Steve and their abusive relationship and after she becomes pregnant by Zillah she repeats Jessy’s fate. Steve cannot let go of Ann and engages in increasingly self-destructive behaviors. Nothing and his adopted parents have absolutely nothing in common. If anything, the conversation they have with him early in the novel reads like a cliché from a suburban family sitcom: the son suffers from acute teen angst, the mother is soft and overbearing, and she follows advice of her New Age support group; the father is strict and quick-tempered, and addresses Nothing as “young man.” The only two relationships that seem to work are Steve and Ghost’s intense friendship (which becomes intimate as some point) and Nothing’s new vampire family of which he becomes the leader at the end of the novel.

One could read Brite’s novel as an ironic commentary on the heterosexual nuclear family and its obsession with preserving (and strengthening) the blood lines. Having established the connection between blood and semen early on in the novel, Brite’s characters become linked through the exchange of fluids in a series of practices that mock both the heterosexual reproduction and the transfer of middle-class aspirations, property and patrilineality (Hughes 149). In a somewhat ironic twist, Brite’s transformed family is bound by blood, but not in any traditional sense. Theirs is a family envisioned as “an erotic and recreational rather than an administrative and reproductive unit” (Hughes 149). Similarly to Gomez, Brite blurs the distinctions between feeding, breeding and sexual pleasure. Nothing, upon learning that an old New Orleans vampire, Christian, took care of his mother after Zillah had impregnated and abandoned her, muses on the erotic exchanges that took place the summer he was born:

Christian’s long bony hands moving over Jessy’s slick breasts, her distended belly. Her belly that cradled him, unborn. He wished he could be Christian’s
hands. He wished he could feel Jessy’s weight above him, her skin slick as if with oil. He imagined Christian thrusting up into her, parting her womb, nudging up against the fetus there. Me, he thought. In the womb, had he been bathed with Christian’s semen? Had it nourished him along with the blood of Jessy? (227)

Brite’s tackles here the taboos surrounding the pregnant body, incest and exchange of fluids. Semen and blood are re-evaluated as nutrients, which also provide sensual pleasure for adult Nothing. I would argue that by returning to the basic categories of the abject – the female body and its physical transformations, the maternal, female reproductive powers and taboo sex acts – Brite utilizes the real abject. However, thanks to carefully crafted, seductive language she manages to bypass the culturally inscribed dread and disgust, and instead accentuates the desire triggered by what was lost and abjected in Nothing’s vision of the primal scene. Commenting on Brite’s other novel, Exquisite Corpse (1996), Mueller draws attention to Brite’s frequent aestheticization of the unaesthetic. Brite singles out the abject par excellence, that is the corpse and the related acts of murder and cannibalism, and then proceeds to aestheticize them through selected narrative techniques (such as first-person narration or the adoption of the killer’s point of view) and through highly sensual, poetic descriptions that evoke the sublimity, and not the horror, of murder (257). Such sensual descriptions also pervade Lost Souls, thus complicating the readers’ identifications and affective investments. (74)

Hughes argues that Brite “redefines the family as a relational concept” by showing how superficial the heterosexual kinship structures really are, as they are primarily based on inheritance and ownership (149). In their place, Lost Souls offers a family structure defined by

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74 One such description is provided by Ghost, who, by using his psychic abilities, recalls memories of a child murdered by what can only be guessed was a pair of vampires: "Ghost felt Robert’s terror mount as he caught sounds—insidious whispers, soft laughter—sounds not of the night and its usual spooks but something darker, stranger, more purposeful and far, far deadlier. And then the hands, grabbing him from behind, four strong and sharp-fingered hands, and the hungry mouths all over him, sucking out his strength and his life. At the end there was only pain that spiralled up and up and stretched itself impossibly thin—exquisite pain, pain that precluded all thought, all memory, all identity. To know such pain was to lose one’s self, to become the pain, to die borne away on pain, its high soundless song in the ears. That was what had happened to Robert” (23).
seeking pleasure, and not by following the duties of lineage. Hughes also notices the irony in that Nothing turns out to be both a proper gay man and a willing wannabe vampire as he is used to swallowing both semen and blood (148). Still, Hughes also points out that Brite does not allow “vampirism as vampirism to function as the central issue of its exploration into the troubled nature of identity within the alternative family” (150, original emphasis). Instead, she presents vampirism as embodying “homosexual practice as one of its regular accoutrements” (150). It is Zillah, however, who breaks the tacit vampire-homosexual contract through what Hughes calls closeted heterosexuality. Through two one-night stands with human females Zillah threatens his queer family with the typical dangers of heteronormative matrix of exclusivity, ownership and reproduction predicated on the exchange of women (Hughes 154). And it is his desire for sex with human females that also leads to Zillah’s downfall:

Zillah’s encounter with the human, enacted as it is on this occasion [with Ann] for revenge and power rather than to physically exhaust a mere passing lust, has compromised the exclusivity of the alternative family. Zillah’s actions and motivations have interposed the heterosexual and reproductive into the vampire culture, creating a new rhetoric of ownership and, potentially, a drive towards monogamy to challenge the pre-existent and freer vampire culture of collective co-existence and polygamy. (Hughes 154)

Yet, the exclusivity and possessiveness that underlie the sexual relationship between Zillah and Nothing, a bond that “had become flesh” (229) once it was revealed that Nothing is Zillah’s son, hint at serious problems in the queer vampire sexual paradise. A new form of jealousy and exclusivity appears, and now Nothing feels he can even chide Zillah for not being a good enough father: “You don’t treat me like your son—you treat me like I’m half sex slave and half lapdog. When I’m good, you pat me on the head, and when I fuck up you yell at me and hurt me. But you never explain anything to me. What kind of a father are you, anyway” (283)?
In the end, the conflict between the vampires and the humans is resolved with Zillah’s death, who is quite rightly held responsible for Ann’s death. This act of revenge, however, results not from Zillah’s threat of vampirism, but from his “interference in the proprietary power structures of heterosexual relationships” (Hughes 155), as he slept with an on-and-off girlfriend of one of the human males. Yet, what Hughes glosses over is the fact that Zillah has also meddled in his own familial relations by excluding Nothing from the heterosexual tryst with a doomed female human and by trying to hurt and control Nothing. As a result, Nothing feels little regret after his father’s death and has absolutely no intention of avenging him – he has lost a lover, but not a person with whom he was involved in a filial-paternal exchange of duties and expectations. Instead, he follows smoothly in Zillah’s footsteps and takes control of Twig and Molochai, the two remaining vampires. The novel ends with the trio becoming a fully self-enclosed unit. They turn to the outside (heterosexual and human) world for sustenance, but no longer for sex. In a way, they have become a perfect Gothic family – forever closed off and directed inward with no outsiders to violate the delicate status quo and no children to introduce heteronormative temporality of lineage, inheritance and nurture. As interspecies breeding leads to the dilution of vampire blood, it has to be rejected, if the vampiric community is to remain strong (Hughes 206). Arguably, by returning to species exclusivity the novel resurrects late nineteenth-century anxieties concerning the mingling of blood and miscegenation. Lost Souls could be thus seen as a perverse modern-day Dracula, because both novels share a similar fear of radical exogamy: in the latter case, it is a human female who has to reject the dangers of exogamy embodied by the Eastern European Other, and in the former it is a vampire male who has to practice radical homophily and reject human companions of either sex. Ironically, at the end of the day, it is heterosexuality that has to be abjected and left behind. Nothing’s dreamy vision of his mother’s sexual union with Christian
has to be repudiated if he is to establish a strong vampire identity (and not a weak human-vampire hybrid one vulnerable to threats/desires from the outside).

Interestingly, in order to survive, the vampires need to stick to a species-based and sex-based monogamy, which strikes me as a rather reactionary ending to an otherwise intriguing book. In place of a heteronormative nuclear family, a specific kind of homonormative *ménage a trois* emerges. It is not, however, only a matter of choice but rather of necessity: every vampire birth ends in the mother’s death and female vampires are understandably reluctant to breed, while children born of human females assume more human (and thus weaker) characteristics than their older, “purer” vampire ancestors. One could thus read the vampires’ reluctance to open their family to outsiders as symptomatic of the AIDS crisis in the gay community of the early 1990s. The epilogue, set 50 years in the future, plays with this fear most explicitly, as Twig and Molochai bring Nothing a syringe filled with blood. The syringe stands both for a danger (the threat of needle-sharing), but also safety and cleanliness (sanitized blood, no teeth-to-skin contact). In the end, Nothing decides that the only way to protect his new family is by minimizing physical contact with the outside world.

One could see Nothing’s slipping into Zillah’s role as the leader/father figure as a mockery of the Girl’s transformation into Gilda II in Gomez’s story. Both vampire families form alternative structures, yet ultimately their radicalism is diluted by their conflicted allegiances. The community, which is so elegantly woven by Gomez, remains elusive for the better part of Gilda’s 200-year-long life – a life she spent mostly alone. It is only on the final pages, as Gilda readies herself to escape to South America, we finally get a glimpse of what this family might become. However, this beautiful extended family of queer vampires cannot exist in North America, not even in 2050 – they must flee. On the other hand, the sensual vampires of Brite’s fiction, though not willingly or consciously involved in reproduction, and thus seemingly free from the heteronormative ideology of lineage, inheritance and
proprietorship/propriety, are very much implicated in the stickiness of belonging and blood ties that paralyze their transgressive potential. Although it is possible to read “Brite’s exploration of self-chosen and unorthodox family structures as a subversive option to the violence of the hegemonic norm” (Greenberg 164), ultimately *Lost Souls* presents a vision of static excess. The novel ends with a glimpse of the future – “Epilogue: Fifty Years Later,” which situates it close to the last story’s timeline in *The Gilda Stories*. Molochai and Twig are in a night club packing after their sniff-rock concert. Nothing, their lead singer, is seen sleeping in a fetal position sucking at his fist, which proves that the abjection of the maternal (and the heterosexual) can never be final or complete. The narrator comments that Nothing “has a good reason to be tired. He runs a tight crew, and he has kept them alive, well fed, and sated for half a century” (354). For all the potentially explosive and subversive versions of the future, the one on offer presents a rather conservative picture of a man taking care of his family, keeping them safe and providing for them. He is still, however, yearning for some paternal figure to take care of him, as his unconscious thumb-sucking would suggest. Even though the three vampires look bizarre, engage in sado-masochist practices and pretend to use fake blood while performing on stage, their backstage version of domesticity is in fact quite tame and, one could say, even traditional.

**Escaping the “Little Wife”**

While Brite’s vampires were finally able to find support and protection within the enclosed space of their homogenous family, Elizabeth Engstrom’s 1986 novel, *Black Ambrosia*, presents a vampire’s solitary existence filled with self-doubt and manic-depressive oscillation between self-abhorrence and satisfaction. In a way, *Black Ambrosia* is structured along a series of escapes: the protagonist, Angelina, manages to escape her family and small-
town middle-class existence, but she cannot fully escape either her human nature or her vampirism. In contrast to the self-assured vampires from *The Gilda Stories* and *Lost Souls*, Angelina struggles with her vampiric proclivities and experiments with several identities and self-conceptions before finally accepting who (or what) she is. Because Angelina’s vampirism is never fully explained (nor confirmed, for that matter), Engstrom is free to investigate different guises of vampiric behavior and different meanings attached to the vampire. Angelina is alternately presented as a psychologically disturbed person, a member of separate species, a supernatural creature, a wild animal, a carrier of transmittable disease or a host of a parasite. Interestingly, what links all those identities is the abject nature of vampirism – the killing, the blood-letting and blood-drinking, the non-human ferocity, the associations with dirt, death and dark maternal eroticism.

The novel begins with Angelina, the protagonist and first-person narrator, admitting that she never intended to become a vampire. This marks the first and last self-reflexive moment, where the word “vampire” is mentioned by her. The book follows a linear narrative in which Angelina describes her life in what we learn at the end is actually a journal written at a psychiatric hospital. Each entry is followed by a short note from a selected supporting character – usually one of the people she has met on her travels or Boyd, the man who falls for Angelina and begins to hunt her. These short entries, which resemble interview notes or case files, fill in the gaps in Angelina’s account, offer a supposedly more objective view on her deeds, and also slowly reveal Boyd’s growing confusion and emotional investment in the hunt for Angelina. The novel is to a large extent structured as a road novel as it follows Angelina’s journeys across late-1980s America. Her hitchhiking trips are interposed with three longer periods of settling down: in Westwater with Lewis, a man she meets on the road, in Seven Slope living on her own, and finally in her home town of Wilton, where she is finally apprehended.
As already mentioned, Engstrom does not provide definitive answers as to the true nature of Angelina’s vampirism. There are clues suggesting that she could be a separate species, a supernatural being with telepathic and hypnotic powers or simply a mentally disturbed woman suffering from clinical vampirism (porphyria). In fact, during one of her longer periods of blood abstinence, Angelina is sure that she “must have been insane” and “seriously mentally ill” to kill four people and drink their blood (116, 120). Similarly, Angelina’s stepfather admits that he knew something was seriously wrong with her and he should have killed her the night she left home. Interestingly, Angelina misreads his hesitant behavior that night as him being conflicted whether to cry or to rape her. One has to wonder why her stepfather wanted to kill her in the first place and what signs of her future murderous self he noticed, while inhabiting the same house with her for a number of years.

Over the course of the narrative, other characters point to her animal-like, feral qualities. For instance, the way she smells is compared to a fox-lair smell, and Lewis thinks of her nocturnal activities as that of a “reptilian” (101). Another non-human connection is the rat nest she finds in her Seven Slopes apartment and which she simply accepts. On several occasions she distances herself from other humans, for instance, when she describes how her keen sense of smell allowed her to predict people’s emotions and behaviors. At the end of the novel, after she has killed several children in her home town, she can sense the paranoia rising around her: “witch-hunter, lynch mobs, and angry, outraged gatherings turning monstrous themselves” (296). A young boy who recognizes the supernatural nature of her threat knows “too much lore” and hangs a crucifix above his bed (297). But crucifixes, garlic or stakes do not mean anything to Angelina.

Still, even though Angelina snorts at garlic or religious symbols, there are typical vampire tropes used by Engstrom quite effectively. For instance, when Angelina spirals down into a feeding and killing frenzy in Seven Slopes, she decides to build a coffin-like container
for herself as a form of protection against her unsavoury desires. She leaves this catafalque together with her Bela Lugosi-like cape, which she used to wear to avoid spilling blood on her dresses. Boyd then recalls how her flat “smelled like a den, or a lair, or a bat cave” (183). And when she returns to her home town and hides in the cellar of her childhood home, she has already mastered the craft of vampiric hypnosis. She chooses children for her victims because of their malleability, and she either lures them outside or visits them in their bedrooms, which brings to mind Lucy Westenra’s choice of victims in Stoker’s *Dracula*. It seems that the more comfortable she feels in her vampire skin, the more closely she follows traditional vampire scripts. Conversely, when she fails to follow her chosen vampire script, she becomes sick. For instance, when she tries to switch to animal blood, she has an allergic reaction to lamb blood. And when she kills Joshua, a war vet, for no apparent reason and without following the orgasmic feeling she associates with feeding, she ends up vomiting the blood: “The sweet, tangy ambrosia that had been mine the night before had turned black and diseased and hateful during the course of the day, during my sleep, bloating my stomach, now to be spewed forth in a raging gush of acid” (177). Wrong blood, no longer sustenance in the vampiric sense, but an abjected bodily fluid has to be expelled.

The novel charts Angelina’s second adolescence (that is, the process of becoming a vampire) and her teenage-like symptoms of rebelling against a mysterious female Voice that begins guiding her actions. The novel does not reveal the source of the voice, which could be a sign of Angelina’s psychosis, a figment of her imagination (which takes over a maternal function from her dead mother), or a parasitic being schooling her in vampirism. Twice she attempts to drown out the female whisper and consciously re-join the human race. And for a while she genuinely yearns for “a life-style of normalcy” and “yellow kitchen curtains” just like the ones her mother owned (118). She rents an apartment and gets a job in a call center,
but when winter months come to Seven Slopes, Colorado, she finds it difficult to resist the call of darkness. She is confused and wishes for a real place in a community:

The loneliness was suddenly overwhelming. I felt a need to share with someone the terrors of the night, the confusion about my past that strangled my thoughts. I needed someone to talk to, to be with. I needed to learn not just the definition of the word remorse, but to see how other people lived with it. And remorse wasn’t the only word I didn’t understand. Altruism was another. So were compromise, and sacrifice. All those social words. (127, original emphasis)

Paradoxically, her joining the social body is presented precisely in terms of painful sacrifices and compromises. She needs to repudiate those parts of herself that do not fit the social reality and force her vampirism back into the closet. In Kristeva’s understanding, abjection is critical not only for delineating the borders of an individual body but of the social body as well. That is why Angelina knows that her vampirism cannot be part of her if she wants to settle down in Seven Slopes. No longer feeling “special” the way she did during her first kills, she now believes a short-term insanity took over her mind. The killings and the mutilations were an aberration, a short lapse that she can put behind quickly and neatly. The fact that she refuses to confront what she did signals her reluctance to see her vampirism as part of herself. In that she is abjecting her vampiric needs and her vampiric corporeality.

In Amending the Abject Body (2004), Deborah C. Covino links the process of abjection to participation and community. Writing about cosmetic surgeries and interventions in the female body, she contends that abjection designates “those parts of us that we refuse” and which we do not accept in our constitution (4). The abject acts then as a necessary reminder of the material (not merely maternal). According to Covino, the reigning aesthetics which deems certain bodies and certain body parts abject is culturally conditioned and sustained (and thus liable to diachronic transformations), but instead of looking at abjection through the lens of alienation and individuation, she sees abjection as a group project: “an act of orientation to a welcoming community, populated by clean and proper bodies” (13). Abjection, then, can be
understood as “a metaphor for the process of maintaining the social body” (Covino 28), a body that is accepted in the (real or imagined) community of proper bodies. This novel way of recontextualising abjection can be extended to vampire and human communities in Black Ambrosia, as vampirism in Angelina’s case also signifies her inability to connect with others, her psychopathic tendencies, her lack of social skills and scorn for typical human wants and needs linked to communal existence. For a while, as she gets better, she also begins to perform better in social terms: she strikes up friendships with other women at work, and she even begins “to dress like a young lady” (120). Of course, such descriptions suggest that her belonging to a community depends solely on her acting skill and that she is in fact performing both a certain type of femininity and a certain type of sociality.

Covino’s understanding of abjection in social and communal terms differs from the analyses which concentrate on affirmative abjection or faux-abjection, which are then employed in the service of transgressive gestures. Angelina does not want to transgress and become visible. Instead, for a short while she attempts to be like ordinary people – want the same things they desire and despise the same objects they hate. Of course, she is unable to keep up this façade for long, just as she was unable to play Lewis’s companion for long.

Her separation from community is also what draws her to Boyd. She is right to sense a similar kind of emptiness and loneliness in him: “We were in the vast minority…. Most people were basically the same, showing healthy expressions of their individual differences. They married, had best friends, served on committees, and played bridge” (108). Their connection rests on their shared dissatisfaction with middle-class standards of happiness and contentment. Boyd, too, begins to notice his proximity to Angelina and the reasons why he keeps hunting her: “Because I didn’t want school. And I didn’t want work. I didn’t want the same old friends and the same old place to live, right near my old man and Bill [Boyd’s brother] anymore” (209-210). He no longer wants to follow in his father’s footsteps, become a
construction worker and remain satisfied with the small life that envelopes him. Thus the hunt for Angelina offers a way out of this humdrum existence.

This anti-materialist sentiment is expressed by Angelina already at the start of the novel. When her mother dies and all her possessions are sold away, teenage Angelina is relieved to be unburdened of ownership and is actually glad to leave her stepfather’s house and travel on her own. Middle-class ambitions regarding house ownership are completely alien to her. She spends a year as a transient, moving from place to place, without direction or hurry. When she moves in with Lewis, an amiable, if somewhat boring, man, his house is described as “a modern nothing,” a place entirely foreign to her but where she stays and plays the “little-wife role” for a while (36, 43). She remains completely detached from Lewis, feeling neither indebted to nor entrapped by him, but she is able to master at least some semblance of genuine feelings for his sake. However, when her transformation into a night-creature leads to a loss of consciousness during the day, she knows it is time to leave. After all, “Lewis had standards, requirements. He would want me to be home every night” (96). Angelina, however, does not want to be tied down by long-term relationship expectations such as marriage, sex and parenthood. Leaving Lewis, she wishes “for rapid appreciation on his home, and a wife and sons to keep his level of respectability right where he felt most comfortable” (103). The sardonic statement connects several tenets of middle-class life: heterosexual romance and marriage, monogamy, financial security, house ownership, and finally having sons rather than daughters to carry the family name. All this combined will present Lewis with a middle-class respectability, which in Angelina’s eyes is precisely what he needs and she does not.

The novel, rather predictably, connects vampiric activity with sexual arousal and sex acts. Witnessing her mother and stepfather having sex, prepubescent Angelina begins to experiment both with masturbating and drinking her own blood. If one wanted to follow a more logical explanation for her adult vampirism, this episode could serve as an example of
an early-age imprint, which left Angelina with a blood fetish. Years later, the very first person she kills is a stranger trying to rape her. His friend later recalls that “[t]hat girl was no girl, if you get my drift” (17) – an ambiguous statement pointing both to her potential non-humanity and equally disturbing fluid gender identity. Her first kill is shortly followed by her first sexual experience, a cold and detached affair that gives her little pleasure or satisfaction, but which she nonetheless deems necessary in terms of reaching full physical maturity.

Her first predatory kill is conscious, as she can no longer contain “an ancient, innate, dormant hunger” that overcomes her thoughts and her body (56). After killing three people, she leaves Westwater and Lewis behind and takes up her road trip again. However, she is now being followed by Boyd, a young man with whom she struck an immediate connection back in Westwater, and who soon connects the dots and realizes that she is the killer responsible for the deaths in his home town.

Angelina keeps rationalizing her kills in a manner strikingly similar to *The Gilda Stories*. She imagines herself as an angel of death, providing her male victims with pleasure, rest, and release, rather than excruciating pain and torturous death. She sees herself both as a skilled huntress and a semi-savior of lost human souls. The voice of her god-like immaterial companion tells her to share her “gift” with her victims (71). Angelina reflects that her “freedom from responsibility was no mistake…. Freedom from family tethers, from material assets, from even the basic desires to have these things” meant that she was selected by a higher force for a higher purpose (71). She bucks away from accusations of murder. Instead, she insists that: “I hadn’t murdered the lad at all. I had loved him. I had loved him totally and completely, with my entire body and soul” (85). If anything, she is mad at the townspeople and the police that they are unable to recognize her mastery, bravery and skill.

Her self-perception as a huntress is another link to Boyd, himself an avid hunter. But while he kills for pure pleasure and release, Angelina truly believes she is on a special
mission. Yet while he is praised, she is vilified. Even though Boyd is preternaturally linked with her in a soul-mate-like, telepathic manner, he also staunchly refuses to see her as an otherworldly being or a vampire: “[c]ompulsive, obsessive, self-destructive, and homicidal, true, but sick nevertheless. There was nothing supernatural here. It was just Angelina…. A misdirected, sad, psychopathic case” (322). Boyd’s unnatural connection with Angelina is finally proven on the last pages of the novel when readers learn that she carried her “music” to Boyd when she bit his arm and sucked his blood briefly. It is now Angelina who is becoming the female Voice in Boyd’s head, just like an unnamed female voice guided Angelina on her road to becoming a vampire.

After a rather unsuccessful attempt to keep her darker instincts in check in Seven Slopes, Angelina finally succumbs to them again. This time her feeding is almost indistinguishable from sex. In a scene highly reminiscent of Dracula feeding Mina from a slit in his breast, Angelina grips her male victim’s chest and sucks blood out of his breast, “teasing the nipple of [her] nourishment with [her] teeth” (145). The kind of abjection posited by this scene has as much to do with gender reversal (a woman sucking a man’s breast) as with the blurring of boundaries between feeding, suckling and sex. The connotations with feeding are strengthened in that Angelina chooses only the healthiest specimens she can find – non-smoking, non-drinking and athletic single men. Angelina is thus presented as a parasitic succubus, a praying mantis of sorts, who seduces and kills men at the height of sexual passion. As Halberstam has noted, this kind of parasitic vampirism “represents a bad or pathological sexuality, non-productive sexuality, a sexuality that exhausts and wastes and exists prior to and outside of the marriage contract” (16-17). Angelina not only refuses the middle-class ideal of a family life, children and monogamy, but she violently perverts it. The heterosexual act becomes a parasitic rape in reverse. And her emphasis on the partners’ so-called “good genetic material” mocks the heterosexual mating process in that she chooses
healthy men for strictly dietary, not reproductive, purposes. In this sense, she transforms
typical heterosexual contract into something debased, repelling and abject.

The dark eroticism that erupts time and again in *Black Ambrosia* is also linked to the
maternal and mother-daughter relationship that Angelina pursues over the course of the novel.
Angelina mentions her father only once – he died when she was eight and she has almost no
memories of him. Her mother, conversely, was a much more important figure for her as
evidenced by the capital “m” that always accompanies the “Mother.” Soon after her mother
dies, Angelina leaves her stepfather and her family house. It seems that her mother was
Angelina’s only mooring and without this connection she is set adrift. Throughout the rest of
the novel Angelina develops and matures through her relations and experiences with women
rather than men. After her the very first kill, she begins hearing sensuous music that floods
her with pleasure and which she comes to associate with drinking blood – the titular “black
ambrosia.” Within the music she also discerns a voice, which she comes to identify as
belonging to a nameless female presence or “She” as Angelina calls her. They enter a master-
servant relationship, in which Angelina promises to serve Her, satisfy Her and make Her
proud of her vampiric accomplishments. Their relationship is also erotically charged as
Angelina finds intense pleasure in Her visits. Usually, she sees her mistress as a mist or as a
beautiful mouth near her face. It is suggested that She might be a manifestation of Angelina’s
dark nature, terrifying and beautiful, but ultimately mentally unhinged. She could be “a she-
devil,” that is, another vampire who schools Angelina in the dark art of hunting and killing
(244). Angelina rebels against her like a teenager and refuses to be “Her puppet, Her pawn”
(164), yet she returns to Her obediently again and again. The bizarre presence brings to mind
an image of an older, more mature and more knowledgeable female, a maternal figure of sorts
who educates, sways and seduces the younger woman.
One could also argue that both Angelina’s vampirism and the female voice are her attempts at dealing with the trauma of being attacked and having to kill in self-defense. The voice that directs her to kill men and drink their blood may be thus explained as Angelina creating a motherly figure who can assume responsibility for the murders through which Angelina is reenacting her sexual assault. The big red mouth that stands for the mysterious female figure can signify vampire’s orality as well as a threat of being swallowed and subsumed by the predatory female presence. In this sense, She might also represent the archaic mother – a figure threatening Angelina’s subjectivity and individuation but also tempting her into absolute freedom from selfhood and accountability.

Apart from the strange female presence that accompanies Angelina, two other women play important roles in her development: Sarah and Rosemary, both of whom she meets during her travels. Soon after leaving Lewis, she meets Sarah for the first time. When Sarah, a single mom of Native American descent, finds Angelina, who has been on the road for days and is now suffering from exhaustion and exposure, she takes her in for a couple of days. Soon Angelina comes to see Sarah as her own personal savior and a paragon of a truly happy, well-adjusted, healthy, young woman. And for years to come, Angelina thinks of Sarah as a beacon of hope. She even makes a conscious effort to be more like Sarah – stable, sane and wholly satisfied with her life – when she settles down in the ski resort. Yet, the dark call is too strong and soon she begins killing again. Unable to stop herself from killing, she leaves Seven Slopes and seeks out Sarah to once again find help and support. However, the moment she realizes that Sarah’s strength and happiness have evaporated, and she is now just another exhausted single mom trying to make both ends meet, she kills her instead. Upon discovering that happiness and stability are at best temporary respite in human life, guilt, shame and regret Angelina has struggled with before disappear completely.
Arguably, Angelina’s murder of Sarah is also a result of Angelina’s encounter with Rosemary, whom Angelina meets shortly before reconnecting with Sarah. Right after escaping from Seven Slopes, when Angelina is on her way to Sarah, she meets Rosemary, a seemingly harmless elderly lady, who lures her with promises of help, but instead kidnaps Angelina and then rapes and tortures her for two days. Rosemary embodies another maternal figure, one who deeply scars Angelina and abandons her. Once again, the dark and violent maternal eroticism, one that threatens Angelina with total subjugation and disintegration, surfaces, but this time Angelina is no longer its instrument, but rather its helpless victim. Still, she refuses to acknowledge Rosemary’s proclivities in terms of a lesbian desire. She reserves the highly sensual descriptions of same-sex erotic pleasure only for the Voice: “She was there. She cupped my chin in Her hands, ever so delicately, and Her touch was like velvet. Her love and warmth surrounded my delirious head” (203). Rosemary, in stark contrast, is just a diseased, perverted creature of the night, who nonetheless identifies their shared predilection for dark deeds, their “baser passions, the ancient ones” (213).

Violated and sick, Angelina attempts to reconnect with Sarah, and when this fails, she returns to Her and recalls how “[s]he welcomed me back with kisses and floods of ecstasy, wave after wave of orgasmic pleasure” (247). What follows is their “honeymoon”: “I opened myself to Her so completely, so totally, that I felt filleted, exposed, with no secrets, nothing withheld” (249). Such descriptions define their union not only in terms of lesbian desire, but also matrimony and mother-daughter ties. It is only when Angelina insists on seeing Her in full that she finally recognizes “the vileness of Her nature” and the horror of Her existence (251). One could argue that what Angelina sees at that moment is nothing more but her own reflection – her own monstrosity, murderous deeds, and the pain she inflicted on others. At first she is understandably horrified, but then she comes to understand why she cannot escape from Her. From this moment onward in the novel, the Voice no longer appears. Angelina
notices her new “lean and statuesque” body, “a new posture,” which overnight “changed [her] into a person worthy of worship” (253). Thus she becomes her own Voice and supplants her previous mistress with herself or, conversely, she finally realizes that there never was a She. Angelina ends up assimilating (becoming even) her mistress, teacher and motherly guardian, a process which seems to mock the final separation of an adult child from its overbearing parent.

The novel’s ambiguity may thus be interpreted as Angelina’s ambivalence towards subjectification. It is only after she sees the full horror of the female presence that the voice disappears and Angelina’s moral and emotional confusion is lifted. It is important to remember that the horrific moment of recognition, which incidentally interrupts the marital bliss of Angelina and her mistress, is yet another image of the archaic mother. But instead of repudiation and abjection, Angelina opts for fusion with this threatening figure. And in the wake of this process Angelina announces that “She and I have become one—or was it always so” (254)? Her previous attempts at self-reliance and radical independence from anything and anyone, which were heavily tested by the machinations of the female presence, are over as Angelina accepts the Voice and mergers with Her.

Interestingly, Angelina becomes her cruelest self when her maturation into a full-fledged vampire is completed. If her earlier choice of victims (young and healthy men) might have signified Angelina’s inability to work through a traumatic sexual attack, she now chooses the most taboo victim – young, innocent children of either gender. She opts for the easiest prey not because she lacks skills but because she enjoys toying with them and wants to instill dread in the whole town. One has to wonder about her choices here – she seems to be punishing her hometown in the most macabre way possible; however, Engstrom never explains why Angelina feels the need to do so. The fact that she switches from male victims to children is even more intriguing, and it might in fact be construed as a sign of her
ambivalence towards reproduction. Back in her hometown, she goes into a pure survival mode. Now, as a mature vampire, she feels “fertile” and knows that “perpetuating the species” has become of paramount importance (303). On the one hand, she seems to be finally ready for companionship and reproduction. On the other hand, she kills children, who by definition are the very goal of reproduction.

At the end of the novel, as soon as Angelina moves into the cellar of her old family house, she begins to haunt the family that lives there now with disquieting erotic dreams. She selects the mother and her teenage son – Daniel – as her favorite playthings. It is Daniel who finally traps Angelina and assists Boyd in capturing her. However, even though Daniel was ultimately able to resist Angelina’s cull, his mother recalls that the pleasure Angelina brought her in her sleep was irresistible. The dreams were perverse and disturbing, but pleasurable nonetheless. The connection between eroticism and vampirism is sealed through abject imagery of transgressive sex acts. In case of the mother, who maintains her heterosexual orientation, it is lesbian sex, and in Daniel’s case it is sex with a minor. One cannot but wonder about Angelina’s decision to concentrate her telepathic manipulation on these two family members. The mother, as an adult person, cannot be perhaps swayed and controlled as much as Daniel, which is why Angelina stops at teasing the woman through dark and unwanted eroticism. However, with Daniel she adopts a more controlling and demanding stance. For a short while she harbors a hope that the boy could become her apprentice, and maybe even a future partner. Paradoxically, while she is trying to persuade Daniel into becoming her student, she is also actively trying to kill his younger sister, which could point to Angelina’s ambivalence towards motherhood as aChapter  What is more, she is drawn to Daniel’s mother and, possibly, she is trying to supplant her in Daniel’s eyes. Yet throughout her stay with this particular family she acts like a manipulative teenager testing the boundaries rather than an adult woman interested in settling down.
Ultimately, Angelina fails to find a suitable apprentice in her hometown and settles for Boyd, who in capturing her becomes preternaturally linked to her. Since the reliability of Angelina’s first-person narration is repeatedly called into question by interceding case notes (which gather other people’s viewpoints), and the novel eschews explanations of any kind and refuses to provide any mythological, historical or even physiological background as to the nature of Angelina’s vampiric desires, her vampirism appears to be receptive to a more symbolic reading. Angelina’s vampirism could be then read as a parasitic disease of the mind which causes increasingly aberrant behavior in its host. Judging from Angelina’s and Boyd’s examples, only those people who are already marked as aberrant (that is, not interested in settling down and meeting social expectations) are prone to this disease. In a particularly reactionary reading, Angelina’s monstrosity resides also in her refusal to settle for one man and bear his children. Still longing for a past mother-daughter fusion of identities, she is incapable of making rational, adult decisions that are expected of her. Instead, she seduces, kills and discards men after deadly one-night stands in a misandrist spectacle of violent female emancipation. And when she transforms into a child-killer, she literally crosses into the non-human realm. In a more sympathetic reading, Angelina’s inability to carve out a space for herself in a society that values only certain types of behavior and accepts select few choices concerning relationships and family life (or lack of thereof) means that she is forced to become the very opposite of what is respectable, healthy and welcomed. She transforms into a vampire because in a system based on binary oppositions she has to choose a side, and since she is not interested in the normal/good/middle-class existence, she opts for its very antithesis. Because Angelina’s lust for blood is posited as being at odds with her delicate girly looks and her feminine gender (as noted often by herself and other characters), the “troubling ontology” of her vampirism also points to her conflicted inner self. As Milly Williamson explains, the conflict between the beautiful façade and monstrous internal desires in a vampire
corresponds to the difficulty of experiencing one's self when one does not enjoy a normative identity (2) – an identity which, in Angelina’s case, would mean someone’s happy “little wife.”

**Prodigal Children (Not) Coming Home**

A winner of the Bram Stoker Award for the best debut novel, Melanie Tem’s *Prodigal* (1991) might seem an odd choice for analysis in this chapter, presents a vampire from the victim’s perspective and focuses on spiritual or emotional vampirism and does away with blood as well as other traditional vampire paraphernalia. What is more, *Prodigal* is also the only novel of the four analyzed here that manages to sidestep Anne Rice’s and Bram Stoker’s hefty influence. In fact, Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “Luella Miller” (1902) seems a more suitable literary ancestor for *Prodigal*, as both stories feature life-draining psychic vampires. Another potential link could be established between Tem’s novel and pre-*Dracula* works which focused on human-vampire friendships as seen through the human protagonist’s eyes, for instance, Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Polidori’s *The Vampyre*. But in contrast to these nineteenth-century texts, it is now a young child’s focalization that structures the whole plot, not an adult’s.

Similarly to Engstrom’s *Black Ambrosia*, Tem’s *Prodigal* has been accorded virtually no academic scrutiny. For that reason, the inclusion of these two novels is also a part of my project to shed some critical light on works which have never been widely discussed and have remained in the shadow of their more popular counterparts such as Brite’s or Gomez’s publications. One of the few researchers of the Gothic who actually mention Melanie Tem is Gina Wisker. In *Horror Fiction*, she describes briefly a couple of Tem’s stories and underlines that in Tem’s works “family relationships are a prime location for horror, an
expose of hypocrisy and simple repressive binary oppositions, taboos, and rituals, which prioritise some behaviours and exclude, demonise, and punish others” (100). In “Devouring Desires: Lesbian Gothic Horror,” Wisker stresses how contemporary women authors rescue the lesbian vampire from her sordid punishment enacted by patriarchal authorities for the supposed breach of social decorum and the dissolution of familial ties. Although she focuses only on Tem’s short stories, her comment on the centrality of family relationships in Tem’s fiction can be extended to *Prodigal* as well: “Melanie Tem undercuts conventional horror’s neat reinforcing of the status quo in its closure, its packing away and staking of that which is terrifying because Other, abject, threatening to the status quo. Her work exposes and refuses the demonizing of our animal nature, our other selves, and the easy maintenance of taboos as ritual spells against any bit of questioning of this neat set of behaviors and beliefs” (127). In another article, Wisker mentions Melanie Tem, alongside Katherine Forrest and Jewelle Gomez, as examples of women writers “speaking the unspeakable” and “counteract[ing] the marginalization and silencing of conventional, oppressive texts” (“Women's Horror”).

Admittedly, it is real abjection (the unspeakable) rather than the culturally mediated faux-abjection that stands out in Tem’s novel. The title suggests a welcome return of the prodigal (son), but the son who returns is abjected through the association with physical decay and disease. The second site of the abject is located within psychic vampirism – an addiction-like disturbance which is linked to the eroticism of early adolescence, menarche and menstrual blood, birth/re-birth and Freudian primal scene. What is more, the title unambiguously places the family at the center of the narrative. The biblical story of a wayward son who turns away from his parents, but is then forgiven and re-accepted into the family structures the plot, which traces the lines of flights and returns of the teenage protagonists. And because the novel’s focalizer, Lucy, moves along the axis of childhood-
adolescence in the course of the novel, we can witness her changing perspectives on her older siblings’ desertion, her parents’ failures, and her own budding teenage angst.

We meet Lucy as she is struggling with her older brother’s ghostly presence. Ethan, who escaped from a court-mandated children’s home almost two years earlier, has been haunting Lucy and her mother. Interestingly, the hauntings began before his actual death and they continue after it. The second oldest child, Rae, soon follows in her brother’s footsteps and graduates from general teenage malaise to shoplifting, drugs and ultimately to running away. Rae, just like her brother, then begins to haunt her parents and tries to warn Lucy that she is in fact next in line. A social worker, Jerry, who used to take special interest in Ethan and then Rae, invites Lucy to his group sessions, and as the narrative progresses, the readers learn that he is a monster draining life from troubled kids. Although the word “vampire” is never used, the narrative leaves little doubt as to Jerry’s monstrous status. Highly disturbing scenes of Jerry’s feeding are accompanied by suckling, slurping and biting sounds.

The narrative charts Lucy’s progress from a precocious, but innocent 11-year-old to a moody and enraged 12-year-old. Ironically, when Lucy still firmly identifies herself as a child rather than a teen or a pre-teen, she can sense that there is something wrong with Jerry. Yet, the moment she hits puberty and begins to think of herself as a misunderstood teen, she begins to navigate towards Jerry and yields easily to his charm. Tem brilliantly weaves together all the potential signs of trouble that will befall Lucy. Her conflicted and confused feelings and drastic mood swings, quite typical for girls her age, are precisely what draws Jerry to her in the first place. While the Brill family consists of eight people – the parents, Ethan (the son who is the first to disappear and then to die) and Rae (the oldest daughter who disappears soon after Ethan’s death) and four younger children – the narrator focuses on Lucy’s relations with her parents, especially the mother, and her two missing siblings. Because the narrative

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75 Interestingly, Tem worked as a social worker herself.
concentrates on the older children almost exclusively, Tem is free to portray the sheer predictability and repetitiveness of teenage angst. Each teenager in the Brill household goes through the same motions and falls into the same trap, and in each case parents and younger siblings are unable to counter Jerry’s power.

Even though the title suggests a long-awaited return of an errant child, both Ethan’s and Rae’s attempts at returning are positioned as abject. It is the sweet and sour smell of decomposition that usually alerts Lucy to their presence. After one of Rae’s visits, Lucy can still smell in her room “a kind of sickening [smell], like something half-dead or really really dirty” (107). Ethan manifests himself similarly: “She tasted coldness; her mouth puckered and her teeth hurt. She smelled Ethan, sour, as if he hadn’t taken a shower in a long time, as if he were sick” (36). Although it is clear that Ethan needs her help, he cannot speak: “His mouth was hanging open, crooked, as if hurt. It looked full of dirt or blood; Lucy felt sick” (36). She also recalls that even before his disappearance Ethan had trouble communicating and was ultimately reduced to saying “ugly things to everybody, obscenities and accusations and lies” (37). However, after disappearing, he completely “lost the power of speech” and was reduced to physical violence as his only means of communication. Manifesting as a wraithlike presence, he attacks Lucy and his mother and tries to strangle them on several occasions. The novel never explicitly states whether Ethan’s ghostly violence towards his mother and sister is a sign of his resentment or a cry for help. In fact, the novel is also unclear as to whether these are genuine ghosts, psychic residues of the two teens’ anger or figments of Lucy’s imagination. Although Ethan visits his family both before and after his actual physical death, Rae does not die and her “ghost” appears while she is still locked in Jerry’s cellar.

Interestingly, Ethan reveals himself primarily to his mother, whereas Rae chooses her father, a fact that baffles Lucy. The father suggests to Lucy that this gendered pattern might be connected to “teenagers’ ambivalence toward the parent of the opposite sex” (88). This
rather obvious reference to the Oedipalization process is complemented with several scenes which showcase familial tensions arising from the parent-child gender dynamics. For instance, when Lucy witnesses one of Rae’s attacks on their father, she initially misinterprets it as a loving embrace. Only after some time Lucy realizes the truth: “[Rae’s] arms were around his neck not because she loved him, but because she hated him. She wasn’t kissing him, she was biting and sucking. She was trying to hurt him” (120).

The kind of abjection occasioned by the convergence of various taboo intimacies features prominently in *Prodigal*. Lucy’s growing interest in sex makes her think about her parents and their bedroom activities on two occasions. The first time she suspects that her parents are having sex, she is mortified to discover that the two naked, moaning people in bed are in fact her mother and Ethan’s specter. The horror of this realization is such that she cannot process what she is witnessing – the shock resides both in the incestuous desire made manifest and the blurring of boundaries between giving and taking life. Twice the narrator has to repeat what Lucy is seeing: “Ethan was in bed with Mom” (62). Lucy, however, does not understand what is happening: “There was something awful about this; Lucy wasn’t clear, couldn’t have put words to it, but her skin crawled” (62). The sickly sour-sweet smell that accompanies ghostly Ethan now reminds her of her infant brother, thus conceptually linking death and birth. And even though she is unable to relay what she is actually witnessing, it slowly dawns on her that she is actually watching her mother “having a baby, only backward, because nothing’s coming out, Ethan’s going back in” (63, original emphasis). Lucy is understandably horrified, but she is also envious of Ethan’s absolute closeness with their mother. She yearns to take his place at their mother’s side, but is nonetheless repulsed by such a fantasy. The scene reads not only like a reverse birth, but also a reverse process of subjectification. Ethan, first robbed of language and then of his life, is making “sounds that came before words, gurgling, hiccupping, mewling” and his and his mother’s bodies are so
intertwined that it is impossible to distinguish their contours (62). While he is sucking and biting his mother’s breast, he becomes smaller and smaller until he disappears completely, upon which his mother “groan[s] and arche[s] her back and spread[s] her knees” (63). Lucy interprets her mother’s arching body as a body in child-birth, but a similar imagery also applies to orgasmic pleasure. Later on, Lucy imagines feeling her brother inside her mother’s belly “kicking and feeding and curling tighter and tighter around himself” (86).

Of course, one could read Lucy as an unreliable focalizer; she is after all just a child. At one point, her mother points out that sometimes small children fantasize that their parents are in their dreams or imagine them in various scenarios, thus suggesting that Lucy might be imagining things. And before Rae disappears, Lucy sees her giving her father’s a back rub in a rare scene of domestic bliss. However, Lucy first misreads this tableau as Rae’s violent attack. Then she moves immediately to a sexually charged description of both “her father and her sister breathing rhythmically together” (68). When she cannot stand the tension any longer, she escapes to the bathroom. One might ask if what Lucy witnessed was truly inappropriate, or whether it was Rae who orchestrated the scene for Lucy’s dis/ease and dis/pleasure, or whether Lucy, lacking relevant language, leaped to disturbing conclusions. Once again, as with Ethan and their mother laying in the same bed, Lucy reads physical contact between a parent and teenage daughter/son in terms of violence and/or dark eroticism.

Not surprisingly then, when Jerry finally kidnaps Lucy, the vampiric draining and feeding becomes mingled with dying and being reborn, with making love and being raped:

He needed her…. She pushed between the seats, between the gearshift and Jerry’s thigh; Jerry’s thigh gave, as if it were making itself hollow to take her in.

He put his arms around her and she relaxed into him. Then he pushed her down across the seat and wedged one massive leg over her. She struggled to free herself.

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76 After witnessing an earlier attack on her mother, she wrote in her diary that “[s]ometimes Mom and Ethan are like the same person. Sometimes they’re like total strangers” (50), a sentiment recalling both the semiotic lack of differentiation between mother and infant, and the sudden break which results in two separate subjectivities.
but couldn’t; he wasn’t very heavy, but he was bigger, stronger, and he needed her to stay where she was.

‘It’s okay, Lucy, it’s okay.’

He was murmuring against her ear, against her temple. She felt her own pulse there, and his tongue and teeth against it.

‘You feel rage. It’s good to feel rage. Rage is nourishing. Feel it, my love. Feel it as big and as full as you can, and then give it to me.’ …

Rage hot and cold, red and flashing silver and every color, bursting out of her ears and mouth and vagina. She was screaming. She was moaning. Jerry pressed his open mouth over hers and sucked.

‘That’s good, that’s good, oh, you’re so good, you’re so beautiful. Give it to me, Lucy, give it to me.’

Then his huge, heavy, growing body stiffened and shook on top of her. He groaned into her open mouth, and she knew she was dying or being born again or turning into something she’d never been before. (176-177)

In the very last feeding scene, which follows the one quoted above, Lucy lies naked in Jerry’s secret basement, while other young people, including her sister, are holding her down and channeling her pain towards Jerry in a group ritual. Again, the scene combines incest taboo imagery (as her sister’s breath and her tears fall on Lucy’s pelvis and between her legs) and the ultimate abject of the dead and/or diseased body (as the people holding her down resemble the living dead – zombies). Ultimately, Rae and Lucy are able to combine their forces and destroy Jerry at his most vulnerable moment – when he begins feeding on their mother, who followed them to Jerry’s secret hideout. Rae and Lucy have what other kidnapped teenagers lack, a family connection that is capable of breaking Jerry’s magnetic pull.

Pain, anger and sexual arousal are mixed together even earlier, as Lucy visits Jerry at home. When he pulls her to his lap she can feel his erection and becomes excited herself. But all the places that he touches on her body become insufferable loci of pain. Jerry then asks Lucy to imagine her pain as a red substance which he then proceeds to consumer
symbolically. Interestingly, after this intense “session,” Lucy experiences her menarche. Thus this imagined red essence of pain stands for both Lucy’s menstrual blood and the blood drained by vampires. The abject nature of menstrual blood resurface also in connection to Rae, who on the night of her disappearance leaves behind a ruined bed and sheets soaked with (menstrual) blood. Associations with death and dying are immediate, but the fact that the blood turns out to be menstrual suggests a birth scene rather than a death scene. In both scenarios, however, the flowing blood marks the liminal zone, where the erotic mingles with the horrific, as in scenes of vampiric feeding. The importance of blood is underlined by Kristeva, who sees it as “the propitious place for abjection, where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together” (96, original emphasis). And as Creed has noted, since vampire myths are linked closely to menarche and defloration (The Monstrous Feminine 66), menstrual and hymenal flows are posited as abject and even dangerous substances in horror narratives.

Initially, Jerry seems to offer friendly support and understanding to the wayward and lonely teenagers. In this, he approximates the pre-Dracula vampires who “were dangerously close friends” and offered intimacy that threatened not only class distinctions but also paternal authority (Auerbach 6). Yet, with time, especially in the second half of the book (after Rae’s disappearance), the interactions between Lucy and Jerry switch from a dangerous friendship to a pedophile grooming his would-be victim. He goes through all the recognizable motions: he establishes a false sense of trust; he shares with Lucy little secrets that make her feel special; he kisses her and uses endearing pet names. When the therapy sessions move to Jerry’s house and he “works” on Lucy’s anger, the scenes are clearly reminiscent of sexual abuse: Lucy continues to tell Jerry that what he is doing to her hurts too much and that he is actually making her pain even worse, but during the group sessions he continues to drain her
anger and frustration into him, often with the help of other confused kids who hold her in one place.

When Lucy skips school and comes to his place on her own, Jerry’s appearance brings to mind the abjection of her ghostly brother’s and sister’s bodies: “He was panting, and she could see his tongue, coated with some kind of white stuff. (...) his breath smelled awful” (141). Accordingly, vampirism is presented as a disease that affects (albeit differently) both the carrier and his/her victim. The reigning metaphor for vampirism in *Prodigal* is, however, addiction. It is Jerry himself who half-jokingly warns Lucy and her friend that he does not want to overdose on their pain. Later, even Lucy’s parents finally begin to discern Jerry’s obsessive behavior in terms of a desperate addiction (171). Following Auerbach’s suggestion that each epoch instills onto vampires particular cultural and social fears, *Prodigal* could be read as a cautionary tale exploring the dangers of drug addiction among latch-key children and aimless teenagers. Teenagers from solid middle-class suburban households, whose whiteness and social status were supposed to protect them from urban degeneration, are made abject in that their healthy young bodies become diseased, corpse-like and ghost-like, a fact underlined by Tem a number of times.

“[A]ll intuition and—metaphysics” is what Lucy’s father provides as an explanation for his growing mistrust of Jerry (172). Interestingly, the word “metaphysics” is probably the closest any of the characters comes to describing the vampire’s supernatural nature. During the final confrontation between Jerry and the two sisters and their mother, he finally admits that he was always drawn to the pain of other people. But as he grew older, he needed to drain more and more suffering from others. He became a social worker only to use the new-found power and authority and a certain social transparency to manipulate troubled kids, give shape to their teenage angst and intensify their pain, and then drain them until their death. All of Jerry’s victims have been affected by his addiction: those who are found in the secret
basement are emaciated, dull-eyed and completely dependent on their master. Teenagers are an easy target, Tem’s novel suggests, because no matter how stable and secure their home situation is, by virtue of being young and misunderstood, they are highly susceptible to outside manipulation. Jerry could thus be read as a cult leader who selects only troubled teenagers, grooms and seduces them, and ultimately offers them an alternative family, a new home, all in order to satisfy his urges.

Despite Lucy’s growing infatuation with Jerry, she remains aware of the threat he represents and to some extent tries to fight off the infection he carries. Her desire to be with him is also partly driven by the fact that she has caught glimpses of Rae in his house and knows there are secret, locked rooms at his place that she would like to explore. Thus Lucy’s fascination with Jerry, which constitutes both a repetition and continuation of Rae’s experience, is tightly connected with the two sisters’ relationship. Rae and Lucy share a strong, if a bit frayed, bond. It is Rae who initiates Lucy into feminine rituals, such as shaving legs or deciding when to wear a bra. And when Rae begins flirting with Jerry, Lucy feels both “a grudging admiration for her older sister” and “a strong desire to be like her” (55). As Rae’s younger and more cautious self, Lucy is able to critically look at Jerry and see him as “a fairy-tale tree. With homes inside the trunk and branches for tiny scared creatures with made-up names” (18). It “bothers” Lucy to think about him and to recall the family sessions when Ethan was still with them (23). At first she associates Jerry’s fatness with a threatening force that disrupts her family life, and she is glad when she is able to avoid him: “She didn’t like this big thick man... He was the last one to see her brother alive. He was the first one to see him dead” (44-45). Subconsciously, she is able to discern the danger he poses to her and her family. Yet seeing Rae falling in love with Jerry makes Lucy reconsider her negative opinion of the clumsy social worker. Somehow her older sister’s crush makes him more desirable in Lucy’s eyes. He becomes “cute” and his beige eyes seem pretty, even beautiful.
Interestingly, the very first sexual stirrings that she experiences in connection to Jerry’s body quickly turn from “a funny feeling in Lucy’s groin” to nausea (56), which underlines both the abject nature of taboo sex acts between adults and children as well the diseased vampiric abjection that Jerry epitomizes. The nausea she experiences acts as a protective foil produced by her body against the horrifying abjection she encounters. In this, Lucy’s nausea resembles Kristeva’s description of bodily reactions which protect the subject from the potentially polluting elements, especially the corpse. Of course, Lucy is also fascinated by Jerry’s body: its ability to transform, to fill in and deflate, to switch between weightlessness and heaviness. The fact that his body alternates between seemingly impossible states – he is large but feels empty, he is strong but lacks substance – also points to his unclear status. Neither a subject nor an object, he floats between categories and frustrates them, and in doing so triggers repulsion and attraction simultaneously.

With time, as the group sessions become more and more intense, Lucy’s feelings for Jerry change into a strong infatuation and addictive-like dependence. She vacillates between fearing and wanting him, sometimes all at once. She wants to please him and nurture him. She becomes aware of that under the guise of offering troubled kids a “safe environment” for voicing their anger, rage, shame and jealousy, he is in fact amplifying these emotions in order to consume them. His sustenance comes from their pain – the pain he has to foster and then swallow. Without their pain, his large body grows sunken and he seems to be in danger of collapsing upon himself. It is only after successful sessions that he regains solidity and color. He calls anger “a high-energy food,” which can be used in “nourishing ways” (106), but only by him.

It is significant that Jerry is defeated by the two sisters working in tandem to save their mother. While other teenagers who were locked with them could not muster enough strength to oppose Jerry, the familial bond between the three women is what tips the scales in their
favor. In death Jerry’s body is both “bloated and collapsed” (190), thus emphasizing once again its ambiguous status, and when Lucy puts her hands inside his corpse she finds no organs, no tissue, no blood. In line with popular vampire imagery, Jerry’s corpse is not brimming with dark liquids he drained from others, but rather it collapses onto itself and turns dust-like and brittle in a matter of seconds. And just before Lucy’s family takes her away, she manages to stow away a piece of Jerry’s skull – “an amulet, a message, a secret code” (191) – a memento whose significance remains unclear. Perhaps Lucy takes this curious keepsake to remind her of the ordeal she and her family went through. It might also be a reminder of the attraction she once felt towards Jerry and the promises he gave her, of which she is not yet ready to let go. The “secret code” meaning remains the most elusive one – was there something truly precious and unique in her exchanges with Jerry, something her parents and siblings will never be able to replicate?

The presence of a psychic vampire, Jerry, brings into focus the maddeningly bleak realization that an average nuclear family – not dysfunctional or pathological in any sense – is fundamentally flawed and radically open to external intrusions and manipulations. It is the Oedipal triangle that seems to be the most exposed entry point for potential abuse, both physical and psychological. Jerry knows which buttons to push in young people, and readers can assume that he is able to repeat the same process over and over again precisely because tensions associated with Oedipalization are so common and pervasive. It could be argued that Jerry offers his victims a warped version of a family life where Oedipal anger, dissatisfaction, jealousy and desire are embraced and nurtured, rather than ignored or unnoticed. He tries to convince Lucy that in lieu of a traditional family the troubled kids he gathers around him are his true family – one that is better and ultimately more satisfying than what, for instance, Lucy’s parents and siblings could offer. The intense physical bond that Jerry establishes between himself and Lucy answers not only Lucy’s desire for attention (which her parents
have to divide between all their children) but also her yearning for a complete union with a parental figure, something that she glimpses in the erotically charged reverse birth-scene between her mother and Ethan’s specter.

The Brills become victims of psychic vampirism because as a traditional family they are already implicated in the messiness of reproduction, the never-ending cycle of life and death, the sudden eruptions of eroticism and violence, and a potent blend of love and hatred, desire and repulsion, pain and pleasure. In a way, Jerry does not offer anything new or radically different from what the teenage runaways can find at home. He simply tells them what they want to hear. What is more, Tem describes Jerry’s manipulations in terms of cult-like obsession and drug addiction: two very compelling plot devices concerning teenagers and pre-teens who, feeling misunderstood at home, search for alternative communities and like-minded groups, and who become easy prey for predatory adults.

It is possible to read Tem’s novel as a rather conservative take on the familial politics of the early 1990s – a book that exploits popular panic scares that set innocent teens against ruthless drug dealers and abusive sectarians. After all, the danger came from the outside, the somewhat naïve parents were not really to blame, and no-one really stood a chance against the wicked predator who weaseled his way into the Brills’ suburban home. Still, by underscoring the bleak repetitiveness of Jerry’s actions, *Prodigal* also implies that the very structure of a typical middle-class family is what actually enables the vampire to lock on its members. The family is helpless not because the predator is a supernatural creature with fangs, but because he can insinuate himself so easily into their ranks. More than that, he can even take over some parental functions and promise to perform them better than the parents. The painful truth that Lucy is forced to accept is that the family can protect her only from some dangers, but “[s]ome things nobody can protect [her] from” (105). Still, the fact that Jerry was defeated because familial bonds proved to be stronger than he anticipated offers a glimmer of hope.
Conclusion

While for Kristeva the abject as such remains unrepresentable, for many feminist theorists who engaged with Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* the abject is an identifiable site of culturally coded repulsion and fascination centered on the female corporeality, and “abject criticism” offers a way to “expos[e], disrup[t] and/or transcod[e] the historical and cultural associations between women’s bodies, reproduction and the abject” (Tyler 6). Although it can be persuasively argued that the cultural practices of reading, unveiling and decoding the abject have little to offer when faced with real-life matricide and violence against women, the abject remains a valuable critical tool in analyzing the narratives of reproduction, body horror and vampirism.

For Kristeva, abjection always returns us to the maternal, and specifically, to its violent repudiation – an emotional matricide essential for the subject’s shift towards the Lacanian mirror-stage and the onset of subjectification. The abject encounter is unwelcome in terms of bodily affects it triggers (nausea, shudder, disgust), but it also erupts in a burst of jouissance, an ego-shattering jump into the forbidden realm. Those two sets of themes – ambivalence towards individuation and separation from one’s parents (especially the mother) as well as a combination of disparate body affects (disgust and delight) caused by an encounter with abject substances, beings or practices – are woven into the four narratives that have been examined on the preceding pages.

In *The Gilda Stories*, Gomez concentrates on the ways in which one’s sexuality is inseparable from race and the historicity of one’s life. The vampire and vampirism become vehicles for the investigations of the abject usually associated with the maternal, the feminine, the bodily. By emphasizing the sensual and pleasurable aspects of the maternal bonds, the abjection associated with the break with the mother is to an extent neutralized. Gilda’s growth
as a black female vampire is not predicated on the violent repudiation of her maternal figures, but an affirmative embrace of their physical love and support. Abjection in Gomez is also revealed “as inherently mobile, and as descriptive of a mechanism by which various others are stipulated as excluded, in particular, raced, classed, and sexually deviant others” (Chanter, “The Exoticization” 158). Lastly, Gomez skillfully rewrites the Gothic narratives of lesbian desire by showing how the excess, which Gilda signifies for the symbolic order, has “a destabilizing effect on heterosexual institutions such as the family and society in general” (Palmer, Lesbian Gothic 53). The abjection used by Gomez is employed affirmatively and successfully to show alternative configurations of desire and kinship. Still, the bleak ending and the repetition of historical injustice and violence towards non-normative bodies and alternative familial arrangements suggest that the scope of repair work done by Gilda and her group is restricted by people who still conform to normative fears and desires.

In a somewhat similar vein, Poppy Z. Brite’s Lost Souls investigates the culturally mediated abjection which concerns homosexual desire in vampire fictions. By radically widening the array of perverse, unnamable and horrific acts and desires, Brite provides an ironic commentary on the uses and abuses of abjection, especially in connection to queerly-inflected subjects. One could also argue that Brite examines the eroticism of the abject in order to mock the jouissance of homoerotic vampire encounters so deftly portrayed by Anne Rice. Brite portrays a deeply private all-male vampire family, with no possibility of accepting the (m)other. Candace R. Benefiel notes that in the majority of vampire stories the master vampire is the head of the family; there is no mother, however, as reproduction is achieved through blood exchange. What is more, “the vampire ‘family,’ isolated from human society by its extreme longevity and its essential otherness, becomes an intensely inwardly directed unit, and the blurring of normal familial relationships creates unnatural tension” (Benefiel 263). Incestuous desires are explored in what comes to be recognized as “a subversive
alternative model to the nuclear family” (Benefiel 263). In a way, while Gomez softens the shock-value of the abject by rescuing the maternal both on the level of the individual and the social body, Brite self-consciously amplifies the abject to such an extent that at the end of the day the vampire coven is laid bare as yet another isolationist and a tad reactionary unit. Although, superficially, Nothing and his cohorts reject traditional middle-class values (such as monogamy, heteronormativity, marriage, reproduction, ownership), they end up forming their own closed-off system, a timeless and stagnant bubble where nothing new (literally) happens.

Arguably, it is in Elizabeth Engstrom’s *Black Ambrosia* that conventional middle-class family lifestyle is truly rejected along with all the communal responsibilities that go hand in hand with settling down, starting a family or buying a house. The novel shows Angelina struggling to accept her abject condition, her status as an outsider who threatens the community and cannot coexist with others for long. And because Angelina is portrayed as a failed experiment in radical female empowerment, first exacting revenge on her would-be rapist and then killing men while seducing them with promises of sexual release, she also exemplifies the link between femininity and monstrosity, of which Linda Williams wrote in “When a Woman Looks.” She is frightening in her unwomanly emotional detachment and supposedly unfeminine killing skills. At the same time, her inability to withstand prolonged loneliness and her budding desire to perpetuate her species reveal Angelina’s lasting investment in the idea of romantic love and companionship. Engstrom thus investigates the multiple abject positions accorded to Angelina: a murderess, a non-human subject, a madwoman, a vampire and a woman who refuses to follow through with a traditional romantic script. In the end, the eruption of the abject is augmented not only because Angelina is a vampire (who merely represents our fascination with blood, corpses and the erotics of death), but also because she is a woman whose very corporeality is already positioned as a potential site of the abject. What is more, because her vampiric development is defined by and
through her relationships with women, especially maternal figures, Angelina experiences first-hand both the orgasmic pleasure of being reunited with the maternal as well as the horror of being faced with the archaic mother figures who threaten to engulf her subjectivity.

Similarly to the other three novels, Melanie Tem’s *Prodigal* examines the questions of growing up, separation from one’s parents and/or parental figures, and finding one’s voice and place in the world. And even though the vampirism described by Tem is bloodless, the connotations of female sexuality and body, menstruation and blood, death and eroticism cannot be missed. What makes *Prodigal* unique in its own right is the way it tackles fears linked specifically to modern-day families, namely drug addiction, threat of cults and sects, teenage angst and sexual abuse. Ultimately, the Brill family gives the impression of a rather weak familial unit, which can be easily infiltrated and manipulated by someone who understands its inner workings, tensions, oedipal desires, and (mis)identifications. The sheer repetitiveness of the plot structure suggests that each and every middle-class suburban family is susceptible to such external intrusions and abuse. What is even more disturbing, the very institutions that are supposed to support families are in themselves corrupt and cannot be trusted. It is, after all, a social worker who feeds off the Brill family’s teenage children.

In *History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault sketched the role of the Western nuclear family in regulating the sexuality of its members. He argued that far from successfully repressing sexuality, the nuclear family was and still is responsible for its dissemination and deployment. And as all four novels analyzed in this chapter imply, the ways in which this instilment of normative sexuality and middle-class mentality can falter and fail are numerous, indeed. What is more, the repudiation of the maternal, which in Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory initiates the process of individuation, ensures subsequent un/wanted returns of the abject within the familial structures. In this sense, the abject encounters with the vampire always evoke the
original abjection and the un/ease surrounding blood, reproduction, female biology, and sexuality as su

Chapter

All four novels investigate the limitations and constraints of middle-class families. They look at the often cruel consequences for those family members who do not fit the normative mold or who desire something that their families are unable to provide. The question that emerges after reading these four works is perhaps best articulated by Tina Chanter:

If Oedipal triangulation amounts to a naturalization of the modern, postindustrial familial relations unique to the nuclear, Western family, what would it mean to rethink the imperative of separation, individuation, or realization of autonomy in a way that no longer aligns biology, need, and self-preservation instincts with the mother, and humanity, desire, and orientation to the Other with the father? (The Picture of Abjection, 30)
Chapter 4
Spectral Kinship and Ghostly Selves

Introduction

Even though I have already looked at haunted house narratives, I have purposefully avoided including ghost stories in the first chapter. Ghosts, to my mind, move well beyond the haunted house trope and appear in a surprisingly versatile corpus of works, which focus more on the process of haunting rather than its particular setting. And although haunted houses are conventionally associated with the appearance of ghosts, it is people (rather than houses) that are actually being haunted, and the place is a secondary (or even tertiary) concern to the repercussions brought about by a specter’s visit.

One could trace the ghost motif back to the antiquity, but, arguably, contemporary ghost stories owe most to the folk and medieval threads within Romanticism and the Gothic as well as the fantastic genres developed in the two centuries since the Enlightenment. Contrary to what the Age of Reason promised, the supernatural was not completely banished from the human realm. Instead, as Castle persuasively argues in *The Female Thermometer*, ghosts were simply redefined to fit a new paradigm – they were transformed from wholly external beings into internal parts of the human psyche. As a result, the mind itself was turned into a spectralized space, in which it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between genuine ghostly hauntings and psychological figments of the haunted self (Bergland 377-378). Castle notes how the materiality of other people “became strangely insubstantial and indistinct: what mattered was the mental picture, the ghost, the haunting image” (*The Female Thermometer* 125). Thus the eighteenth century saw “the internalization of the spectral—the gradual reinterpretation of ghosts and apparitions as hallucinations, or projections of the mind”
(Castle, *The Female Thermometer* 17), a process which culminated in the advent of psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century. If specters come from within, then their appearance marks an internal crisis – one much more terrifying than the external one, as the haunted self has limited power over its own faculties. In a sense, Freud inherited the “crypto-supernatural language” of Enlightenment rationalists as well as “their sense of the psyche as a vulnerable domain subject to frightening spectral intrusions” (Castle, *The Female Thermometer* 184).

Though never completely forgotten, ghosts came to occupy the center stage of popular imagination in the late nineteenth century, as the “material, psychic, and supernatural” aspects of life became increasingly imbrued in spiritualism, clinical psychology and religious revivals, while scientific and technological developments continued to breach the gap between the tangible and the intangible (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *Spectralities Reader* 2). Over the course of the nineteenth century, the metaphorical potential of the ghost—which was readily employed in the analyses of “disturbing forms of otherness,” alienation underpinning capitalist structures and the uncanniness of new inventions and scientific discoveries—was tightly connected to the notion that ghosts could be actual objects of study, as evidenced by a plethora of groups and societies dedicated to ghost-hunting, clairvoyance and paranormal research in all its guises (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *Spectralities Reader* 3).

The early twentieth-century, however, saw a gradual withering of the belief in actual ghosts and spirits. Freud, in his 1919 essay on the uncanny, forcefully rejected the supernatural in favor of the repressed infant anxieties and remnants of the animistic past as the true sources of the uncanny. In other words, “the uncanny ha[d] to be exorcised—cleansed of ghosts—precisely because, to maintain its status as a normal, even privileged experience, it [could not], at least not exclusively, be associated with the (non-repressed) primitive” conception of the world (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *Spectralities Reader* 5).
In twentieth-century cultural and literary criticism, ghosts, specters and phantoms have resurfaced in psychoanalytic discourses, continental philosophy and, finally, deconstruction. Colin Davis, the author of *Haunted Subjects* (2007), insists that deconstruction and psychoanalysis are two singularly appropriate approaches to the study of death and the return of the dead (14). Brian Norman, in *Dead Women Talking* (2012), supplements the two above-mentioned methods with cultural studies research on necropolitics and biopower, and sociological studies concerning trauma, memory and history. By 2002, when Roger Luckhurst used the term “spectral turn,” the most important and innovative works within the budding spectrality studies had been already published – the English translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994), Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (1997), Peter Buse and Andrew Stott’s *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (1999), to name just a few. This “spectral turn” coincided with the on-going renaissance of Gothic studies and the flourishing of cultural and literary criticism which centers on the themes of the supernatural, the haunted and the monstrous in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Two seminal collections edited by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren – *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture* (2010) and *Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013) – helped to bring together and consolidate different strands of spectrality studies and to underline the interdisciplinary and intersectional nature of ghost(ly) research.

Chapter Thematic clusters and specific topics covered by the authors included in the two anthologies speak to the malleability and analytical utility of ghosts: pop-culture, commodification processes, questions of replication, imitation and simulacra, photography and cinema, new media technologies and virtual reality, creepypasta and memology, cyberpunk aesthetics, memorial sites and museum space, among others.

In the introduction to their 2013 *Spectralities Reader*, del Pilar Blanco and Peeren draw attention to how ghosts and haunting have moved from the realm of everyday clichés, plot
devices and objects of study for ghost-hunters and parapsychology enthusiasts to that of “influential conceptual metaphors,” which, in contrast with the more mundane ordinary metaphors, perform actual theory and can be used as analytical tools (1). And even though the beginning of the “spectral turn” is usually associated with the publication of Derrida’s *Specters de Marx* in 1993 and its subsequent English translation, much earlier psychoanalytic theories focusing on ghosts, hauntings or phantoms could be mentioned as well.

Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* constitutes “a reading of Marx and Marxism following the disintegration of the Soviet Union” as well as “an account of spectrality, ghosts and spirits” (Royle 67). And while the former has been met with a barrage of criticism and skepticism among Marxist scholars, the latter has been welcomed by a much wider academic community. And because Derrida associates the figure of a specter with “absolute alterity, notions of inheritance, hospitality, and the messianic” (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *Popular Ghosts* xv), concepts which especially in a post-9/11 reality have gained new import, spectrality and hauntology have proven useful springboards for interdisciplinary research. Chapter Derrida “uses the figure of the ghost to pursue... that which haunts like a ghost and, by way of this haunting, demands justice, or at least a response” (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *Spectralities Reader* 9, emphasis in original). Similarly, Colin Davis notes the ethical dimension of the encounter with the ghost, which is reminiscent of the Levinasian Other “whose otherness we are responsible for preserving” (Davis 53). He adds that “[h]auntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *Spectralities Reader* 53).77

Perhaps part of the theoretical attraction to hauntology lies also in Derrida’s decision to describe haunting as a temporal phenomenon, not a spatial one: “Ghosts don’t belong to the

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77 Unsurprisingly then, research within spectrality studies often meshes with contemporary philosophy, poststructuralism, new materialism and death studies.
past, they come from the future” (Royle 67). In contrast to Freud, who was interested only in how the past affects the present, Derrida looks both into the past and the future, and thus his specters operate on different temporal planes, both as revenants returning from the past and arrivants invoking what will come to pass. What is more, for Derrida, spectral logic lies at the heart of deconstruction as such (2013, 39), which means that ghosts, thanks to their liminality and in-betweeness, can help dismantle dyadic and dialectical thinking that has plagued structuralism and poststructuralism for years.

Masschelein, in her book-length study of the uncanny, reads Derrida’s hauntology as a “philosophy of haunting, of the return of the repressed, in which the spectral takes precedent over being, existence” (139). She argues that Derrida links Heidegger’s Umheimlichkeit (a phenomenological experience of not-being-at-home, a homesickness that defines a human subject) and Freud’s uncanny to create his own version of the uncanny. Therefore, Masschelein is able to posit that this new “Heidegger-Freud-Derrida connection in ‘hauntology’ leads to a new domain of the uncanny,” which in turn is employed in various research disciplines that concentrate on spectrality and hauntings (144). Even though I find it difficult to agree with Masschelein’s insistence on the uncanny as constituting the core of Derridean spectrality, I believe she is right in pointing out the biggest weakness of hauntology, namely its “fundamental distrust of technology, of contemporary bio-power and globalized capitalist systems, and nostalgia” (146). At the end of the day, Derrida’s hauntology, if envisioned as a critical project, seems to be too wide-sweeping, and his call to install haunting at a core of other concepts is unrealistic at the very least. Derrida’s dehistoricizing approach posits the ghost and the haunting as universal concepts, even though these are actually typically Western concepts, heavily laced with Judeo-Christian definitions of life and afterlife, soul and body, reality and the imaginary realms. As postcolonial theory as well as necropolitical and spectropolitical scholarship (by, for instance, Achille Mbembe)
remind us, ghosts do not haunt all subjects in the same way and the Western definition of spectrality is but one of many.\textsuperscript{78}

When it comes to the ghost in psychoanalysis, one can detect spectral presence in Freud’s attempts to eradicate nineteenth-century remnants of spiritualism from his version of \textit{Das Unheimliche}. Still, somewhat paradoxically, all of Freudian theories rely heavily on the irrational belief in intangible, elusive and phantom-like psychological structures. In \textit{Haunted Subjects}, Davis points to Freud’s theory of death drive, according to which a subject that may become haunted is already inhabited by death, so the dead do not have to return (17). Although Freud’s theory of death drive remains highly contestable, those theorists who do accept it tend to replicate the supernatural language which Freud employed in his own writing. Thus Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok talk about intergenerational trauma using the metaphors of gnomes, crypts and phantoms, which constitute part of a spectral language of the haunted mind.

Colin Davis notes Derrida’s unacknowledged debt to Abraham and Torok’s writings, in the dissemination and popularization of which Derrida was, in fact, instrumental. Still, Davis takes great pains to maintain a clear distinction between Derridean specters and Abraham and Torok’s phantoms. The latter signifies “the presence of a dead ancestor in the living Ego, still intent on preventing its traumatic and usually shameful secrets from coming to light” (Davis 54). Interestingly then, the phantom does not bring a revelation of secrets; instead it works hard to deceive the haunted subject and prevent the hidden knowledge from being brought to light. Abraham and Torok firmly believe that the ghost’s secrets have to be revealed in order for the living Ego to be rid of the shadow of death and pain. By contrast, Derrida’s ghosts are

\textsuperscript{78} See also Orlando Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death} (1985), in which he elaborates the concept of “social death,” to which enslaved subjects were subjected to a varying extent and which translated into a lack of connection with one’s ancestral past, cultural heritage, language, religion, and kinship. Another vocal critic of Derrida’s spectrality, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, chides Derrida for the inclusion of “universalizing \textit{danse macabre}” (511), through which the haunting is rewritten as “a masculine economy,” blind to its own hegemonic practices of excluding women and minorities (510).
not carriers of knowledge and one does not speak with them in the hope of wrenching their secrets out of them; “[r]ather, [the encounter] may open us to the experience of secrecy as such: an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know” (56). No wonder then that Derrida’s logic of hauntology holds such an appeal for deconstructionists, who perceive a link between the tropes of haunting and ghosts, on the one hand, and “the processes of literature and textuality,” on the other (Davis 56).

Ultimately, Derrida and Abraham and Torok differ primarily in terms of the place they accord the questions of truth and lies in their respective theories. Whereas Derrida’s specters exist “outside the order of truth and knowledge” (Davis 81), in Abraham and Torok’s account, the truth can be ultimately revealed and order can be restored. For Davis, the two approaches differ also in terms of their epistemological and ethical positioning. Where the psychoanalytic tradition emphasizes the interpretative practice of close (and loving) reading of particular texts, the deconstructive analysis is more open to speculation and somewhat sweeping, yet often-times productive, generalizations. For Derrida, the ghost should remain hidden so as to enable a meaningful encounter with the Other, while in the earlier psychoanalytic view, the ghost functions as a manipulator and an intruder that has to be identified and expelled.

Žižek, following a more traditional ghost narrative, interprets the ghost’s appearance as a reminder of “a duty still to be fulfilled, a crime to be uncovered, or an injustice to be rectified” (Davis 80). In a somewhat similar vein, Abraham and Torok posit phantoms as “the mediation in fiction of the encrypted, unspeakable secrets of past generations” (Davis 80). The fundamental difference is, however, that their ghosts are skilled manipulators and liars, whose principal function is to protect the ancestral secret from ever emerging. In addition, the haunted self has no knowledge of this secret and functions merely as a protective vessel in which the secret is entombed. Abraham and Torok’s account thus reverses traditional ghost story model and moves the ghost’s singular ability to restore order onto the psychoanalyst.
The ghost is no longer a key to a secret, a catalyst or a messenger, but a problem in itself that can only be resolved or bypassed through psychoanalysis and by wrenching the secret out of the crypt buried in the haunted self’s ego.

According to Davis, the majority of ghost films and stories subscribe to the restorative model in which the ghosts have a curative rather than a destructive role. Still, this neat division into curative ghosts and lying ghosts can take us only so far. Many contemporary ghosts stories do not invoke the specters’ healing and reparative functions, as evidenced by some of the novels analyzed in this chapter. Some of these ghosts are bent on exacting vengeance and their intense hatred over past wrongs cannot be mended in the present. Sometimes they are simply non-human agents, whose agenda eludes the human understanding of good and evil. In fact, in all four novels analyzed below – Ania Ahlborn’s *Within These Walls* (2015), Tananarive Due’s *The Between* (1995), Sara Gran’s *Come Closer* (2004) and Audrey Niffenegger’s *Fearful Symmetry* (2009) – spectral presences have complex agendas which defy easy distinction into order and disorder, restoration and destruction. Seen in this light, all four writers share the impulse to complicate the figure of a ghost, which rather than used instrumentally as an agent of retribution or a keeper of secrets, either evolves into a character of its own or at least refuses to be categorized as a dangerous Other.

**The Ghostly Other in Literature**

As far as literary studies are concerned, Julia Briggs’s seminal *Night Visitors* (1977) was the first fully fledged work on the ghosts in literature. Interestingly, Briggs used the term “ghost story” very broadly to denote all kinds of stories of the supernatural, which include such disparate beings as demons and possessed individuals, werewolves, vampires, ghouls, etc. Srdjan Smajic, in “The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing,” recalls Briggs’ explanation as to the
lack of scholarly interest in the figure of the ghost. According to Briggs, it is “the elusive character of ghost-fiction itself” that puts off scholars (Smajic 1107). What is more, as Smajic admits, ghosts are a persistent and omnipresent part of Western literature and they “evidently belong everywhere in literature – and consequently, one might say, nowhere in particular” (1107). And because ghostly figures appear timeless and ahistorical, they are often approached from a psychoanalytic perspective, which does not necessarily engage with the ghosts’ time- and place-specific roles and limitations. Obviously, over the last three decades most Gothic and horror studies scholars did analyze ghostly tropes, hauntings, haunted houses and the Victorian ghost story genre, but it was not until the “spectral turn” of the 1990s and later that more in-depth analyses were published. Luckily, it seems that the renewed interest in the notion of spectrality has given a new life to the spectral in literary and cultural studies. Apart from the many examples of literary and cultural criticism collected in del Pisar Blanco and Peeren’s two recent anthologies, one should mention Brian Norman’s Dead Women Talking (2012), Kathleen Brogan’s Cultural Haunting (1998), Jeff Andrew Weinstock’s (ed) Spectral America (2004), Julian Wolfrey’s Victorian Hauntings (2001), among others.79

Most literary critics begin their research by acknowledging the resurgence of ghost stories in American and British literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is worth noting that similarly to the classic Gothic romance from almost a century earlier, many women writers were associated with the spectral genre. Authors such as Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett and Edith Wharton were among the most popular writers of

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79 It should also be noted that spectral in-betweenness and elusiveness are mirrored in the concept of “queer,” which might explain the affinities between the nascent queer theory of the 1990s and spectrality studies (see, for instance, Carla Freccero’s work on queer spectrality from 2008). Still, the connections between ghosts and queer scholarship with respect to nonheteronormative narratives could be traced to even earlier research. In Lesbian Gothic, Paulina Palmer stresses the usefulness of the ghost and the metaphor of haunting for the discussion of lesbian characters in ghost stories as well as of the relationship between hetero- and homosexuality. In fact, Palmer mentions the seminal gay and lesbian studies critical anthology edited by Diana Fuss in 1991 – Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories – in which the problem of haunting is addressed in two essays: in Diana Fuss’s introduction and in Patricia White’s “Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: The Haunting.” Another seminal publication is, of course, Terry Castle’s Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture (1993).
ghost stories. An important milestone for the ghost story genre was Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which relocated ghosts from the realm of external phenomena into that of internal hauntings, psychological disturbances and feverish imagination. Because James’s novella could be read as both a traditional ghost story and a psychological study of a mental breakdown, *The Turn of the Screw* is often cast as the predecessor to contemporary tales of haunting such as Shirley Jackson’s *Haunting of the Hill House* (1959). And as Virginia Woolf aptly suggested, while reading Henry James’s ghost stories, “[w]e are afraid of something, perhaps, in ourselves” (289).

Although ghosts continued to appear as plot devices and clichéd tropes in the American Gothic and the genres directly influenced by it (such as the urban Gothic, the Weird Tale, the Southern Gothic, the modern horror, etc.), it was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that the supernatural horror came into vogue again. Interestingly, the very first bestselling books and wildly popular horror movies associated with this revival of horror narratives were stories of demonic possession and supernatural visitation, such as *The Exorcist* (1973) or *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968). Following the success of both mainstream and independent horror cinema, coupled with the legitimization of the literary horror and the triumph of Stephen King in the late 1970s, a wider variety of narratives were published throughout the 1980s and later, including stories of ghosts, hauntings, haunted places and supernatural possessions.

From a cultural critic’s perspective, however, the renewed interest in the spectral in the late twentieth century could also be linked to a louder call for tackling the issues of cultural erasure, historical trauma, violent past and the heritage of slavery and racism in the US. In this vein, Kathleen Brogan, in *Cultural Haunting*, links the resurgence of ghost narratives to American ethnic literatures, which, on the one hand, often come with their own non-Western figures of ghosts and spectrality and, on the other, employ ghosts as metaphors that help unravel the entanglements of the past, work through mourning and deal with racial violence.
The increased interest in collective as well as individual history, national identities and social fragmentation inspires *Spectral America* (2004), a collection of essays edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. In the introduction, Weinstock draws attention to the communal aspect of Derrida’s specter, which by virtue of being “no more one” and “more than one” points to both individual and collective subjectivity (62). He also links early twenty-first-century fascination with ghosts to the poststructuralist awareness of the fragmentation and disintegration of history, which comes to be seen as a collection of competing narratives, private and public, minor and major, minoritarian and majoritarian. Thus he argues that the spectral turn in American culture signifies a “millennial anxiety” surrounding the return of repressed knowledge which threatens the future (64).

Because ghosts frustrate dyadic thinking and they effectively interrupt boundaries between the self and the Other, the one and the many, they form useful conceptual tools to deal with both private and public traumas, familial secrets and the role of kinship both on the individual and the group level. Nicholas Abraham asserts that “what haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (quoted in Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny* 38). And because Abraham’s psychoanalytic cryptonomy focuses on transgenerational haunting, it is “an especially fitting mode of Gothic investigation,” which puts family drama at its center (Armitt 148). Armitt argues convincingly that this type of inquiry into the spectral is a perfect fit for postmodern and poststructuralist texts with their “interrogation of the nuclear family unit, [their] narrative lacunae and [their] fractured narrative subject” (148), which is precisely how the ghost and the ghostly come into play in the four novels analyzed in this chapter.

All four novels – Ania Ahlborn’s *Within These Walls* (2015), Tananarive Due’s *The Between* (1995), Sara Gran’s *Come Closer* (2004) and Audrey Niffenegger’s *Fearful Symmetry* (2009) – revolve around family life, which is put to the test by the intrusion of Otherness.
Because the ghostly Other is spectral and imperceptible, its influence is not immediately felt or recognized, which makes its presence ambiguous and its motivation ambivalent. This uncertainty and in-betweenness of the ghostly makes it a perfect tool of dissecting family dynamics, which more often than not revolves around secrets, lies and withheld knowledge. Because of their unstable ontological status ghosts act as catalysts for the things left unmentioned, unarticulated and unanswered.

Out of the many functions of ghosts and their potential interpretations, several are paramount for the present chapter: ghostly dis/possession as the return of the repressed (though not necessarily linked to the uncanny), the process of “ghosting” (which implies erasure of improper elements), ghosts as a repetition of past trauma and as signs of transgenerational haunting, ghosts as characters’ (dangerous) doubles and ghosts as marked absences and gaps (of history, identity, kinship, etc.) The four novels analyzed herein are first and foremost ghost stories. In the case of Ahlborn’s *Within These Walls* (2015) and Due’s *The Between* (1995), their generic appellation is marked by their authors’ earlier horror publications. Their books are perhaps more easily identified as belonging to the horror genre in the sense that the narratives do not shy from showcasing death, violence and oppressive atmosphere. Then again, neither does Gran’s *Come Closer* (2004), which could be read both as a horror narrative and a vicious satire on white yuppies. Niffenegger’s *Fearful Symmetry* (2009) is perhaps the most genteel of the four in the sense that its careful prose, London setting and a slate of Victorian accouterments recall late nineteenth-century ghost stories, in

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80 Interestingly, Arno Meteling, (writing about Georg Klein’s and Elfriede Jelinek’s prose) sets the Gothic as a direct predecessor to the “ghost novel,” a wholly separate genre, which, according to him, encompasses, for instance, Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, Richard Matheson’s *Hell House* and Stephen King’s *The Shining*. In this sense, all four novels in the present chapter should be actually identified as “ghost novels” rather than Gothic or horror novels. Nevertheless, what seems quite remarkable about Meteling’s examples is the fact that these three best-selling novels are traditionally posited as horror narratives about haunted houses rather than stories about ghosts. Consequently, his critical assessment proves the fluidity of generic appellations concerning horror fiction and points to a certain critical apprehension when it comes to discussing Gothic and horror texts.
which the Gothic vestigiality and family secrets are actually more important than the actual frights.

**Dangerous Dis/possessions**

Sara Gran’s *Come Closer* (2004) is a relatively short novel whose first-person narrator, Amanda, pragmatically and methodologically describes how she came to be possessed by a demon and how her life spiraled out of control soon after. Amanda’s dead-pan descriptions of her yuppie lifestyle, her successful career as an architect, her husband, even their post-industrial loft, at times shift the overall mood from the horrific to the satiric, yet the trail of gore and destruction left in the demon’s wake leaves no doubt as to the novel’s generic loyalties. Ultimately, the novel never clarifies whether Amanda is truly possessed or not, whether she is suffering from a late onset of schizophrenia or from a psychotic break, or whether she is dodging responsibility for her actions by projecting the blame onto a non-existent supernatural entity. At the end of the day, Amanda’s unreliable narration opens up many avenues of interpretation, and it is up to the reader to fill in the gaps. The demonic possession becomes a narrative device, an extended metaphor, a horrific analogy, which allows Gran to bring into focus several discreet topics – an ironic commentary on yuppie lifestyle, a violent return of the repudiated femininity and corporeality, and a deep-seated hunger for meaningful relationships among women. And most importantly, the possession/madness that Amanda experiences brings into focus the cracks in her seemingly perfect marriage. The ideal heterosexual romance that she and her husband, Ed, have woven together is revealed to be an empty product, a clever marketing ploy aimed at hip urbanites. The bond that is supposed to be based on real emotions, desire, mutual respect turns brittle and hollow in the face of adversity. Finally, the haunting as envisioned by Gran is founded on
the idea of an evil twin or doppelganger, whose impropriety, misconduct and criminal activities both fascinate and repel the main heroine.

As Freudian “harbinger of death” (*Uncanny*, 940) Amanda’s demonic doppelganger highlights the frailty of her life, marriage and even personality. Possession doubles thus as dispossession, as Amanda loses everything in a physical frenzy of lust and violence. The desires she once successfully “ghosted” return and insinuate themselves back into her life – in an ironic twist, it takes a spiritual possession for Amanda to re-engage with her corporeality and re-discover what her body really wants. Still, Amanda’s failed attempts to get help posit her as a hysterical female – hypochondriac, unstable, and in need of containment by others. Paradoxically, however, no-one steps in to take control of her. There are no patriarchal figures who would curtail her freedom or restrain her sexuality. Her husband slowly withdraws; the medical professionals are all seemingly sympathetic, if ineffectual, women, and the spiritual advisors are New Age charlatans. Amanda is left alone with her possession and/or madness.

Elaine Showalter points out how madness is often the only legitimate form of self-expression for women in literature. Yet, female madness always runs the risk of being recast as sexually aggressive, lush, succubus-like rather than as violent as is the case with male madness. *Come Closer* mocks this typecasting by presenting madness/possession in terms of both demonic hypersexuality and nymphomania as well as extreme violence towards men. Textual madness in *Come Closer* remains veiled by Amanda’s correct grammar and literary sophisticated language, and it emerges only in memory lapses and ironic self-distancing and willful dis-remembering. What Kristeva identifies as “the speech of non-being,” a feminine writing of “silence, and the unspoken, [and] riddled with repetition” provides an interesting clue to Amanda’s first-person narration (“Talking about Polylogue” 286). Amanda refuses to reveal herself and the extent of her possession/madness not only because she is afraid to face

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82 See also Kromm, “The Feminization of Madness in Visual Representation” (1994).
the facts but also because language as such cannot contain the haunting and express the insanity properly. Just like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), *Come Closer* could be read as both a supernatural haunting and a story of madness. And just like in Gilman’s story, the indecipherability of the heroine’s plight highlights the fact that a woman’s tale of madness/possession exceeds the cultural markers and signifiers attributed to it by phallogocentric language. In other words, by refusing to follow with just one explanation, Amanda cannot be fully classified as either a possessed woman or a madwoman, both of whom need to be restrained and/or cured.

The novel begins rather lightly with a few odd events such as strange messages at work or seemingly innocent pranks. Then strange tapping noises are heard in Amanda and her husband’s (Ed’s) apartment, whenever she is around. After the tapping starts – a rather playful nod to the famous Gothic messenger from Poe’s poem – Amanda and Ed begin to fight all the time. Thus the possession progresses in line with a slow disintegration of Amanda’s marriage. Interestingly, each time Amanda does something strange, two explanations offer themselves. The rational explanation is that Amanda has stopped being a nice girl and an understanding wife. The other explanation emphasizes the otherworldly influence, which absolves Amanda of the accountability for the fate of her marriage. In the months to come, Amanda graduates from picking up fights with Ed to small anti-social behaviors, such as stealing a lipstick. Again, notwithstanding the real or imagined supernatural presence, these acts are not entirely out of Amanda’s character. For instance, Amanda does not remember (or chooses not to remember) the actual moment of stealing the lipstick, she can recall that as a preteen she actually went on a make-up shoplifting spree when her grandmother did not allow her to use make-up. What is more, even though the brick-red lipstick is hardly Amanda’s color of choice, not only does she continue wearing it all summer, but when it runs out she goes back to the store and steals another one.
Sitting home one evening, smoking, she burns Ed with her cigarette. She tries to rationalize her behavior as a sign of normal curiosity that everyone surely experiences from time to time: what would it feel to burn someone with a cigarette. Amanda firmly believes that her hand moved without her volition. She also starts losing time. The first “time lapse” happens just after an angry exchange with the owner of a magazine stand, who, as it turns out, is murdered the very same day. Of course, a couple of months later Amanda realizes that it was she who had killed him. She starts drinking and hooking up with men – the type of men she preferred in her early twenties, before she settled down for Ed: bad boys with tattoos. The first time she cheats on Ed, she describes the whole situation as a helpless bystander rather than a willing participant: “[i]t was like looking at a photograph, seeing the room but not really being in it” (88). Feeling remorse, she decides to cook Ed his favorite dinner, but while strolling through the supermarket the “demon slither[s] back into [her] thoughts” and makes her angry at Ed’s lack of interest. Instead she goes shopping for shoes, thus choosing instant gratification over hard emotional work. In no time is she buying things compulsively and accepting high-end credit cards, and thus all the knowledge about handling money responsibly and avoiding debt she learnt the hard way in her twenties is unlearnt.

After a failed depossessation ritual, Amanda assumes more often the role of a bystander describing what “she,” a female demon called Naamah, is doing when in control of Amanda’s body: “What she wanted most of all, even more than shopping or cigarettes, was men…. Of course, I only saw them afterwards, when Naamah would leave and I would sink back into consciousness, naked and shivering, in bed with a man I had never seen before” (117-118). Eventually Amanda becomes violent towards her male lovers, which culminates in her seducing and then killing a male rival from work. Soon after she stops going to work and begins introducing herself as “Naamah.” The narrative becomes increasingly jumbled as
Amanda has fewer and fewer lucid moments. Days and incidents merge together. The novel ends with Naamah murdering Edward and Amanda being locked in an asylum.

All through the months leading to Amanda’s transformation into Naamah readers learn more and more about the life Amanda is leaving behind. Together with Ed she lives in a heavily gentrified urban area in a post-industrial loft, which she has carefully refurbished and redesigned herself. The white décor, smooth surfaces and sparse furniture reflect Amanda and Ed’s existence: spotless, neat and bland. Although Amanda is now an up-and-coming architect, she initially majored in art. It was her father’s death and the ensuing money problems that made her choose a seemingly easier direction in life – architecture. After all, the architects “dressed a hell of a lot better than the art professors,” had better cars and were more likely to find partners and lead secure lives (54), which was what Amanda wanted. In a way, Amanda has become not only a professional architect and interior designer, but also an architect of her own lifestyle and character as well. She refers to “the old Amanda” (that is, the one before Naamah) as “the one [she] had chosen for [her]self and cultivated for years” (86). She acts as if her model life was exactly that: a model she can plan, enhance and build from the way up just like the sumptuous suburban houses she designs for a living.

In Amanda’s model life, Ed represents stability, dependability and reason. He is the person who introduced much needed order into her happy-go-lucky existence. Before marriage, as a single woman, she ate ice-cream for lunch and kept her tax records in a shopping bag. Ed, in contrast, is the perfect companion and a perfectly normal guy, someone “who could finish any crossword puzzle, open any bottle, reach the top shelf at the grocery store” (12). For Amanda, Ed is just another ticked box: “[o]ne the whole, Ed and I were happy—with each other, with the loft, with our careers” (23). She pragmatically points to their financial and professional security before she goes on to describe how Ed is a man one can trust and “a big-boned healthy blond” (23) to boot. He offers no surprises, no risks, and
even his neuroses are predictable. Her subdued and passionless descriptions of Ed strongly suggest that before the possession, Amanda settled for Ed for pragmatic rather than romantic reasons. As she herself admits, “[o]ver six years, though, I had become accustomed to a certain amount of irritation, as I’m sure all spouses do, and these were small arguments and disappointments that didn’t interrupt the steady flow of our marriage” (25). Not surprisingly, the things Amanda hates most in her husband are Ed’s obsessive neatness and cleanliness, and his hunger for order and regularity in all spheres of life. But she does not allow herself to feel disappointed, angry or hurt. Instead, she opts for “a certain amount of irritation” as her true companion in marriage. From this perspective, Amanda’s gradual estrangement from her husband, the fights she initiates, the pain she inflicts on him are not wholly surprising. Amanda needs Naamah to be able to refuse the life she has built with Ed and to reject the upper-middle-class stiffness, cleanliness and ordinariness that her husband represents. Still, what in the beginning could be construed as Amanda’s understandable outbursts of pent-up frustration and anger turns into something much more malicious and deadly.

When towards the very end Ed visits her, Amanda wants to tell him everything: “I love you and I miss you and I don’t know why this happened. To us, out of everyone in the world” (158). She reminisces about their shared past, their first dates and “Sundays at the flea market” (158). She recalls plans they once had: travelling around the world, buying a new car and getting a new dishwasher. Yet, in the end Naamah takes over and kills Ed. Amanda, in rare moments of lucidity, thinks back to Edward and their life: “the good times, … his blond hair falling over his eyes . . . . And our home, our great big beautiful loft” (165). What is interesting about Amanda’s memories is the recurring correlation between the loss of her love-life and the loss of her material comforts. The sadness over losing Edward intermingles with the sadness over losing their beautiful flat. And when thinking about their future plans, she does not mention having children, but rather buying a new car or a new appliance.
As already mentioned, *Come Closer* could be easily read as a satire on the twenty-first-century young urban professional lifestyle, which is founded upon a specific white upper-middle-class sensibility and values. Amanda’s need for material comfort and her appreciation of finer things in life turns into a shopping frenzy under Naamah’s tutelage. Seeking satisfaction through ownership, Amanda ends up buying hundreds of things and maxing out her credit cards. In the end, she gets severely punished for her materialist selfishness, and loses everything she has worked for all her adult life. Interestingly, from the very beginning it is clear that she and Ed, as a family unit, reject reproductive futurity and instead opt for replicating their own wealth and comfort. Seen in this light, the characters of Amanda and Ed are, in fact, caricatures of stereotypical upper-middle-class professionals who are criticized for postponing children and are accused of selfishness, hypermaterialism and immaturity. Naamah’s insatiable hunger for new objects and thrills mocks the idea of identity-formation through consumption under late capitalism, and Amanda’s demonic possession is twisted into a pun on earthly possessions and their almost supernatural hold on Amanda, Ed and their peers.

Arguably, because Amanda accepts only certain aspects of ideal heterosexual romance (such as monogamy and marriage) but rejects others (that is procreation), she seems more open to other types of non-normative disruptions of her life. Halberstam notes that in the postmodern Western world there are plenty of people who “will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production” and “[b]y doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 10). Interestingly, Halberstam suggests that these “queer subjects” do “live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned, and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family” (10).
Amanda’s increasingly risk-ridden behavior (stealing, sleeping with random men, spending money she is no longer earning) and her refusal to take part in what is considered a “normal,” healthy and productive routine (instead, she sleeps late, drinks alcohol, smokes cigarettes) place her somewhat closer to the “queer” end of the lifestyle spectrum. She deliberately rejects social contract and finds a certain exhilarating freedom in frustrating people’s expectations of her. This rather generous understanding of queerness is supplemented by the queer desire for Naamah that emerges in Amanda’s dreams and during Naamah’s visits.

For instance, in one of Amanda’s dreams Naanah licks her face and tells her that Amanda belongs to her. In another dream, Naamah asks Amanda to stop fighting her and tells her she specifically chose Amanda and will never abandon her: “She put her arms around me and pulled me tight against her. Our ribs crushed together and our hipbones slammed and she pulled me tighter until I couldn’t breathe, I was choking, and my spine met hers, vertebrae against vertebrae” (36). Such violent imagery implies not simply sexual contact but also a complete physical merger, which, coupled with the fact that Amanda starts resembling Naamah physically, suggests that Amanda is being devoured rather than supported by Naamah. Later on, when Amanda quits therapy, Naamah visits her in the park and tells her not to tell Edward about abandoning psychiatric treatment. The way the incident is described is heavily laced with queer eroticism but also with sexual violence – Naamah pushes Amanda onto a concrete pavement and Amanda starts to cry, moan and gasp for air.

Rather predictably, her “bad girl” persona leaves Amanda completely hollowed out at the end of the narrative. Any satisfaction Amanda might have initially felt vanishes, as Amanda is reduced to a mute and helpless witness to Naamah’s increasingly anti-social antics. At the same time, Amanda uses satire and irony in her first-person narrative to distance herself from the perverse pleasures that Naamah has to offer. The need for distancing is fueled by Amanda’s fear of her own corporeality. The temporal gaps in Amanda’s narrative and her
self-positioning as a witness rather than a willing participant also point to her deeply conflicted relationship with her body and her sexuality. Possession, thus, becomes a metaphor for re-engaging with her desires and physical needs.

In fact, possession, a special kind of haunting that is located on and within the haunted person’s body is usually associated with females. Iconic horror movies that deal with possession invariably center on young (or even prepubescent) girls and their budding sexuality: *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Possession* (2012), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Unborn* (2009), to name just a few. In fact, many critical analyses of the said movies emphasize the horrific spectacle of corporeal femininity and its attendant markers (menarche, sex, menstrual blood, bodily fluids, pregnancy). The monstrous performance of the uncontrollable, ecstatic and rapidly changing body is thrilling but also troubling for the audience, which is why at the end of such movies the unruly female body has to be exorcised and subdued by male figures of authority (priests, pastors, fathers, husbands, paranormal investigators, etc.). In such narratives, the demonic presence turns the possessed girl or woman into a sex-craved maniac, a sexual predator that will not hesitate to snare weak-willed men with her sexual appeal. Sex, carnality and lust in women are thus smoothly equated with abnormality, immorality and blasphemy.

This curious combination of fascination and repulsion with female sexuality and the female body, which keeps on reappearing in traditional narratives of demonic possession, is discussed at length by Sara Gran. In stark contrast to typical possession narratives, Amanda is not a young girl on the verge of womanhood, but a grown-up woman, happily married and professionally successful. One could argue that it was Amanda’s socialization into a responsible adult woman that made her inaccessible to an earlier haunting. Instead, her

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83 It is worth noting that if boys or men are subject of demonic/ghostly possession, their bodies are not turned into eroticized spectacles of corporeality. The influence of the demonic presence surfaces rather through mind control, murderous urges and general uncanniness, as in *The Omen* (1972), *The Amityville Horror* (1979, 2005) or *Fallen* (1998).
sexuality and thirst for the improper and the illicit materialize when she is already in her thirties, thus suggesting that it is never too late for the repressed desires to come back and wreak havoc.

As a matter of fact, Amanda recalls that she has actually met Naamah before. When Amanda was five or six, she used to have an imaginary friend, Pansy. This older girl was a “mother substitute” for Amanda, whose own mother died when she was three years old (19). Amanda simply wanted someone to take care of her and imagined Pansy as a knowledgeable teenage girl, a mix of an older sister and a maternal figure. By the time Amanda was nine, she was well aware that Pansy was just a figment of her imagination, and yet she remembers meeting Pansy, a pink-skinned woman with a mane of black hair, waiting for her on the corner one day. Still, because Amanda’s nine-year-old self knew that what happened was impossible (because Pansy was not real), she buried the memory deep inside her and repressed any knowledge of Pansy.

When Amanda is describing Pansy and her childhood, she suddenly jumps a couple of years ahead to her own college years. It seems that remembering Pansy made Amanda think about her father’s and stepmother’s deaths in a scuba diving accident in Jamaica. The way she intrudes on her description of Pansy suggests that Amanda subconsciously searches for a connection between the black-haired woman with “bisque” skin and her father’s and stepmom’s drowning in a coral reef. Amanda’s emphasis on the color pink makes the connection apparent, although Pansy’s motives for killing Amanda’s parents remain unclear. Bearing in mind that Naamah will act as the agent of Amanda’s deepest desires in the future, it could be argued that Pansy/Naamah killed Amanda’s father and stepmother, because Amanda unconsciously wanted to punish her dad for remarrying. Amanda, as an unreliable narrator, is not keen on revealing her improper desires, but it can still be gathered from the way she describes her stepmother that she deeply resented her, and she was angry with her
father for allowing his new wife to blow through their family money, which in turn forced Amanda to look for financial security and grow up into a person she did not really like.

Even though it is suggested that Naamah has always been present in Amanda’s life, the actual possession begins when Amanda is a grown-up woman. Amanda’s late-onset possession is thus a playful nod to popular demonic possession narratives which eschew mature women in favor of young girls and their lithe bodies. And when Amanda can no longer ignore the obvious signs of her possession, she sets out to find more about her demon – Naamah – whose name means actually “charming” and “pleasant” in Aramaic. Naamah, according to the Kabala, was Adam’s second wife (after Lilith). Because God wanted to make sure that Naamah would fit Adam’s requirements, he created Naamah from scratch in front of her future husband. Unfortunately for Naamah, Adam was so disgusted with witnessing this whole visceral process of creation that he cast her out. After killing Ed, Naamah speaks out for the first time in the novel and explains her actions saying that Adam was so sickened by her because he saw what she looked like on the inside: “He had imagined a person as sleek and neat on the inside as outside. He couldn’t stand the mess, the chaos, the blood. I wasn’t needed. I wasn’t wanted” (162). Ed repeats Adam’s offense in that he refuses to accept Naamah/Amanda in all her complexity and corporeal glory.

In Amanda’s recurring dreams she meets Naamah by a red sea, a sea of blood. Naamah’s reddish skin and her red lipstick further strengthen the associations with blood, entrails, bodily functions. Rejected for her own corporeality (which turned out to be too real for Adam), Naamah offers Amanda all that is culturally rejected and abjected, that is pleasures associated with carnality and the female body. Repressed desires are given free rein and Amanda cannot resist the temptation, because somewhere deep inside her she still longs to go back to the earlier, rougher and less proper version of herself. As Naamah recalls:

Of course she [Amanda] fought at first. They all do. And then they see the possibilities and they’re happy to go along. She could have gone on forever, in her
small lonely life. But sometimes the door to a bigger life opens, and it isn’t so easy to say No. You can’t spend your whole life saying No. Sometimes you have to say Yes, and see where it takes you. (166)

Interestingly, even though Amanda is institutionalized for killing Ed, Naamah continues to have fun in the asylum, attacking inmates and sleeping with the male staff. The demon is not punished for her transgressions. No-one saves Amanda, and there are no powerful authority figures or male exorcists who could drive Naamah out of her. Instead, possession is ironically belittled as just another millennial anxiety or a “first world problem.” For instance, when Amanda orders a book on design, she gets a self-help style guide to demon possession. Out of boredom she picks it up one evening and completes a test on whether or not she might be possessed. The first time she does the test, she scores four out of ten and immediately forgets it. However, when she scores seven out of ten, she goes to a spiritual advisor (listed at the back of the guide book) – Sister Maria, the owner of a new-age shop crammed with beads, crystals and tacky Madonnas. Sister Maria confirms that there is a demon sitting next to Amanda and gives her a bottle of special wash (NUMBER #5: DEMON FIGHTING), which rather predictably fails to have the desired effect.

Ed suggests a therapist, which initially makes Amanda happy with relief: “I wasn’t possessed—I was insane” (101)! Still, the psychiatrist assures her that what she is experiencing are simply the growing pains of becoming an assertive independent woman and she should stop resisting these changes. However, the psychiatrist seems to know too much about Amanda and her condition. It occurs to Amanda that Ed has revealed details of their life to his pretty house doctor, who in turn babbled to her psychiatrist colleague. Not surprisingly, Amanda feels manipulated and betrayed and leaves immediately.84

84 Amanda’s visits to the different doctors are a veiled reference to a Rosemary Baby-type of possession narrative, as both her MD and psychiatrist’s advice is causing the demon to grow stronger, almost as if they were in on it. For instance, her MD told her to increase the salt intake, which is precisely what makes this particular demon stronger.
She tries another spiritual advisor, Dr. Ray Thomas, director and CEO of the Ray of Hope Fellowship. He offers her “depossession” – he and his followers do not use the “e-word” (presumably, *exorcism*). She signs a release form which states that whatever Amanda agrees to undergo is for “entertainment purposes” only. The failed depossession is actually a mix of visualization, meditation and hypnosis techniques, sprinkled with pop psycho-babble. It fails completely and the demon takes full possession of Amanda and then happily writes a check for $250 dollars to Thomas.

As already mentioned, Naanah could signify the return of everything Amanda has repressed or hidden away in order to cultivate her new and improved adult self. Naamah’s lust for other men and Amanda’s growing dislike for Ed reveal the hollowness of Amanda and Edward’s marriage. Still, one cannot but wonder what made Naamah choose Amanda in the first place and if, maybe, it was Amanda who somehow attracted or called to Naamah. It is worth pointing out that Amanda begins dreaming about Naamah immediately after a big shout-out with Ed on Valentine’s Day, which suggests the crossing of a certain threshold. Before, Naamah’s presence was limited to tapping noises and prank-like slips, but after a symbolic rift on Valentine’s Day it is possible that Amanda tacitly invited Naamah into her life.

Writing about foreigners and hospitality, Derrida describes two subtypes of the latter: conditional and unconditional (2000). Whereas conditional hospitality remains bound by language and normative rules of communication and social exchange (issuing an invitation, accepting an invitation, the stranger revealing his/her name to the host, etc.), which are supposed to erase the essential unknowability of the Other, unconditional hospitality is not limited by language and works with difference rather than against it. As Andrzej Marzec points out in his book-length study of hauntology (2015), it is precisely the lack of knowledge about the foreigner, the guest, the visitor that constitutes the absolute hospitality (136). Not
knowing whom we have actually accepted into our life, we remain in the dark willingly and anxiously as we agree not to pursue our guest’s identity and his/her secrets. This latter type of hospitality puts the host in a rather compromising and unpleasant position. A stable, fixed and unified self needs to rule his/her familial space as the ultimate master of the house and the host who wields absolute power over his/her guests and visitors. Thus both Derrida and Heidegger point to the importance of feeling-at-home for a modern subject (Marzec 139-140).

In this sense, the unwelcome visitor (the haunting entity, the ghostly Other) invades the familial space and violates the power structure and implicit hierarchy in the house.

When Amanda’s house is invaded by absolute Otherness under Naamah’s guise, her carefully structured selfhood collapses upon itself. Absolute hospitality which she inadvertently offers (by not questioning her “guest” and not asking her to leave until it is too late) threatens Amanda’s integrity, which over the course of her narrative gradually falls apart. In a way, this is not a wholly unwelcome process, as Amanda’s rigid and integrated self is, at best, “a nostalgic vision of subjectivity” (Marzec 141) and, at worst, a delusionary misconception. The novel subtly implies that the coherent “self” that Amanda constructed for herself in the early twenties was not only false but also facile because of its underlying presumption of wholeness and finitude. Interestingly, another concept, hostipitality (a pun on hostility and hospitality), which Derrida created in Of Hospitality (2000), points to the ambiguity inherent to hospitality, which can never wholly separate itself from the potential for violence (Marzec 143). The violence that ensues in Come Closer may be in fact unavoidable as Amanda’s guest/ghost violates the house rules and breaks the tacit agreement, according to which Amanda is the one in control. Over the course of the novel, Amanda is transformed from a curious host accommodating a strange guest to a horrified host of a parasitic entity and ends up being taken a hostage in her own corporeal space.
One could argue that it is the sum total of marital disappointments that makes Amanda invite Naamah. She envisions a perfect companion, a visiting friend who would always be there for her. As a consequence, the night after Valentine’s Day fiasco, Amanda dreams of a “red ocean [that] was rimmed with a shore of darker crimson sand,” in which a beautiful, dark-eyed and black-haired woman is playing (17). This beautiful, pink-skinned stranger is called Naamah. She asks Amanda if she can stay with her, to which Amanda readily agrees. Lying next to Naamah on the red beach, Amanda feels as if they were sisters and she wants Naamah to stay with her forever.

In time, Naamah becomes a third person in Amanda’s life, a voice calling from the unconscious saying “do it” and “have fun.” Amanda starts smoking again, a habit she relinquished for Ed, but which she missed “like an old friend moving out of town” (26). Amanda thus goes back to her old self, perhaps the primary self, the one she was as a child – with no social restraints and no dreams or no ambitions that were not her own. Initially, the more freedom Naamah offers her, the better Amanda feels about herself. Naamah seems to be helping Amanda get back to her older self, the one that was a bit wild, reckless about her health or financial situation, a girl who was majoring in arts and who preferred bad boys rather than dependable bores. In this sense, Naamah acts as a best friend or an older sister that takes care of the younger girl and teaches her how to enjoy herself. Perhaps inspired by Naamah, Amanda helps another woman in a similar way. Because Naamah equips Amanda with a sixth sense of sorts, Amanda is able to learn that one of her more challenging clients is actually a bored millionaire housewife, leading a depressingly empty life. Amanda thus hints to her unhappy client that a generous divorce settlement is what she actually needs, which of course turns out to be true.

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85 Interestingly, the only other person who sees Naamah is a young daughter of Amanda’s distant friend. It would seem that children are more perceptive, because social norms and expectations have not yet been imposed on them, thus blocking their access to their own desires.
Female solidarity and friendship that fill the gaps left by an absent mother or sister are cornerstones of Amanda and Naamah’s relationship. Amanda has no close female friends, no female role models; her grandmother is mentioned only in passing as someone who restricted her budding femininity, and her father’s new wife, Noreen, is described as a gold-digger who squandered Amanda’s family money and spent it all on expensive fur coats and redecorations. The only close person that Amanda has is her husband, and over the course of the novel it becomes clear that their emotionally uneventful marriage does not fulfill Amanda’s needs.

Yet the kind of female solidarity Naamah seems to offer Amanda turns out to be rather insubstantial in the long run. During a failed dinner with their friends, Alex and Sophia, Amanda realizes that she is not, in fact, the only possessed human being. Sophia turns out to be possessed by a demon too, and she tells Amanda to relax and enjoy the power she will soon possess, which suggests that Sophia is at peace with her own demon. Soon after this incident Amanda begins noticing more and more people who reveal themselves to be demons or who are possessed by demons – strong, stunning and secure women and men. Yet there is no solidarity between them, only a tacit understanding of the secret demonic power they are now sharing. And whereas Sophia seems completely reconciled to her demon, Amanda cannot accept what she is becoming. Ultimately, she wants to be left alone but Naamah assures her that she loves her and will never leave her. More than that, Naamah explains: “I never made you do anything. I only let you do what you wanted. I told you, Amanda, I can’t have fun without you” (142). In the end, Amanda admits that she got what she wanted all along – someone to love her completely and someone who would never leave her, no matter what, which ironically makes Amanda’s relationship with Naamah much more meaningful and solid than her marriage to Ed.

Naamah could also be read as Amanda’s supernatural double. This reflective, horizontal aspect is underlined through carefully crafted images: in Amanda’s dreams the two women
are shown lying next to each other and looking into each other’s eyes; the scene in the park and the previously mentioned merger scene also imply a correspondence in the way their respective bodies are placed. Naamah starts out as Amanda’s uncanny double: a sister-like companion who gives Amanda permission to enjoy her life outside the confines of Amanda and Ed’s big, white, empty loft. As Palmer explains in The Queer Uncanny, “[p]sychoanalytic approaches, pioneered by Freund and developed by later theorists, have enriched [the earlier traditions of the uncanny doppelganger] by linking the double to the return of the repressed, the fragmentation of the psyche and the tension between conscious and unconscious dimensions” (91). As already mentioned, Naamah could be seen as a violent end of repression for Amanda, but she could also signify Amanda’s psychological split between the girl she once was and the woman she became. Since Amanda is unable to reconcile her youthful dreams and fierce independence with adult ambitions and yearning for security and stability, she is also susceptible to Naamah’s manipulations and temptations.

Freccero asserts that ghosts frustrate easy definitions of ownership and belonging, as “[t]here is no ‘propriety,’ no ‘proprietariness’ in ghostliness” (342). Naamah’s wish to possess Amanda is thus complicated by the fact that Amanda wants to be (with) Naamah and that she welcomes this arrangement, at least initially. In addition, as already mentioned, Naamah embodies every improper aspect of Amanda’s personality, everything that Amanda strove to hide, mask or change into something socially acceptable. Again, many of the transgressions that Amanda perpetrates actually feel proper to her in the sense that she finds satisfaction in rebelling against what is widely considered appropriate. To some extent, her impulses are understandable when contrasted with the white-washed lifestyle she secretly abhors. But in time, Naamah crosses too many lines and Amanda becomes her hostage rather than an active player in her own right. Once again, she becomes trapped in a lifestyle which is not entirely of
her own choosing. Nonetheless, one cannot but ask if Amanda is not simply evading the responsibility for her actions by inventing this tale of possession.

Ultimately, Naamah’s presence exposes the cracks in Amanda’s seemingly perfect life, which is revealed as too ascetic and aseptic, sheltered and proper, neat and ordered. Her upper-middle-class materialism, the gentrification she is partly responsible for, her stale and boring marriage, her carefully crafted identity as a mature and sensible professional woman – all this comes crumbling down and Amanda’s vehement protests that she is not, in fact, accountable for the total collapse of her life, sound rehearsed and unconvincing. And though Naamah is clearly cast as the not-fully-welcome and not-completely-unwelcome supernatural presence, what is actually ghosted in *Come Closer* is female corporeality and the materiality of existence. Edward repeats biblical Adam’s mistake and rejects Amanda once he sees her improper innermost self. She is no longer the proper upper-middle-class woman she constructed for their shared life, but a real woman she might have grown into – passionate, messy, sensual, angry, chain-smoking, and completely of control.

*Ogbanje and the “Wandering Subject”*

Tananarive Due’s novels are often labeled as supernatural or speculative fiction – a scholarly gesture that links Due’s output to the critical embrace of Afrofuturism in the 1990s, “a decade of counterhegemonic multiculturalism” (Okonkwo 55). Notwithstanding the critical reluctance to locate Due’s works within the horror genre, most of her titles are unequivocally read as horror, and her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Between* (1995), is no exception.86

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86 Christopher W. Okonkwo notes how in *Freedom in the Family: A Mother-Daughter Memoir of the Fight for Civil Rights* (a memoir co-authored with her mother) Due recalls the constant fear of death during the turbulent decades of her childhood and youth. He also points out Due’s usage of West African conceptual imagery, which reverberates through her memories.
Due, who majored in Nigerian literature, weaves into *The Between* themes and figures associated with West African spirituality and cultural heritage.  

On the one hand, the novel yields itself easily to a psychoanalytic reading, in which Abraham and Torok’s concept of transgenerational trauma occupies center stage as the protagonist, Hilton James, cannot cope with the horrifying secret he unknowingly inherited from his grandmother. Alternatively, the splintered temporality that informs the narration is reminiscent of the disruption brought about by Derrida’s specter – a *revenant/arrivant*, who does not respect linear progression and defies clear-cut causality. From a non-Western perspective, however, Hilton James could be read as a half-ghost, who acts not only as a harbinger of things to come but also as a mediator and translator of the past. In this sense, Due’s novel taps into a rich tradition of American Gothic narratives which are concerned primarily with what Kathleen Brogan terms cultural hauntings rather than ghostly visitations or possessions.

Hilton has inherited his grandmother’s ability to flee the so-called death spirits. This ability is both a gift and a curse: a gift because Hilton is able to save his family and a curse because he almost loses his mind in the process. As a child, he witnessed Nana’s miraculous resurrection, but he repressed this harrowing memory in the wake of his own near-death experience as a young boy. It is suggested that his grandmother cheated her own death so that she could be able to save little Hilton from drowning a year after her own original “death.” In

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87 The fact that Due had had some prior knowledge of African cosmology before she set out to write *The Between* was confirmed by Okonkwo in his private correspondence with her (*A Spirit of Dialogue* 202, note 11).

88 Brogan explains how contemporary American writers add to the classic Gothic tradition, in which ghosts served mainly as a popular plot device used “to illuminate the more shadowy or repressed aspects of characters,” in that their ghosts also “signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history” (2). She distinguishes cultural haunting from a ghost story and places Faulkner’s and Hawthorne’s writings as the precursors to cultural haunting literature rather than Edith Wharton’s or Henry James’s ghostly output. The communal aspect of a cultural haunting is underline – the ghost thus functions as more than the haunted self’s externalization and interacts with a larger community from which an individual cannot easily disentangle himself/herself. The ghost thus links both individual memory and group history. What is more, cultural haunting in such stories shows how “ghostly ‘kinship’ replaces biological descent as the basis for ethnic affiliation” (Brogan 12).
a similar way, Hilton, as an adult, a father and a husband, escapes death so that he can save
his family from dying at the hands of a neo-Nazi months later. Unhinged by hate mail and
racist threats, Hilton almost drives into a hearse, which would have been fatal, as he had
forgotten to fasten his seat belt. For a split second he smells salty air, which acts as an
olfactory reminder of his first brush-in with death in 1964, and charred rubber, which is a
signal from the timeline in which he was supposed to die in the said car accident. Just before
his near-death experience, he sees someone inside the hearse – a ghostly figure asking him
how many more times Hilton will cheat death. And just as Nana became restless and irritable
after her first death, Hilton is plagued by horrific nightmares and hallucinations, and his
mental health deteriorates quickly. Yet, in contrast to his grandmother, Hilton is not aware of
his gift (at least not on a conscious level) and tries to suppress all the signs that point to him
being a half-ghost, who is being haunted by a horde of embittered death spirits.

It is only when he can no longer believe in the rational explanation that he finally asks
his adoptive parents about his swimming accident, and they confirm that his heart did actually
stop beating for a while and he was officially dead for a couple of minutes. Through hypnosis
he learns that mysterious “others” are angry with him, because he possesses the gift of flight,
just like Nana. He can move and stay “in the between” (a limbo state between life and death).
What is worse, he managed to steal thirty birthdays from them (218). The “others” are death
spirits who manifest themselves as Hilton’s alternative selves from other timelines. The
hypnosis session proves that deep down Hilton understands what is happening to him now
(and what happened to Nana thirty years earlier), but his conscious self refuses to process this
information. Each time he falls asleep, his spirit escapes to a different timeline, which
explains why his memories do not make sense in some of these realities.

Desperate, Hilton seeks a rational explanation as to why he suffers from nightmares,
loses time, mis-remembers facts and sees things which are not really there. Finally, he
contacts his friend’s brother, Andres, who used to investigate near-death experiences. From Andres, Hilton learns about Marguerite, a woman who went through strikingly similar ordeal. A voodoo priest finally explained to Marguerite that she was a “walking dead” – someone who was supposed to die but refused to stay dead and came back to life – and that “she walked between life, death, and the gods” (241). In a word, she found herself in-between.

Andres clarifies Marguerite’s beliefs: if doorways lead to different spirits, they also lead to different realities. Her spirit, upon her death, escaped to a different reality, in which she did not die. And each time she fell asleep, she entered a different doorway and found herself in a slightly different version of reality on waking up. It is also suggested that she may have decided to stay alive longer so that she could save her younger cousins from a house fire. Still, Hilton, rather predictably, rejects the walking dead hypothesis and prefers to find consolation in a rational diagnosis of a late-onset schizophrenia.

In Marguerite’s case, the ability to escape death is explained through voodoo, which suggests a much wider mesh of spiritual connections and associations, all of which are non-Western in origin. Still, an even stronger connection emerges in a conversation about Ghanaian spirituality. Hilton learns that Kessie, his wife’s (Dede’s) mother and a native Ghanaian, insisted on giving her granddaughter a different name than the one chosen by Dede. Rather than going forth with a Kiswahili name meaning “faith” – Imani – Dede suddenly switched to a Ghanaian name, Kaya. Kofi, one of Dede’s cousins, explains the meaning of giving an infant a so-called “born-to-die name.” The symbolic name – Kaya translates into “stay and don’t go back” – is meant to trick the death spirits inhabiting the child into leaving it alone. And when Hilton presses Kessie, she tells him a story from her childhood in a village near Accra. Her mother told her that Kessie’s younger brother died soon after birth and she saw a death spirit above his head an hour before he stopped breathing.
Though unwilling to trust superstitions, Kessie believed she saw a similar death spirit above Kaya’s crib in the hospital, which is why she made Dede change the girl’s name.

Kessie also tells Hilton how she initially felt that her grandchildren seemed insubstantial, “less than a corpse. It was… nothing” (153). This refers to the fact that Kaya and Jamil were not meant to be born, just as Hilton was supposed to die when he was seven. It was Nana who interfered with the proper timeline by refusing to die on her kitchen floor and then staying alive long enough to save Hilton from drowning. Still, the idea of a “proper” timeline, which was somehow destroyed by Nana (and then Hilton when he refused to die in a car accident), is challenged repeatedly. Kaya is visited in her dream by Antoinette’s ghost, a girl her age who died of AIDS and who was one of Hilton’s patients at his drug-rehab center. Antoinette comes to Kaya to warn her about the neo-Nazi who is harassing her family, but inadvertently she also sheds light on Hilton’s predicament. More specifically, Antoinette’s ghost says that she had trouble finding the right doorway to Kaya because in some places Kaya James did not exist at all. As Nana explains to Hilton in one of his dreams, his children live on borrowed time: “they have no time that belongs to them. They came to be from what you stole” (224). But even though Antoinette tells Kaya that she was not supposed to be born, she also assures her that Kaya would grow up to be a great scientist, a person who would be instrumental in the fight against HIV. Therefore, even though Kaya should not have been born, plans for her have already been set in motion and her future as a famous doctor has already been given shape.

Kaya’s dream was not a nightmare; rather, it had a melancholic and almost ordinary feel to it. This easy intermingling of the two planes – of the dead and the living – is the subject of Esther Peeren’s essay on West African literature. She argues that in typical Western ghost stories “[t]he everyday and the ghostly are… presented as irreconcilable realms that ought not to encroach on each other, and adage that works in both directions” (106), as neither is
allowed to impinge on the other and interrupt everyday life (or death). A burdensome secret once revealed, the ghost can be laid to rest or exorcised by authority figures. However, West African spirits or, for that matter, Due’s ghosts do not follow this pattern. Due chose the anglicized term, “born-to-die,” in *The Between*, but in the traditional West African tales such child-spirits are called *ogbanje* or *abiki*. According to the Yoruba and the Igbo, *ogbanje* and *abiki* describe a child that is born many times but dies young, as it remains chained to the spirit world. Hilton, who is caught between being a human and a “born-to-die” spirit, or *ogbanje*, cannot be exorcised or re-buried by others. Neither does he function as a speaker for past secrets or as a victim demanding retribution. One could argue that Nana is the more traditionally conceived ghost figure as she was not buried properly. Her body was taken by the sea and her grave remains empty. Thirty years later she returns to haunt Hilton in his dreams. Yet, in contrast to Western ghost stories, Nana’s ghost is not there to demand a proper burial, but rather to help Hilton rectify his errors (which are also her own) and help him pass over and achieve peace. Her agenda changes once she gets to know her grandchildren and Dede, and she decides to steer Hilton in the right direction and help him save them.

Hilton’s “in-between” status is also akin to the concept of a “wandering subject,” introduced by Achille Mbembe in his analysis of Nigerian author Amos Tutuola’ novels, based on Yoruba folktales. According to Mbembe, for this “wandering subject,” “there is no self-mastery” and he is “forced into a continuous re-making of the self through the profoundly ambiguous and fraught dimensions of imagination, work, and remembrance” (95). In contrast to Western hauntology, there is no place for exorcism here, and the ghost does not act as a “counterweight or corrective” to a stable sense of the unified self, but as a reminder that permanence and unity are in and of themselves illusory at best (95). Mbembe sets out to show how much Western ontology is indebted to the ideal of a rational, self-governing subject,
which in its post-Enlightenment formulation tries to suppress passion, imagination and the spiritual. Because of that, “[t]he world of instincts and animality” (along with its ties to feelings, affects, remembrance, imagination) is denied and/or mistrusted by Western thinkers (133).

In this sense, Hilton as a “wandering subject” frustrates the stability of the self, time and truth. There is no clear genealogy, and no obvious continuity between the past, the present and the future: Hilton was supposed to drown when he was seven, but instead he had children – children who should not have been born at all. The death spirits compare Hilton to “[a] dead tree dropping seedlings” (126). According to Venetria K. Patton, as an ogbanje, Hilton was never meant to become an ancestor (180), although she observes that in some beliefs, ogbanjes could be persuaded to stay and start families. In a way, starting a family was for Hilton a way to repay Nana’s sacrifice (Patton 180). When he finally dies, he swims to his grandmother, who is waiting for him on the other shore. He is a child again, repeating his first near-death experience. In his hand he is still holding a medical pin Kaya gave him earlier: he can no longer recall its meaning, but he knows that it was given to him by someone he loved: “a very great woman, a famous healer he knew once, long ago” (287).

Thus the different timelines and phases in his life collapse in the afterlife: his past as Kaya’s father recedes as he goes back to being his seven-year-old self again, the original self that was lost because his grandmother protected him from dying. His daughter becomes “a famous healer,” even though this knowledge belongs to the future Hilton has not lived to see. What Mbembe applied to Tuluola’s writing fits the disjointed temporality described by Due as well: “there is only an unfurling of temporal series that are virtually disjointed or linked together through a

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89 Patton notes that in Kongo cosmology, water is what separates the world of the living from that of the dead. She quotes Kruger-Kahloulou’s research on the “Kalunga line,” that is the water passage. It is Hilton’s ancestor, Nana, that guides him over the Kalunga in the last scenes of the novel.

90 Interestingly, Patton draws attention to the multiplicity of meanings concerning the pin. Although in the novel, the pin represents medical profession and thus stands for Kaya’s future (which is literally placed in Hilton’s hands), it can also be taken to mean “the image of the Mami Wata or Nne Mmiri, who controls the water entry to the physical world” (188). Soon after this exchange, Hilton dies and swims across the water to his grandmother.
multiplicity of slender threads” (145). In this “fractured temporality,” the wandering subject is reminiscent of the schizophrenic of Deleuze and Guattari’s writing – someone who passes freely between different states and evades finite self-organization, sedimentation and self-imposed linearity (Mbembe 146). Still, the one constant thread that binds Hilton’s realities together is his unwavering commitment to his family and their future.

The fractured temporality of Hilton’s own existence as half-human and half-ogbanje is superimposed on the two important periods of African-American history: the promise of the 1960s and the failure of the 1990s. As Patton notes, the 1990s saw the end of the many gains achieved through the Civil Rights Movement (181). The Los Angeles riots of 1992 and the increasingly resentful and racist undertones of the debates over affirmative action and multiculturalism are just two examples of the socio-cultural failures associated with this decade. Consequently, Due’s decision to cast a white supremacist as the villain points to the enduring importance of race politics, even if the novel itself does not engage with the American racial past and the legacy of slavery to the same extent as, for instance, Toni Morrison’s Beloved. The comparison with the Gothic neo-slave narrative is warranted also because Beloved can be read as a death spirit coming back to haunt Sethe – an ogbanjelabiku – whose motivation for haunting cannot be simply subsumed under a quest for retribution or for a proper burial, but rather speaks to “the social and spiritual unease” that the characters experience in their everyday life (Ogunyemi 664, quoted in Patton 131).  

Racism remains the most prevalent form of “social and spiritual unease” that reverberates through Due’s novel. In fact, it was the death spirits who selected Charles Ray as their agent of Hilton’s demise and instructed him through his dreams on how to target the Jameses. Death is thus presented as a mastermind who can “dispatch all kinds of agents, inanimate and animate including, in this case, the ocean, roadway, motor vehicles, racism, a

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The novel stresses that out of all these dangers, racism is the one most likely to destroy the Jameses, as it accompanies them everywhere and at all times.\(^9\) And because racism is so deeply ingrained in their life, Charles Ray’s hate mail is initially ignored by Dede’s office. As a (black) public figure, Dede has grown used to receiving racist threats. Interestingly, as Okankwo points out, Charles Ray’s racism targets Dede not only because of her ethnic background, but also because of her gender and her class mobility, and the power and authority that come with it. Another proof of the pervasiveness of racism is the fact that no-one is entirely immune to it. In multiethnic and multicultural Miami, Hilton finds himself doubting his and Dede’s Hispanic marriage counselor, Raul, precisely because of the latter’s ethnicity and different cultural background. Finally, gender dynamics presented through Hilton’s focalization reveals his investment in certain racially coded stereotypes of black femininity and masculinity, and heterosexual romance. It could be argued then that the ghostliness constructed by Due in *The Between* to mark Hilton’s ontologically indefinite status, his children’s precarious existence and his uneasy relation with the past brings into focus not only the weight of racism but also that of toxic masculinity.

Hilton admits that he went to grad school to obtain two things: a master’s degree and a wife. Coming from a working-class (Nana) and lower-middle-class (his adoptive parents) background, Hilton sees working-class and lower-middle-class women as good enough only for dancing and sex. He wanted someone more sophisticated – a woman from a middle-class professional background who would, in turn, elevate his social status. Some of his college friends suggested that he should start dating white educated women, who apparently had their

\(^9\) For instance, the white woman from whom they bought their four-bedroom suburban house was happy that a black family was interested in buying her place as “she’d been brought up by a black nanny in Virginia” and “she’d always hired blacks to clean for her and became such good friends with them” and “her husband had marched with Martin Luther King” (56-57). Dede and Hilton suffer through this bout of “benevolent” racism and bite their tongues as the woman keeps pinching Kaya’s cheeks, because they want the house badly. Once they move in, however, some of their new neighbors, all of whom are white, begin to harass them.
“imaginations fixated on the Congo” (19). He scoffed at the idea and instead found Dede, a fierce and independent woman, whose mother was from Ghana and whose father was a well-respected pastor. “After a year’s worth of Earth, Wind & Fire concerts, poetry readings, and black student meetings” they got engaged and got married (20). Yet, from the very beginning, Dede is cast in the role of a jealous nagging wife, prone to verbal outbursts and unmanageable in her fury, which comes dangerously close to the “angry black woman” stereotype that saturates American mainstream media. Hilton’s work, amidst mostly female social workers and with many young female clients at the rehab-center, does nothing to assuage his wife’s obsessive fears. The fights grow in intensity over the years and each time Dede is consistently presented as the irrational one and the one who picks up fights with him. It is even suggested that her jealousy is actually her family’s heritage, as her father spent the last years of his life struggling with rumors about a female lover he had supposedly installed in a town apartment. The way Hilton explains Dede’s behavior serves to further insure his role as a blameless victim of his wife’s paranoid hysteria. Still, at the end of the day, in one of the realities to which Hilton escapes, he actually sleeps with one of his clients, a sexy ex-junkie Danira. Although he leaves this reality quickly and for the remaining part of the novel he moves in and out of realities without the “Danira incident,” he still did cheat on his wife, which suggests that Dede’s fears were not completely unfounded.

When Kaya is seven and Jamil is still a toddler, Dede and Hilton reach an impasse which has to be resolved through marriage counseling. Thanks to therapy, Hilton realizes that his obsession with giving back to the community is a way of repaying his grandmother who died saving him. During marriage counseling sessions, Hilton is able to confront his unacknowledged childhood guilt over Nana’s death – he felt he was rewarded and pampered by his adopted parents even though he literally killed his grandmother by disobeying her and swimming too far. By confronting the guilt, he is able to move on and the nightmares stop.
The disturbing dreams only return after Hilton’s brush-in with death in a car accident, which suggests a clear correlation between family crises and Hilton’s ambiguous half-ghost status. In a way then, each time his family life teeters on the edge of collapse, the reality starts crumbling around Hilton, and he becomes unmoored and unable to hold on to one timeline, one set of memories and one stable identity.

Hilton also struggles with the high demands placed on black masculinity. He is supposed to be the protector of his family, but he feels that he is unable to fulfill this role adequately. He becomes increasingly irritable due to fatigue, lack of sleep and exhausting switches between realities. But his annoyance, anger and violence could also be read as a reaction to the decreasing authority in his own household as well as his powerlessness in the American society as a black man. Because the timelines keep changing each time he falls asleep, Hilton grows weary and paranoid. In one episode, he fears for Jamil and accidentally hurts his son’s face in a panic attack. The ensuing fight with Dede is one of the worst, and he goes as far as to call her an “ungrateful bitch” and tell her that if it was not for him, his children would not have been born (210), ineffectually trying to reassert his masculinity and alienating his wife in the process. He cannot contain his anger, as he feels slighted and thinks his family does not appreciate his efforts to keep them safe. On the basic level, he expects cooperation and gratitude for getting a guard dog and a gun, and keeping vigil at nights. But on a deeper level, he is angry because he knows that he is overstaying his welcome in this world, and he is doing it solely for his family, who cannot comprehend his sacrifice. Dede tells him that he has changed: “You’re a man who lives here, you walk with that gun, you’re watching over us all the time like some sort of guardian angel. But other than that, I don’t know you” (129). As already mentioned, his personality is ultimately tied to just one aspect – protecting his family’s future. All the other elements, personas and components of his identity are obliterated through Hilton’s constant flights between realities. In a cruel twist, he is reduced
to the caricature of a family man, a ghostly presence obsessed with his family, yet unable to communicate with them.

It is in his dreams that Hilton is haunted most mercilessly by the death spirits. The dreamscape is posited as a liminal space between life and death, in which Hilton can talk to Nana and his other selves, and which he comes to see as his own personal hell filled with nightmares, hallucinations, lucid dreams and, finally, even Charles Ray. In his dreams, he sees lines of identical houses and each one of them contains a different would-have-been or should-have-been reality. In dream mirrors, instead of seeing his own reflection, he sees hundreds of men “with glowering eyes full of hate,” covered in blood and asking him to stop running because his time is over (42). He is addressed by his doppelgangers, men who are all him, but are different nonetheless. They explain to him that they have entered Charles Ray’s dreams and manipulated his already-existing racism and violence so that he would kill Hilton and his entire family. Hilton’s continued presence is an offense to the spirits and his escapes have made him an abomination in their eyes. He was not supposed to have opened so many doors. Nana, too, admits that it was wrong of her to try to save him: “I left you a curse, not a blessing” (134) and she admonishes him gently: “Child, you done swum out too far” (90).

In some dreams, his children are pleading for his help as they are dying horrific deaths. In one such sequence, he sees again the man inside the hearse beaconing him to follow. Death personified – the man with powdered face and black sunglasses – encourages Hilton to take a step further and go quietly in his sleep. The uncanny figure in whiteface reverses typical Western binary of whiteness and blackness, as it is whiteness (and not blackness) in Hilton’s vision that is an omen of death and danger.93 At the same time, it is through his dreams that Hilton is given the name of the man who is targeting his family, Charles Ray. The haunting he experiences is thus fragmented and contradictory, with some voices urging him to end his

93 This reversal of color seems especially pertinent to the discussion concerning Africanist presence in white American canon, which was initiated by Toni Morrison in her 1992 collection of essays, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.
misery and others actively helping him and giving clues. More than that, the boundary between the ghostly world and the real world is porous and unstable. This can be contrasted with the Western conception of the dead and the living, who are clearly separated from each other and whose encounters are improper and dangerous, and as such are to be avoided at all times. In *The Between*, although the ghostly encounters with death and the dead are horrifying, they are also presented as necessary and, in a way, intimate, which is evidenced by an early dream in which Hilton finds Nana’s dead body on the kitchen floor and touches her face only to feel the skin crumbling in his fingers. Although this image is clearly terrifying, it also conveys a crucial message about the materiality of death and the necessity of familiarizing oneself with it. Death might be frightening for Hilton, which is why he is escaping it, but ultimately it is dying that will give him peace.

Because Nana acts both as a keeper of the past and a reminder of absolute alterity (death), she could be read both as a Derridean specter and Abraham and Torok’s phantom. Ultimately, the main difference between the two boils down to the meaning of secrecy: while “the secrets of Abraham’s and Torok’s lying phantoms are unspeakable” in the sense that they have origins in shame, prohibition, and taboo, Derrida’s specters cannot speak because the language is not yet ready to articulate their secrets (Davis, *Haunted Subjects* 13). Therefore, Derrida’s ghosts probe the limits of thought and language and should not be reduced to mere objects of knowledge which could be forced to reveal their mysteries. Moreover, one could also argue that Abraham and Torok follow a linear temporality, in which past secrets, present-day phantoms and possibilities for future exorcisms are clearly demarcated, and the progressive narrative remains by all means plausible. By contrast, in *The Specters of Marx*, the ghosts carry “the voices of the past” which are intermingled with “the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” (Davis, *Haunted Subjects* 13).
Even though through most of the novel Nana’s ghost points to the past as a source of all the clues to Hilton’s current predicament, the end of the novel, in which Hilton reverts back to his eight-year-old self with no memory of his adult life, suggests a temporality not bound by questions of past wrongs and future renewals. Due underlines the import of ancestral protection that Nana extends over Hilton, thus literally joining the past, the present and the future in one, and uniting the familiar and the familial in death. Hilton is haunted by the empty spaces in his past and in his selfhood left by his grandmother, which corresponds to Abraham’s assertion that it is not the dead that haunt “the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life” (Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom” 171). One could also argue that Nana functions as a phantom (in Abraham and Torok’s sense), as she protects the knowledge from surfacing and masquerades herself in Hilton’s mind as a distant, yet pleasant, memory rather than a true connection to his past and his troubling gift of flight. In fact, he needs therapy and hypnosis to recover the true memory of his early childhood and he needs to uncover the secrets of his past in order to deal with the repercussions of his own flight from death.

Nana could also be read in terms of the Derridean specter; after all, in Hilton’s dreams she represents the ultimate otherness – death. Through most of the novel Hilton escapes not only from himself and his other ghostly selves hunting him, but also from Nana whose horrifying corpse he encounters in dreams and visions. It seems that he is not ready to accept death (his, Nana’s) up until the very end. Yet it should also be noted that Nana’s and Hilton’s familial relationships exceeds masculine economy of spectrality, which Derrida builds on referencing Hamlet’s relationship with his dead father and a complex web of duties and expectations enmeshing the father and the son. Nana passes on her gift to her grandson, but a direct line of inheritance is broken, as Hilton’s parents are mentioned but once. As a maternal
figure, she acts as Hilton’s fierce protector, but at the same time, she also threatens his mental stability by reminding him of the dangers stemming from his half-ghost status.

Okonkwo points to the *ogbanje*’s “ideological entanglement in questions of borders and border crossings, displacement, exile, belonging, double vision, and identity-formation” (56). Hilton’s whole life could be seen as a series of crossings and journeys between different realms and states: he moves between families, identities, social classes, alternative realities even. Hounded by death spirits, but also positioned as a half-spirit himself, Hilton cannot escape the sacrifices accompanying his journeys. Each passage, however, revolves around the question of belonging to a family, either the one he lost as a child or the one he is trying to save as an adult. As a half-ghost stuck in the titular Between, Hilton’s struggles to hold on to these aspects of his identity that define him – a grandson, a husband and a father, above everything else.

**Familial Disintegration in Within These Walls**

Tom Gunning suggests that “[a] ghost puts the nature of the human senses, vision especially, in crisis” (216). One could go a step further and argue that the ghost signifies an epistemological crisis that demands to be acknowledged and resolved quickly. Seen in this light, the protagonists’ refusal to acknowledge the ghosts that populate Ania Ahlborn’s *Within These Walls* (2015) signals their unwillingness to accept their crumbling family life and the illusionary nature of pseudo-familial substitutes. In contrast to Due’s novel, *Within These Walls* draws heavily from typical ghost stories, in which the ghost signifies an aberration from the norm and a dangerous intrusion into ordinary life. Some of the ghosts introduced by Ahlborn call upon the living to warn them not to repeat the tragic past, while others act as manipulators and liars interested only in their own selfish gains. Yet, because Ahlborn’s
characters continue the Western tradition of reading ghosts as carriers of knowledge and hidden truths, they remain blind to the apparitions’ real agenda. As Avery Gordon eloquently puts it, ghost stories are ultimately stories about “permissions and prohibitions, presence and absence, about apparitions and hysterical blindness” (115, original emphasis). Within These Walls lends itself easily to this reading, as the Gothicized family drama described by Ahlborn revolves around the issues of patriarchal control and parental neglect, broken lines of communication between the living and the manipulated messages from the dead, and, lastly, the violent repercussions of protagonists’ hubris and their stubborn refusal to see reality for what it really is.

Ania Ahlborn (Polish-born author living in Portland) weaves together two narratives: the first one follows a present-day story of Lucas Graham, a failed writer trying to resuscitate his flagging career with a true-crime book on Jeff C. Halcomb, a cult leader responsible for a gory massacre three decades earlier; the second narrative charts the events that led to the deaths of several young people in Halcomb’s commune in the early 1980s. In both stories, the slow disintegration of family life comes to the forefront and both stories remain tightly connected through the mirroring of certain events and chosen narrative devices.

The story begins with Halcomb, locked away on death row, contacting Lucas and promising to grant him exclusive access to himself on condition that Lucas moves into his old house: “You want my story, you live in my house” (The Letter). Lucas, who has been struggling to repeat his original success for more than a decade, is too thrilled by this opportunity to second guess Halcomb’s unusual request. With his marriage on its last legs, Lucas persuades his soon-to-be ex-wife to allow him a few (last) months together with their preteen daughter, Jeanie. For Lucas, the decision to move into Halcomb’s house is a last-ditch

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94 All subsequent quotes from Ania Ahlborn’s Within These Walls come from 2015 non-paginated Kindle Edition.
attempt at saving both his career and the relationship with his daughter, which has been strained by the looming divorce. In the past narrative, readers are introduced to Audra, a soft-spoken, fragile girl, abandoned by her upper-class parents, all alone in a beautiful summer house, who is slowly being manipulated into joining Halcomb’s commune and later accepting them into her house, which becomes Halcomb’s residence in all but a legal writ.

The two narratives do not seem particularly original at a first glance: Lucas is yet another self-absorbed father who ignores his prepubescent daughter’s mood swings and teenage angst up until it is too late to save her from the brink, and Audra’s tragic life is a model story about a lonely young girl who gets consumed by an occultist sect through a skillful combination of psychobabble, hippie spirituality and false promises of emotional support. Yet, because Ahlborn places the narrative focus on the characterization and relationships rather than the supernatural, Within These Walls offers, first and foremost, a bleak tale of familial disintegration and dysfunction that keep on haunting the protagonists. The sense of inevitability that permeates the novel is heightened through several narrative choices, the most important of these being the way the hauntings are structured. Strange occurrences that begin the very first night Lucas moves with Jeanie into the Montlake Road house fall into two main categories: temporal disturbances that are actually echoes of the events from 1982-1983 (and which are explained by the interloping chapters set in the past) and encounters with Halcomb’s and his followers’ ghosts, experienced most intensely by Jeanie. Another important theme analyzed by Ahlborn is the question of identity formation within familial structures, and more specifically the act of naming and renaming as well as hierarchical constraints and limits of agency that are highlighted through this.

The present-day plot alternates between Lucas’s and Jeanie’s focalization. Lucas is presented as a man haunted by the ghost of his past success and his failed marriage. He is grasping at straws, which is why he does not think through Halcomb’s proposal and, later on,
is unable to leave the Montlake Road house, even though each day brings new dangers to his
daughter and himself. He is aware that “[t]his was a mistake. A bad idea. The house wasn’t
meant to be lived in by anyone, not after the things that had happened within these walls”
(Chapter 12). And yet the thought that once the divorce goes through, Caroline will most
probably win the sole custody of Jeanie and he will become a memory of “a washed-up loser
of a dad” (Chapter 19) makes him stay there against his better judgment.

Unsurprisingly, once Lucas settles in Audra’s old house, Halcomb refuses to see him
and soon after commits suicide in his cell. Lucas, lured into staying by his neighbor’s
(Echo’s) machinations, does not notice his daughter’s increasing estrangement and her
involvement with Echo and Halcomb’s ghost up until it is too late. In a tense finale,
Halcomb’s ghost returns to finish the ritual he started with his followers and Audra’s infant
baby in 1983. Using Jeanie as Audra’s surrogate, Halcomb kills her and takes over Lucas’s
body.

Lucas firmly believes that he is “trying to fix things, not just for himself, but for the
three of them as a whole. As a family. As something they used to be. Something he hoped
they could be again” (Chapter 1). His and Caroline’s past as Goth-kids is still a go-to
reference point for Lucas. He bemoans the fact that his wife is no longer the black-haired girl
he fell in love with, but a “proper” (and naturally blonde) businesswoman. His wife’s success
in keeping the family afloat makes him miserable rather than happy for her. He feels
emasculated – he is aware of his wife’s love affair, but at the same time he is too scared to
confront her about it. Instead, he lets himself be humiliated by Caroline’s angry outbursts.
Rather than to see her for who she is right now, he wants to return to how they were before
and to the Caroline he met two decades before. Although he sees her as “a liar. An adulteress.
A provocateur” (Chapter 1), his resentment might also disguise his own feelings of
inadequacy and emasculation. In all probability, Halcomb sensed how vulnerable Lucas was at this point in his life and decided to exploit his weakness.

Lucas’s unyielding refusal to confront the present manifests itself in countless small details. He disregards all the chances to talk with his daughter, because he is too afraid of the repercussions of what might happen if she learns too much about his failed marriage and failed career. He prefers to see Jeanie’s black kohl and sulkiness as signs that she is following in his footsteps and becoming a neo-Goth rather than admit that he does not actually know much about his adolescent daughter. Similarly, Jeanie withdraws into her own world, and she too ignores the rare moments in which some sort of mutual understanding might have been reached between her and Lucas. The moments when the father and the daughter miss each other and pass on opportunities to communicate are thematically re-enacted in the last chapters of the novel. Jeanie misinterprets her dad’s actions, thinking that he is literally chasing ghosts rather than searching for her, even though this is precisely what he is doing. During the final hours at the house, delirious Lucas finally links the dots and realizes that Halcomb’s plan was to get him and his daughter all along. Jeanie, too, realizes that the ghosts are there to kill her, not help her. The two, the father and the daughter are now locked in the same physical space, the Montlake Road house, but in two different timelines. While Lucas is standing in the present-day house, his daughter is trapped in the 1983 one. When the two temporal planes collide, Halcomb (now in Lucas’s body) is the last man standing.

Jeanie is manipulated by Echo and the ghosts of Halcomb’s followers into falling for him, which, as the narrative suggests, would not have been possible, had she been a happy, well-adjusted teenager. As a matter of fact, Jeanie had been quite happy up until her tenth birthday, when her parents started fighting. She is smart enough to recognize the power game between the parents – Lucas wants to use his old Goth-scene acumen to get into his daughter’s good graces, because he knows Caroline hates it. She is also aware of her mother’s
affair and observes with distaste her father’s silence. They are too self-absorbed to notice that her new-found interest in dark alternative music and clothing has less to do with her rebelling against them and more with her falling for a high-school boy. Yet, she is also too young to be able to distance herself from her parents’ problems and tends to see their divorce as her fault somehow. Jeanie is afraid she will end up as a bi-coastal kid, forever misplaced and out of place. She ponders whether she is to blame because of her brooding and her mood swings: “She had rebelled against her parents’ constant fighting by putting on a cold and callous disguise. She’s hidden herself away as a form of protection. But perhaps it was her very hiding that had brought Mr. and Mrs. Graham to this point” (Chapter 10).

At the same time, Jeanie knows that instead of being cruel to her father she could simply open up to him and tell him how much she loves him and understands his passion for writing. In the end, she just feels guilty and reproaches herself for hurting him: “It’s like there’s something wrong with you. You’re broken, Vee [her own nickname]. He’ll be happier without you, too” (Chapter 28). Of course, it is rather hard for the readers to disentangle these typical teenage self-rebukes from Halcomb’s growing influence on Jeanie. Similarly to Audra three decades earlier, Jeanie is prone to self-doubt: “You’re a coward, that’s all. A spineless kid who wants to be tough, but when it gets even a little bit scary, you wuss out…. She was terrified of everything. Ghosts. Boys. Divorce” (Chapter 21). With time, however, she begins to feel stronger as she shifts the blame towards her dad, who sadly enough seems to have abandoned her in favor of his work. This, too, parallels to some extent Audra’s journey from self-blaming to learning how to blame one’s parents.

Upon learning the history of the Montlake Road house, Jeanie gets slowly sucked into Jeff Halcomb’s world. She dreams about him, the man who resembles “Jack White and Johnny Depp, kind of vampiric with his pale skin and black hair, sexy in a quiet yet dangerous

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95 Italicized fragments signal internal monologues of Jeanie and Lucas.
sort of way” (Chapter 21). Still, she decides not to tell her father about her new-found crush and about her run-ins with the supernatural when the ghosts reassure her that they are not going to hurt her. Once a secret sign is sent by the ghosts, she relaxes knowing that Halcomb will take care of her: “[i]t was his [Halcomb’s] eyes. They promised to dissolve Vee’s fears. All that anxiety about her parents, about fitting in, about what was lurking in the dark… he’d make it go away, if only she believed” (Chapter 21). Halcomb’s unconditional love for his followers, coupled with the promise of eternal happiness through death, becomes more and more attractive for Jeanie. She begins to empathize with her mother, even though in the beginning she saw Caroline’s love affair as a betrayal of sorts. But, after all, both the mother and the daughter know how it feels to be “cast aside and forgotten” by Lucas, because he is unable to disengage from his work and can only offer empty promises of time spent together. In the end, Jeanie feels that only the Halcomb kids and Jeff himself can understand her.

Interestingly, Jeanie’s full name is Virginia, but she refers to herself as “Vee,” in defiance of her parents’ nickname “Jeanie.” Thus in contrast to Audra, Jeanie actually starts out with a bit of self-awareness and some agency. Yet being so young, Jeanie remains exceptionally vulnerable and does not realize when Echo starts setting Jeanie against her father. It is Echo who provides Jeanie with a new nickname “Vivi,” even though she soon learns it was actually Halcomb who came up with it. Echo assures Jeanie that

I knew you were the one from the first moment I saw you, Vivi…. You’re just like them, you know. Lost, wanting more than what you have, deserving of more than what you’re being given. Kids like you—that’s who Jeffrey loved the most. That’s why they turned to him, Vivi. He knew what they needed, and Jeff gave them everything he promised. (Chapter 38)

Echo promises Vivi/Jeanie that Jeff Halcomb will meet her soon and asks her to keep it a secret from her father. Jeanie knows her father would ruin everything: “Both her dad and her mom. They messed everything up and didn’t even care. But Vivi didn’t have parents. She could forget them, forget the past and the pain” (Chapter 38, original emphasis). Echo even
gives her a photo of Jeff with a signed note from him: “Dearest Vivi, See you soon. – J.,” thus confirming Jeanie as Audra’s replacement. Three decades ago it was Audra who was hailed as “the one.”

The emotional mirroring of Audra and Jeanie is emphasized in several places, even though at first glance it might seem that Audra and Jeanie do not have all that much in common. Jeanie is quite mature for a 12-year-old; she is able to see through her parents’ deceptions and is not afraid to take a risk when it comes to making new friends. In contrast, Audra is incredibly frail and anxious, and absolutely all of her self-esteem relies on other people’s acceptance and attention. But when it comes to their parents, both girls feel similarly abandoned and unloved. These circumstances actually bring the two girls – one from the early 1980s and one from 2003 – much closer. What is more, Lucas empathizes with Audra and sees her as “[s]omeone’s Virginia” (Chapter 30, original emphasis). Readers also learn in the penultimate chapter of Audra-centered timeline that one of the names she chose for her unborn child was “Vivi.” And in Jeanie’s last moments, she becomes a stand-in for Audra, even adopting her wan and sickly looks.

Three decades earlier, Audra where Audra is left by her politician father and her socialite mother in Pier Pointe, a small seaside town. Her only friend is Marguerite “Maggie” James, who lives less than a mile from her house and has a small daughter named Eloise (later known as Echo). Audra was emotionally neglected by her mother, who preferred the lifestyle of a wealthy socialite to that of a stay-at-home mom and who was more interested in saving a bath mat from Audra’s blood than Audra from dying in a suicide attempt at the age of twelve.96 Because of her self-destructive tendencies Audra is on anti-depressants paid for by her father. She suffers from low self-esteem and is afraid of crowds and people, in general. She is used “to feeling inconsequential” (Chapter 2). This changes when she meets a group of

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96 Incidentally, Jeanie is 12, when the narrative starts.
hippie-like drifters camped out on the beach near her house. She quickly bonds with Deacon – a handsome boy who comes from a similar background with rich but disinterested parents. Almost immediately Deacon announces that “[t]here’s no need to be shy. We’re all family here” (Chapter 2), thus pointing to their quasi-familial structure, which is precisely what Audra misses in her life the most. To her delight, already during their second meeting Deacon addresses her as their “new sister.”

Jeff’s commune binds together a number of characteristics attributed to typical sects and cults: a charismatic male leader, communal living, free love and hippie-inspired anti-materialism, religious references to rebirth and eternal life, anti-establishment politics, formation of new kinship structures in lieu of the old ones, etc. Thus Audra’s goes through all the stages of recruitment process administered by sects, cults and NRM’s (new religious movements). Sirkin differentiates six stages of cult involvement: hooking (initial contact is established; a potential recruit might be feeling lonely, disappointed or disillusioned), joining (a recruit feels “intellectual attraction to the cultic philosophy”; the individual can be “love-bombed” by others and offered eternal friendship and support; the decision to join is often made spontaneously), intensification (a new member is flooded with information that he/she cannot cognitively process; a risk of withdrawal increases; emotional responses might be dulled), social disengagement (contact with the “old” family is discouraged; construction of new familial relations begins) and realignment (after months spent in a cult the individual might have already taken a new name, got married, set up a house; negative feelings about the cult might resurface) (119-120).

Research into the family’s role in cult involvement or joining NRM’s (new religious movements) has been ongoing since the 1970’s. As Murken and Namini recall, NRM’s are often accused of being “anti-self,” “anti-society,” and, finally, “anti-family” (18), which shows the centrality of social and familial questions for the public debate. In fact, in pop-
cultural representations, sects and cults are consistently presented through familial imagery and tropes, such as establishing a new and improved family (which is misunderstood by the outside world), escaping from an old (and potentially abusive or uncaring) family into a better family, trying to protect a new family by escaping from an abusive cult, being brainwashed into hating the old family, etc. Yet, actual empirical findings as to whether a troubled family life is unambiguously linked to a potential NRM involvement are rather “scarce and scattered” (Murken and Namini 18). Because the cults and NRMs are notoriously difficult to define, as they vary in size, structure, goals and are scattered all over the globe (oftentimes existing under the radar of mainstream media or authorities) sustained in-depth research remains a distant possibility. The existing research, however, seems to confirm that early family experiences have a substantial bearing on an adult’s decision to join an NRM, and many studies suggest that a membership in NRMs might offer “some kind of compensation for individuals with problematic family backgrounds and absent fathers” or absent mothers (Murken and Namini 28). People who look for strong paternal figures and a community-oriented lifestyle are thus attracted to NRMs that profess to provide such wish fulfillment. Still, people with similar experiences might be looking for different features in a cult or a sect, such as therapeutic recovery, a new quasi-familial framework, or a communal living. Interestingly, for people who grew up in stable families, NRM might offer a restoration or continuation of that idyllic, happy past.

It is clear that in Audra’s case, she is looking for a compensatory family. Since both her parents are absent, she is not only looking for a paternal figure but also a maternal one. Paradoxically, she finds the latter in herself as she invites Jeff’s commune into her house, offers them meals, place to sleep, her material and emotional resources. For a while, she even harbors a hope of becoming Jeff’s wife and the whole group’s “mother.”
Despite their friendly disposition, Audra senses there is something wrong with the nine people travelling together and living in two small tents, and who describe their leader, Jeff Halcomb, as an angel and their protector. At first, Audra is mistrustful and puts Deacon’s assertion that they are a family in quotation marks, thus showing her disapproval of their easy-made solutions. Deacon knows, however, which buttons to push and offers Audra a tempting mix of self-reliance and emotional independence from her parents in exchange for a dependence on a new form of kinship: “Whoever made up that crap about blood being thicker than water didn’t have a clue, and that’s were we come in. You can’t pick your blood family, but you can pick your spiritual one” (Chapter 3). The hooking stage of her recruitment happens relatively quickly and soon enough Audra realizes she can no longer ask them to leave.

Each person’s entry into this new family is marked by a quasi-baptismal moment, when Jeff gives each person a new name. Thus Georgia became Gypsy and Shelly was welcomed as Sunnie, and the very moment Jeff meets Audra, he begins calling her “Avis,” which means “bird, perfect for a girl who’s ready to learn how to fly” (Chapter 9). Her old name is abandoned on the spot. Audra, having impulsively invited Jeff’s commune to stay at her house, slowly adapts to her new friends, music, incense, even her new name. Somehow, this convention of renaming feels correct to Audra: “It was a way to purge the soul of its past life and welcome it into its newfound family. Somehow, ‘Avis’ felt right, like the name she should have had all along. As though, maybe, the fact that she had been born mislabeled has somehow contributed to a less-than-happy life” (Chapter 11). Only with time do the readers learn that Audra was accepted into Halcomb’s family as a replacement for Sandra, a woman who refused to carry Jeff’s baby and managed to escape the group.

Not surprisingly, despite the communal trappings, Jeff’s cult is organized in a hierarchical manner with him being at the top, his male followers right under him, and the
The gender hierarchy is especially palpable during mealtime, when the girls prepare food but are allowed to eat only after the boys have finished. Audra’s belongings are shared by all. Soon, the same happens to her body as the ideal of free love preached by Jeff boils down to women’s constant availability. Basically, all of them “dedicate[e] themselves to loving one person” – Jeff Halcomb (Chapter 20). Audra’s insecurities poison things between her and Maggie, but Maggie, a self-absorbed party-girl, does not seem particularly perturbed by that. Each time Audra feels threatened by Maggie’s vibrant presence in the commune, she reverts back to feeling inconsequential and devoid of anything to offer.

Audra knows that Jeff demands blind faith – it does not matter what he asks his followers to believe as long as they agree to follow him to the edge: “A red flag waved wildly in the back of her mind, assuring her that only the insane would agree to such allegiance…. Every aspect of such devotion went against what she knew about free will” (Chapter 11). And yet signing this contract seems better to Audra than “battling inner demons” on her own. Even though she does not feel comfortable relinquishing her free will, she finds solace in being led and in being given convictions, beliefs, substance: “Believing in the group was, in essence, believing in herself” (Chapter 11). She is ready to exchange her individuality and loneliness for “a new name and a constant companionship” (Chapter 11), which explains how within one week she goes from “Audra Snow to Avis Collective. Avis Togetherness. Avis One-For-All” (Chapter 20). Still, it quickly turns out that her sacrifices are not big enough. Jeff confronts her about her prescription drugs and makes her flush them, because they are paid for by her father, “the enemy,” and not Audra herself. Dominated by her father and emotionally crippled by her mother, Audra is an easy target for Jeff, who convinces her that her parents are, in fact, liars, skilled manipulators and brainwashers. They bribe her with occasional promises of “false love,” but at the end of the day her parents are simply bad people exploiting her PTSD and Stockholm Syndrome to keep her emotionally chained to them. Ironically, these are the
very same methods employed by Jeff. And as Sirkin adds, “[a]uthoritarian cults… offer the illusion of assisting an individual in the process of separation/individuation while in many cases fostering another dependence” (122). By joining Jeff’s commune, Audra replaces her authoritarian father and emotion-less home for an even worse tyrant who controls her every movement and abuses her emotionally and physically.

That Jeff is in fact an egotistical abuser rather than a benevolent spiritual leader is hinted at when Audra’s first sexual encounter with Jeff is described in terms suggestive of rape. Audra feels that Jeff is “finally rewarding her for her faith,” but she cannot help crying as he undoes his trousers and forces her onto the mattress: “She wept, and she told herself it was joy” (Chapter 20). Later on, when it becomes clear that Audra’s faith is not as strong as others’, Jeff manages to convince her that because of her weakness she might lose her a place in the Halcomb family. As punishment, she is subjected to a group rape when all the men in this so-called family converge on her: “Four pairs of hands groped at her flesh. Teeth dragged across her skins…. She sobbed as they pulled at her bra and underwear, tearing at them like aggressors, like animals, like nobody she’d have ever called her family at all” (Chapter 42). At this time, she is already pregnant and too scared to leave their commune. The breaking point, however, takes place a bit later during one of their burglaries, when Maggie, Jeff and the rest force Audra to kill the homeowner and then berate her for being weak and pathetic. After this, they never let her out of their sight up until the day of the ritual, when all eight of the Halcomb’s followers poison themselves with arsenic, while Jeff cuts Audra open and kills her newborn child.

Halcomb wants to sacrifice Audra’s child as an offering to unseen forces, which is witnessed by police officers who interrupt the ritual. Ahlborn does not provide any answers as to Jeff’s motivations. Over the course of the novel, it is suggested that he might be a Satanist or a psychic, or that he was chosen by some sort of a deity for an unknown purpose. Although
his “philosophy” is never explicitly described, it is suggested that sacrificing his followers and Audra’s baby was supposed to grant him eternal life. He tells Audra: “I’m on this earth to usher a select few to a perfect world—a world of kindness, happiness… of unconditional love. And you’re here to help me achieve that” (Chapter 42). The narrative strongly implies that his control over others was so profound and long-lasting that it felt almost supernatural.97

Jeff’s quasi-supernatural powers of persuasion can be explained through charisma and magnetism he learnt as a reviver pastor’s son. Nicknamed “the Child Prophet,” he was delivering fiery sermons by the age of eight or nine. However, as a teenager, Jeff started preaching his own divine nature, and things quickly spiraled out of control. He even tried to convince some of the younger children that he could resurrect them, which basically ended his budding career as a preacher. Nothing more is known about his childhood, though Lucas learns of rumors suggesting that the preacher’s household might have been abusive.

All the people who died for him are left behind in the afterlife as Jeff, now calling himself Lou Graham, writes a fictionalized version of the events espousing his spiritualist philosophy and then embarks on a new project of creating another family. On the last pages of the novel, readers meet “Lou” at a book signing, already busy spreading his charm and offering brochures for evening meetings where he preaches his philosophy to alienated teenage girls. The fact that a young shy blonde girl walks up to him for an autograph is a sign that the cycle of abuse will never end and he will never run out of damaged young women craving paternal protection and eternal love.

Clearly, the Halcomb’s Faithful, who serve Jeff, are not only his co-conspirators but also his unaware victims. They are not malevolent spirits hell-bent on revenge, but souls

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97 For instance, January, one of Halcomb’s surviving followers, committed suicide a couple of months before the anniversary of the massacre. She chose the same poison as the eight who died in 1983. Additionally, Jeff’s cell neighbor committed suicide after speaking with him briefly in 2010, while the guard who was on watch that day later killed his wife and then himself. Echo’s mother, Maggie, killed herself in the 1980s, and Echo herself after having helped Halcomb’s ghost capture Lucas and Jeanie, swallows arsenic and joins the ranks of Halcomb’s original followers.
trapped in the ember of time through an unfinished ritual. The ghosts, fooled by Halcomb, keep on believing they too will be resurrected through Jeanie’s blood, which of course does not happen. Their naïve belief in the pseudo-religious gibberish Jeff sold them in the early 1980s makes them his obedient servants, even in their afterlife. Arguably, they act as guardians protecting Jeff’s terrible past secret, but ironically they remain oblivious to the truth at the core of the failed 1983 ritual. Audra’s ghost, whom Jeanie sees on the first day, is probably the only one that wants to warn Jeanie, but Jeanie misinterprets Audra’s warning as a cry for help.

Audra is not the only apparition haunting Lucas and Jeanie. Yet, the ghosts manifest themselves differently to father and daughter. With Lucas, they mostly restrict themselves to rearranging the furniture or hanging photos upside down, which is also what they used to do while breaking into other people’s houses back in the day. Lucas hears their laughter and sometimes sees strange shapes in the dark corners of the house, but he doggedly rationalizes these occurrences or pretends they do not really mean anything. In contrast, Jeanie is almost immediately drawn into a much more substantial haunting, which serves a completely different purpose. The ghosts toy with Lucas and their antics prove mischievous enough to disorient him and goad him into staying at the Montlake Road house, but they reveal themselves to Jeanie in order to groom her for Jeff. Just like Audra before her, Jeanie passes through the six stages of cult recruitment, even though this time around this is a ghostly commune and her progress is much more rapid than Audra’s.

Jeanie sees her first ghost in the orchard – a wide-eyed boy, one of Halcomb’s original party. This incident also marks the first temporal disturbance – the boy she sees and the screams and laughter she hears are in fact a ghostly memory of an event from 1982, when Audra was chased through the orchard by Halcomb’s followers. Later on, Jeanie sees Audra’s reflection in her bathroom mirror instead of her own face. She witnesses Audra screaming
soundlessly as blood pools on her sweater: “Vee mimicked the girl’s expression, unable to fight against the thudding of her pulse. Was she imitating the girl because they were the same person? What if, by some trick, the girl took her place while Vee got stuck in the mirror somehow” (Chapter 10, original emphasis)? While her father insists on reason and logic, Jeanie leaps to the most naïve and dangerous explanation: the ghosts, that is “[t]he people living within the walls. Jeff’s brood,” simply need her help (Chapter 48).

Both Lucas and Jeanie are aware of the haunted house vibe at the Montlake Road residence, but they consider themselves above the mundane horror-movie tropes, which is why they decide not to leave. Lucas’s myopia is, to an extent, a conscious decision on his part, as he does not want to see the ghosts for what they represent (danger, death), just as he is still not ready to admit his own complicity in his family’s disintegration. Jeanie, on the other hand, always thought that she would be somehow immune to fear because of her fascination with the paranormal, the dark and the creepy.

With time, Jeanie comes to believe that maybe a spectral door has been opened in that house and it cannot be closed without her help, which is why she wants to investigate the mystery further. She even wonders if she could help the “stuck” girl (Audra’s ghost) cross to the other side, thus becoming a hero in her own ghost story. In a way, this makes Ahlborn’s novel a neo-Gothic text as well: Jeanie acts as a female proto-detective, unable and unwilling to leave the haunted house. Like typical Gothic heroines, she is drawn to the dark mysterious figure whom she wants to save (Halcomb), and she rebels against her well-meaning, but increasingly obsessive father, while her absent mother has gone on a business trip to Europe with her new lover.

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98 Interestingly, the reports by paranormal research teams that are included in the novel state that their findings are inconclusive and the house does not seem to be haunted.
She convinces herself that “[t]here was something broken here. Something that didn’t quite fit in with the rest of the world. It was as though there had been a shift that had never quite managed to reset itself…. Either Jeff’s family was stuck in a constant state of travel or the house had somehow been stripped of the boundary between here and nowhere” (Chapter 48). After having fallen in love with Halcomb, Jeanie forgets completely her older friends or her teenage crush – Tim. She no longer cares for either of her parents and wants to join a new family, “[a] bigger family that understood, that actually cared” (Chapter 48, original emphasis). Even the idea of dying does not scare her any longer, if it means being reunited with Jeff. And after Halcomb’s suicide in prison, when his ghost finally appears at the Montlake Road house, he tells Jeanie all she ever wanted to hear: promises of eternal love and happiness and of a place for her in a new and superior family: “[Your parents] don’t deserve you, Vivi. We’ll run away together, just you and me and my friends. You’ll have a new family, and we’ll be happy” (Chapter 54, original emphasis). Still, a part of Jeanie is able to resist. Deep down she knows that running away from her parents would leave them broken and would leave her an empty shell. As a result, she can finally see through the youthful veneer of Halcomb’s ghost and discern someone actually much older than his father: “an old man’s hard stare. Angry, impatient, a look that told her she was thinking too much, hesitating for far too long” (Chapter 54). She realizes too late that all Jeff ever wanted from her was her life to finish the ritual and gain a new life.

Somewhat similarly to Melanie Tem’s Prodigal, Alhborn’s Within These Walls delves into a slow disintegration of family life, which is facilitated by charismatic, albeit highly dangerous, outsiders. In contrast to Tem’s novel, however, the kernels of teenage angst and unhappiness are sown by the parents themselves. In both Audra’s and Jeanie’s cases, parental failure to communicate opened the door to Halcomb’s machinations. It is actually said that Jeff’s smile won over all the women in his life, because all of them wanted to be protected by
him. His victims were “runaways,” “disenchanted youth” and “[u]nappreciated victims of parents that not only misunderstood their children but also didn’t seem to care” (Chapter 24).

On a different level, Ahlborn’s novel reveals the risks of following a traditional story model. Lucas either rationalizes or ignores the ghostly visits, because he refuses to think of ghosts in terms of a violent disruption they actually bring. Meanwhile, Jeanie is not able to see the danger because she clings to the idea of ghosts as figures demanding justice and in need of human intervention. Gordon describes haunting as a moment in which “abusive systems of power make themselves known,” especially when it comes to matters supposedly finished and safely sequestered in the past (xvi). The abuse to which Audra is subjected in Halcomb’s sect, which was after all supposed to be her new family, reverberates through the years in the Montlake Road house, but its new inhabitants, Jeanie and Lucas, refuse to acknowledge Audra’s suffering. It is telling that it is the nameless narrator who provides Audra’s story for the readers rather than Lucas himself. Lucas sees Audra as just another name on a long list of Jeffrey’s victims and even though he decides to move to what was once Audra’s home, he sees it, first and foremost, as Halcomb’s place just as he sees the story he is writing as the story of Halcomb, not his victims.

Haunting in Ahlborn’s novel is mistaken for a tool to uncover and rectify the past, as this is the meaning that is most often accorded to ghosts in Western popular imagery. This explains why Jeanie cannot read Audra’s message any other way than as a cry for help and an invitation to discover more about Jeff’s cult. Similarly, Lucas decides to stay at the Montlake Road house in order to unravel Halcomb’s mystery and, if necessary, wrangle it from the ghosts of the past. But the ghosts are unwilling to part with the knowledge, and they act as agents of misdirection and as cult recruiters. The only truly useful knowledge could be accessed through Audra’s story, but hers is a tale presented to readers rather than to protagonists, who remain reluctant and/or unable to uncover it for themselves. As Gordon
rightly points out, heightened visibility of a previously marginalized issue does not necessarily translate itself into an acquisition of new knowledge (114), which for Ahlborn’s characters means that revealing what really happened three decades earlier does not automatically give them access to a better understanding of the world they live in. The knowledge of past abuse and horrific deeds does not prevent the horror from recurring, nor does it protect the Grahams from their (self-)destruction.

Repetition Compulsion and Separation Anxiety

The title of Audrey Niffenegger’s *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) is a nod towards William Blake’s “The Tyger” as well as a homophonic pun on the words “cemetery” and “symmetry.” One could argue that the latter – the questions of symmetry and reflection as well of death and haunting – are, in fact, the main driving forces of the novel. Niffeneger’s ghost story could be read as a contemporary Gothic tale, whose pages are densely populated by the ghosts of the past (both literal and figurative), all of which point to family secrets, familial betrayals, obsession with death and the unfinished work of mourning, which prevents both the living and the dead from moving onward. Death, inheritance and haunting are also imbricated in the processes of subjectification, separation and growing up, which the novel explores at length through the relationship between two twins – Valentina and Julia – as well their mother and their mother’s twin sister – Eddie and Elspeth. Ultimately, it is also a novel concerned with the questions of in/visibility, cover-up and disclosure, property and propriety that the haunting brings into the spotlight. Ghosts inform us about a concealment, which needs to be undone. In this reading, haunting is not necessarily equated with the return of the repressed, but rather forms a key to a secret which is concealed by other, often external, forces. In Niffeneger’s story the ghost of Elspeth is not interested in rectifying a past wrong or
bringing about a familial reconciliation. Rather, her absence-as-presence subtly hints at secrets constructed by her and her sister years ago, secrets whose half-hearted disclosure does not really change anything, secrets which paradoxically are not particularly important for anyone else. If anything, Elspeth’s reasons for haunting her nieces are selfish and all too human.

A crude summary of the plot is essential, as the story proceeds to unveil an intricately woven web of interpersonal connections and presents a slow unraveling of different familial relationships. The story introduces middle-aged twin sisters, Elspeth and Edie. The former is dying from leukemia in London, while the latter is raising her twin daughters: Julia and Valentina, in the suburbs of Chicago. Something happened between the older twins two decades earlier: Edie left London with Elspeth’s fiancé, Jack, while Elspeth stayed behind. The two sisters never met again, and began communicating via letters only when Elspeth was diagnosed with cancer. Upon Elspeth’s death, Edie’s twin daughters learn they are now the sole owners of Elspeth’s London flat, which overlooks a famous private Victorian cemetery, Highgate. Elspeth’s last will, however, stipulates one condition: the flat and her fortune will be fully theirs only if they agree to spend one full year living in the said flat, but their parents, Edie and Jack, are banned from ever entering it. Once the twins turn twenty-one, they come to London and slowly realize that Elspeth’s ghost is actually living with them in their new flat. Elspeth’s lover, Robert, a tour guide working on the history of Highgate Cemetery, lives in the same building and soon becomes torn between his mournful love for Elspeth and his budding love for Valentina. Valentina, the weaker twin, wants to separate from Julia and concocts an outrageous plan with Elspeth’s ghost – Elspeth will remove Valentina’s soul from her body so that Julia will think her twin has died and she will finally leave her be, and then Elspeth will help Valentina’s soul get back into her body. The plan fails miserably, as Valentina’s soul is too weak to reenter her own body. Elspeth, however, being a strong ghost,
is able to enter Valentina’s body. Elspeth, now inhabiting Valentina’s body, gets pregnant with Robert and leaves London for Sussex. Julia is left with Valentina’s ghost in their London flat. When Valentina grows stronger, she finally leaves the flat (with Julia’s help) and joins the ranks of London ghosts in Highgate Cemetery, thus finally achieving long-awaited freedom.

The family secret, the rift that torn Edie and Elspeth apart is also revealed by the end of the novel. Back in 1983, Jack was Elspeth’s fiancé, but Elspeth was so unsure of herself that she began impersonating Edie to test Jack’s resolve. Jack, as it turns out, was aware of this ruse, but went along with it. In the end, the real Edie and Jack got drunk and made love one night. Because the real Edie got pregnant, she and Elspeth decided to switch places. Jack then left for America with his new fiancée, the real Edie, who gave birth to twin girls, Julia and Valentina. Edie then went to the UK where she and Elspeth switched places. The real Elspeth, now called Edie, returned to the US with her sister’s daughters and to the man she loved, while the real Edie, now calling herself Elspeth, stayed in London for good. The unbelievably convoluted secret is revealed in the letter Elspeth left to Robert and later in a conversation between Jack and Robert. It turns out Jack knew about the switch from the start, but because he did not remember sleeping with the real Edie, he always assumed that he was not Julia’s and Valentina’s biological father, and that he and the real Elspeth were simply raising the real Edie’s children. The disclosure of the secret is purposefully anti-climactic and as such underscores an essential clash between dramatic Gothic tropes (haunting, spiritual possession, family secrets) and the actual family life with its mundane aspects.

Because the novel deals with special psycho-emotional bonds between twins, themes of identity formation, separation and power struggle come to the fore. Parts of the main plot as well as some of the subplots investigate certain aspects of repetition and mirroring as coping mechanisms in the wake of a loss and/or death of a loved one. Elspeth’s ghost becomes a
catalyst, which effectively destabilizes the already metastable equilibrium of Julia and Valentina’s relationship. She is a ghost that demands attention and visibility and because she has her own agenda, she cannot be treated as a wholly benevolent or neutral spirit.

Interestingly, Julia and Valentina are not identical twins like their mother and aunt, but mirror twins. And it is Valentina who mirrors her sister, being left-handed and having all her internal organs reversed. Since Valentina is also the weaker twin, both physically and emotionally, Julia feels it is her duty to take care of her. They are shown as “essentially one creature, whole but containing contradictions” (42) and they are compared to conjoined rather than regular twins and described as “a two-headed girl” (44). They do everything together: eat, sleep, watch television. Their childlike appearance is stressed several times in the book. They look like malnourished prepubescent children, thin and almond-faced. The effect is strengthened by their identical clothing, which is something usually associated with younger twins, not adult ones. Their youngish looks, coupled with their matching clothes, hint strongly at their emotional and psychological immaturity and, perhaps, even inability to grow into separate individuals with their own sets of passions, longings, habits, even fashion sense.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that this is not really a partnership and Julia is the one who calls the shots. Valentina, nicknamed “Mouse” by her six-minute-older sister, follows Julia sheepishly and, though miserable, agrees to all of Julia’s proposals. Julia is the one who keeps dropping out of schools and who wants to go to London. Although initially afraid of moving across the Atlantic, Valentina starts thinking about London as an opportunity – London with its reverse traffic and a different English might be just what Valentina needs, a place where she could finally do what she wanted, and where no-one (meaning Julia) would boss her around.

Valentina is a bundle of contradictions. She wants to be independent from her sister and to roam the world, but she is also terrified of new things, new places and strangers, and
prefers to stay in rather than venture out. She daydreams about leaving Julia, but is unable to
do so on her own. It is only after she falls in love with Robert that she begins slowly
extricating herself from her twin’s tight embrace. Paradoxically, Julia, the more assertive and
stronger twin, is actually deadly afraid of rejection, especially a rejection coming from
Valentina. More than that, she is intensely jealous of Valentina, whose frailty makes her more
attractive, especially to men. Julia is also the restless twin, the one who wants to go exploring
everything and cannot keep still, which is partly the reason why she keeps leaving schools.
Yet, at the same time, she allows Valentina to slow her down, because she is not prepared to
let her twin sister go. It is only after Valentina dies and her ghost leaves their flat that Julia is
ready to get a dog, start a relationship with a neighbor’s son, and satisfy her thirst for
knowledge and new things.

The intense closeness of the two twins is attested by the fact that they are both afraid of
losing their virginity, as this is one thing they cannot do together. One would have to precede
the other and this would throw their delicate symmetry out of balance. Moreover, to
Valentina, most boys seem “unfinished, dull, absurd” (152), and it is the relationship with the
other twin that gives them both the most satisfaction, love, and intimacy. Their relationship
requires “absolute fidelity” (153), which partly explains why Valentina seems to be “a veteran
of a long marriage who has forgotten how to flirt” (152). Their semi-incestuous relation is
discussed by other characters as well: “You’re like an old married couple, you and Valentina.
You have everything divvied up, all the talents and the chores” (225). Consequently, the
twins’ infatuation with their mirror reflections, their primary narcissism brings to mind
Lacanian mirror stage. On a more literal level, the novel plays up the mirror theme in several
scenes.99

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99 For instance, when Julia and Valentina share a lipstick, they apply it without mirror and then they
simply look at each other and wipe any misplaced smear on each other’s faces.
From a psychoanalytic angle, the two girls are locked in the mirror stage, during which the processes of identification and misrecognition take place simultaneously. The infant at this stage begins to see that she is a separate being from her mother (hence, the identification), but she also assumes that the mirror reflection is somehow more complete, more able, more perfect than she actually feels about herself and her abilities (hence, the misrecognition). Julia and Valentina similarly identify themselves through their respective reflections, but they also misrecognize themselves as bound to their reflections, that is to each other. Neither of them can develop further and finally finish the process of subjectification, as they continue acting as two sides of the same personality assigned to two different bodies. Valentina feels she looks more like Julia than herself, which also proves that she perceives herself as a mere mirror image of Julia and not a real individual. Interestingly, narcissism is always linked to aggression in psychoanalytic theory. And violence Julia and Valenta’s relationship. At one point, Valentina gives Julia a black eye, and the fact that the incident is not explained in any way speaks volumes about the routine nature of such violent eruptions. Valentina may want to smash the mirror, but she cannot do that without hurting Julia and/or herself.

During one of her outbursts, Valentina stresses her yearning for separation and her longing for the “I”: “You [Julia] can do whatever you want. I’ll go to school, I’ll work, or whatever, I don’t even care. I just want to do something, have a life, grow up” (345, original emphasis). In a different scene, when they are discussing their future(s), Valentina says “I want to go to school. I want to have a boyfriend. I want to get married and have kids. I want to be a designer. I want to live in my own flat by myself, I want to eat a whole sandwich by myself” (363, original emphasis). This conversation also reveals Julia’s fear of abandonment, as she desperately tries to convince Valentina that their mother and aunt’s separation was the biggest mistake of their life, and Edie and Elspeth were actually meant to stay together, just like she and her sister are meant to stay together forever. Still, Valentina gets more and more
adamant about wanting her own life, her own secrets and privacy, as she is “sick of being half a person” (264).

The twins’ neighbor, Martin, tells them that “Elspeth thought that there was a limit to how far the twin relationship should go, in terms of each person giving up their own individuality. She felt that she and your mother had exceeded that boundary” (161). The same risky scenario is played out between Valentina and Julia, who are unable to separate and to mature on their own. Even Valentina’s plan to fake her own death in order to become free strongly suggests that she is incapable of facing adulthood. She comes up with the most outrageous and most complex plan because it is the only scheme in which she would not have to confront her sister and tell her directly that she is leaving. The childishness and sheer absurdity of the plan is, however, never questioned by Elspeth’s ghost, who is afraid Valentina may commit suicide, if she is not freed soon from her sister’s influence. Still, it is also possible to read Elspeth’s involvement in the plan as proof that she sees Valentina’s fake-death as an opportunity to advance her own selfish needs of re-living her life. Even though Robert suggests a completely reasonable plan for separation (that is, dividing Elspeth’s assets between the twins by the end of the year), Valentina is convinced that Julia’s dictatorial power over her will not dissipate so easily, which is why she comes up with a decidedly more theatrical gesture.

The unraveling of the twins’ bond is also directly linked to Robert. As Valentina’s relationship with him progresses, Julia reacts with anger and resentment. In the end, Julia finds another person to take care of – Martin – an upstairs neighbor suffering from acute OCD. She admits to Martin that she has never been in love, at least not “[w]ith a boy” (337). These three small words suggest that the love of her life has always been her sister, Valentina, and without her Julia is lost. Thanks to her talks with Martin, Julia realizes that what he feels for his wife she feels for her sister. Her love for Valentina is “insane, broken, involuntary”
(338), just like romantic love. In turn, Valentina’s burgeoning love for Robert arouses in her desire to be her own person, to go back to school, to prepare a fashion portfolio. In the beginning, Valentina rebels in small ways, for instance, by talking back to Julia. Then one day she leaves Julia stranded on the Tube. And soon she begins wearing different clothes – dark and velvety in contrast to Julia’s preferred light colors. Still, many of Valentina’s attempts to disengage from her sister are thwarted by her own body, too weak to withstand the pressure of everyday hustle and bustle, the agitation, the uncanniness of crowds and strangers. In the end, Valentina’s ailing body is a burden she relinquishes without much sorrow. Somewhat strangely, the novel paints her afterlife as a Highgate Cemetery ghost as the actual beginning of Valentina’s real life. Finally freed from her body’s restrictions, Valentina can go anywhere and do anything she wants.

But the center stage in Niffenegger’s tale is reserved for Elspeth, whose death and transformation into a spirit open the novel. Robert is the first one to feel her presence in her old flat. Things move around, the cold currents appear out of thin air, imperceptible movements are caught in the shadows. Yet, because Elspeth begins her afterlife as a very feeble spirit, Robert simply assumes that grief is driving him mad. The novel charts Elspeth’s slow progress as a ghost, from a limbless, shapeless cloud of energy invisible to all but a fully formed ghost visible to Valentina, capable of moving objects, switching on lamps, guiding people’s hands in automatic writing séances. Slowly, she gains substance for herself. Yet, she cannot see her reflection in the mirrors, which bothers her a lot.100

The moment all three – Robert, Valentina and Julia – become aware of Elspeth’s ghost, they begin talking with her. Robert is probably the most confused of the three. He senses Elspeth’s disapproval of his relationship with Valentina, though he recalls her suggestion that she hoped the twins would act as her substitute for him. In the end, Elspeth agrees that Robert

100 It could be argued that Elspeth’s longing for her reflection is masking her actual longing for Edie. Her flat is full of mirrors which multiply her reflection so that she was always surrounded by her mirror self – a stand-in for the sister.
needs to move on. Yet, Valentina becomes obsessed with Elspeth and spends long hours talking with her. She loses weight and gets even more sickly, while Elspeth gains substance and visibility. One could also argue that Elspeth is not only living vicariously through the twins, but she is also feeding off them, especially Valentina who is clearly losing strength and vitality.

Elspeth cannot leave the apartment and can only feed off the twins, which is why she sees the twins’ presence as alleviating her afterlife boredom (110). In that she uses them quite instrumentally and starts living again through their shared life. In a letter to her nieces, which she sent shortly before dying, Elspeth admits that death makes her feel as if she was being erased. This might explain why she bequeaths her flat and money to the two girls – she wants them to ensure a continuation of herself. When Elspeth’s ghost realizes she will be sharing her old flat with her Julia and Valentina, her biological daughters, she is not really interested in mothering them; instead she prefers to relive her past relationship with Edie through the younger twins. She feels possessive towards them but her feelings are unclear: “She felt something like love for these girls, these strangers” (92, my emphasis). On the other hand, the twins are more than happy to make “their life out of Elspeth’s” (211) rather than create something of their own. For instance, they wear Elspeth’s clothing and shoes. Valentina falls for Elspeth’s lover, Robert. They spend their days watching television, reading Elspeth’s books, window-shopping. They seem to be frozen in time just like Elspeth, as a ghost, is stuck in the apartment.

Elspeth’s ghost violates lines of property and propriety, as she is a dispossessed owner of her own apartment, a visitor locked within its walls and a spectral presence that seems out of place in the world of the living. Julia and Valentina, too, have to first spend a year in Elspeth’s apartment in order to fully inherit it, which means that during their stay they are at once would-be-owners, unwelcome trespassers and valued guests in Elspeth’s eyes. This
perhaps should come as no surprise, as ghosts bring “a charged strangeness into the place or sphere [they are] haunting,” thus disturbing notions of inheritance, property and propriety (Gordon 64-65). The haunting acts then as a circuit-breaker for the progress of family inheritance, which is first disrupted and then diverted onto a different line. In the end, Elspeth’s spirit takes over Valentina’s body and uses it as an incubator for a child that Elspeth did not have the chance to raise two decades before.

Interestingly, several characters suggest that Elspeth was not a very nurturing person. Robert flatly states that she may have been many things, but “nice” was never one of them and the twins should be wary of Elspeth’s scheming. Especially since having turned into a ghost, she seems to have lost empathy, to Robert’s mind. Arguably, Elspeth’s potential for becoming a nurturing and giving woman was relocated to Edie when the two decided that Edie would mother Julia and Valentina. Elspeth (the real Edie) gave birth to them, but she relinquished her right of being their mother (or anyone else’s mother in the following two decades). It seems that the older twins, similarly to the younger ones, did not have enough qualities and character traits between themselves. If one became a mother, the other had to remain childless. And since Elspeth made the ultimate sacrifice (that is, gave up both her daughters and her real name), as a ghost she may be actually looking for a way to recover the life she might have had.

Elspeth sees in Valentina a reflection of the same abandon with which she was able to inflict pain on others. Initially horrified at Valentina’s fake-death plan, Elspeth’s heart “hardens” as Valentina and Robert continue their relationship. Robert, aware of being manipulated by Elspeth, has a terrifying, grotesque dream in which his sub-consciousness paints Elspeth as a disgusting monster. The novel never explains whether Elspeth is truly monstrous or merely opportunistic. During Valentina’s failed resurrection, Elspeth is said to have made a decision. But whether she decides not to help Valentina get back into her body or
rather she decides to let Valentina make her own mind remains uncertain. What is evident is that it is Elspeth who wakes up in Valentina’s body. The following day she experiences a combination of “triumph and remorse” (444), while Robert lets the horror of what they had done sink in. Although Elspeth claims Valentina’s ghost was simply too weak to reinhabit her body, Robert is not entirely convinced by her explanation. When they leave London for Sussex, he can neither get used to country living nor to Elspeth inhabiting Valentina’s body. After their baby is born, he gets engrossed in writing his doctoral dissertation. The very moment he finishes his work, he leaves Elspeth and goes back to London.

It seems that Valentina’s perpetual closeness to death (because of her asthma and heart disease) makes her more attuned to hauntings of all types, which is why she becomes the locus of ghostly attention. In the first months, Robert becomes Elspeth’s ghostly counterpart outside the flat: he spies on the twins and haunts their journeys around London. He is fascinated by them and afraid of their “twinness,” their togetherness. Just like Elspeth follows them around their flat, he follows them around the city. It is not until he is forced to make their acquaintance (when they meet by chance at the cemetery) that he stops stalking them. Interestingly, being haunted is an intimacy issue for Valentina. Elspeth, in her desperate attempt to be noticed, invades the twins’ intimacy over and over again, though it is only Valentina who can sense her. Robert, following the girls around, is clearly also encroaching on their privacy. Thus the ghostly encounters signal a breach in intimacy and a blurring of what is private and what is public.

The question of what should remain private and what has to be revealed marks a strong theme in Niffeneger’s novel. Ultimately, nothing suggests that the twins have been told that Elspeth was their biological mother as this matter is discussed only by Jack and Robert.101 Jack and Edie are reconciled in an anti-climactic scene on a plane on their way back to the

101 Conversely, it is not certain how much Valentina’s ghost has revealed to Julia about the fake-death scheme.
States. It is suggested that the real Elspeth (today’s Edie), the more insecure and weaker of the two twins, needed to adopt her sister’s persona to secure her fiancé’s love. She believed his love for an Edie would have been stronger than for an Elspeth.

Before the twins went to London, Jack was afraid he would lose his marriage, as he felt that the burden of this unmentionable secret would only grow heavier once the twins had moved out. All his life he felt “grateful to Edie and Elspeth for having arranged things so that Julia and Valentina could grow up in this ugly, comfortable house, so he could be Dad” (89). Thus he has always been well-aware of a certain artificiality of his family. Interestingly, in Jack’s eyes, he was just a pawn and the sole responsibility for creating their family belonged to Edie and Elspeth.\textsuperscript{102} Still all three remember the events leading to the twins’ break-up a bit differently. For instance, Elspeth is certain that Edie found life with Jack disappointing and she must have longed for London sitting in her boring American suburb. However, when Edie is the focalizer, she thinks of Jack as her “bomb shelter,” someone who was always there for her without the intrusiveness and total control she associated with Elspeth. When Elspeth’s ghost sees Edie in her flat right after Valentina’s death, she notices a hardness in Edie and immediately assumes that Jack did not take good care of her sister, at least not the way she would have done. Still, the above-mentioned reconciliation on the plane suggests that it was Edie, not Jack, who was emotionally wrecked by the secret she was carrying.

In the end the only person who actually learns the secret is Robert, as Jack was aware of it from the start. But Robert, not being a member of the family, is not really affected by this revelation. It could be argued that the two people who would be affected the most – Julia and Valentina – are kept out of the loop. Nothing really changes for them. Still, their attraction to the past might actually signal their subconscious desire to unearth the family secret. This would fit Abraham and Torok’s theory of transgenerational trauma, which is passed through

\textsuperscript{102} Similarly, when Elspeth gives birth (in Valentina’s body) and Robert leaves her, she is not surprised. Almost as if she does not really need him in her life.
omissions and gaps, and by what is pronouneedly not being said or discussed. They are, of course, aware of the big falling out between their mother and their aunt, but ultimately they do not learn anything, and the phantom that protects the secret from being revealed, to use Abraham and Torok’s terminology again, is not really banished from their psyche. Niffeneger’s story implies then that certain taboo secrets are best kept hidden or, put differently, they are too intimate to be understood by others. Jack accepts the status quo, but he does not understand the rationale behind it. Only Elspeth and Edie know why they did what they did, and they do not share that with anyone.

Niffeneger’s Her Fearful Symmetry is at its core a story of people caught between a repetition compulsion and a desire for separation. The two pairs of twins struggle with their internal lack of sufficient differentiation, toxic codependency, jealousy and the ensuing immaturity. In their flawed efforts to separate they get entangled in a never-ending cycle of mirroring, doubling and repeating (for instance, Valentina wearing Elspeth’s clothes for dates with Robert, Elspeth using her own daughter’s body to become pregnant again, the real Elspeth pretending to be Edie for two decades, etc.). At the end of the day, it is only death (or fake-death) that can successfully separate either twins. In her last letter to Edie, Elspeth announces that she is not including Edie in her will because she got to live her (Elspeth’s) life (7), which should be enough. Seen from this perspective, Elspeth’s decision to have a baby with Robert and move to the countryside (a dream she has always cherished) is her way of finally having a life she wanted for herself. Since Edie “stole” Elspeth’s life and her identity, and Elspeth was forced to live under false pretences, their separation was neither successful nor complete. Only at the end of the novel is Elspeth finally free. Ironically, it is Elspeth who successfully carries out Valentina’s plan – she has fooled her twin into thinking she died so that she could move away and start again. Edie goes back to Chicago with Jack, while Elspeth
is relishing motherhood and being her own person, finally. Similarly, Julia after letting go of Valentina’s ghost is also ready to start her own life.

**Conclusion**

The figure of the ghost remains ambiguous and unruly, and as a conceptual metaphor it points to the epistemological instability of perception, (over)reliance on vision and formation of knowledge as it “specifically invokes what is placed outside [knowledge], excluded from perception and, consequently, from both the archive as the depository of the sanctioned, acknowledged past and politics as the (re)imagined present and future” (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader* 9). The ghost brings to mind “connotations of invisibility and fluctuations in visibility” (66) and can function “as an image for liminality and border-crossing” (Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny* 66). And because the ghost is associated with the return of the dead and repetition, it may also bring to mind the concepts of an uncanny double or a doppelganger.

The four novels analyzed above prove the malleability and flexibility of the conceptual work that the figure of the ghost can perform in cultural texts. All the ghosts in question stand for a violent disruption of temporal linearity, as even though they come from the past their task is oriented towards the future and/or the present. Interestingly, most of the ghostly visits described by the four writers do not neatly subscribe to the restorative model of ghost stories. These spectral presences have their own agenda and in that frustrate traditional hierarchies in which the ghosts exist only in relation to the living.

What is more, in most ghost narratives the intrusion and disruption associated with the spectral is what impacts directly on the protagonists’ family life. In the works selected for this chapter, family trouble comes to the forefront, and familial relationships bear the brunt of
unwelcome disturbances. In contrast to previous three chapters which looked closely at alternative kinship formations and queer families, this chapter examined works that problematize first and foremost traditional heterosexual family in its various late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century iterations: stereotypical white yuppies who put personal development and career over procreation, middle-class African-American family buckling under a racist threat, a disintegrating nuclear family with a volatile pre-teen daughter, and a family weighed down by intricate interdependence of twin sisters. In all these cases, ghosts are used to probe the limits of a Gothicized family drama in its most basic and conventional understanding – a well-off, urban, heterosexual family. That is not to say that there are no ghost stories with queer characters or queer families. Shirley Jackson’s classic *Haunting of Hill House* (1959) as well as more recent publications, such as Molleen Zanger’s *Gardenias Where There Are None* (1994) and Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (1999) attest to the popularity of haunting, possession and supernatural visitation as potent vehicles for the discussion of non-normative desires, passing and cultural or social ghosting, which are discussed at length in Castle’s, Betz’s and Palmer’s publications.  

Ghosts in these novels function in different ways: as helpers, messengers, doubles, enemies and liars. As already mentioned, the ghosts can appear as uncanny doubles that bring improper desires and abjected materiality out of the unconscious. Gran’s *Come Closer* is a very effective example of using the evil doppelganger figure as a tool of unmasking the price paid for repressing one’s corporeal desires and choosing security and stability over freedom. In addition, Naamah’s origin story clearly suggests that it is especially the females who are subjected to the scrutiny and restrictions concerning their bodies and their physical needs. Being haunted by Naamah becomes a “transformative recognition” (Gordon 108) for

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Amanda, who is forced to confront the frailty of the identity and the lifestyle she chose for herself.

The fascination with doubles appears also in Audrey Niffenegger’s *Her Fearful Symmetry*, albeit in a slightly different manner, as Niffenegger’s two pairs of twins exemplify primarily the problematic nature of familial relationship that has become too close, too intimate. All the twins suffer from the inability to let go of the other and to complete the subjectification process, which is necessary to begin a separate independent life. It is Elspeth’s ghost and her actions that further problematize the pronounced lack of differentiation and reflective nature of the twins’ intense relationship. In the end, Elspeth had to die and then be reborn in Valentina’s body in order to finally separate emotionally from her sister. Similarly, Valentina was able to live on her own only as a ghost. What is interesting about Niffenegger’s story is that the narration does not present Elspeth’s ghost as a “signifier of absolute alterity” (Peeren 107), which somehow shatters the order of life. If anything, Elspeth’s absence-as-presence intensifies the already existing familial rift and brings into focus the tenuousness of Julia and Valentina’s bond. Peeren notes that both Freudian uncanny and Derridean specter are limited in that they “explicitly oppose the ghost to order and routine as unexpected, surprising figure of disturbance, the return of the repressed, the absolute alterity” (113). However, Elspeth’s ghost is quickly and seamlessly accepted into the world of the living and, in addition, it becomes fully domesticated as it re-enters this reality by taking over Valentina’s dead body.

The lack of communication and fragility of relationships are also the subject of Ania Ahlborn’s *Within These Walls*. Her protagonists fall prey to their own fantasmatic conceptions of what family life should be like. Audra, Lucas and Jeanie die because they are trapped in their own private visions of perfect families and because they refuse to see people (and ghosts) around them for what they really are. Consequently, the ghosts that populate
Alhborn’s novel bring about an acute epistemological crisis, which the characters refuse to acknowledge. The novel could also be read in terms of a ghostly conflict between Audra and Jeff, as they vie for the primacy of narrative focus. Audra’s tragic story haunts the readers, but not the characters, who are much more interested in the ever-elusive cult leader, Jeff Halcomb, and his story, which, ironically, no-one gets in the end. Halcomb’s malicious presence haunts the characters and warps their cognitive abilities to such an extent that they are no longer able to leave the house of their own volition – a process which mirrors Audra’s recruitment into Halcomb’s cult decades earlier.

The refusal to accept the painful truth reappears in Tananarive Due’s The Between, but in Hilton’s case the truth concerns the reality itself rather than family life as such. In a way, The Between is the most conservative novel of the four as it presents a traditional domestic setting, which Hilton wants to protect at all costs, even if it means losing his sanity and his life. What differentiates Due’s novel from the other three is the fact that the Western division into the world of the living and the world of the dead is thrown into disarray. Hilton, as half-human and half-spirit, moves between different realities and it is his own ghostliness that actually disrupts his family life more than the actual racist threats they are exposed to. And in a way, as Rosemary Jackson writes, this is what ghosts do – they “[d]isrupt the crucial defining line which separates ‘real’ life from the ‘unreality’ of death, subverting those discrete units by which unitary meaning or ‘reality’ is constituted” (69). Yet, Due goes a step further by turning her protagonist both into a ghostly figure and a man haunted by ghosts, a family man who is unable to live with his family and an ogbanje/abiku yearning to return to death.
Conclusions

Botting argues that there is nothing natural about horror, and one has to learn how to experience and recognize horror. In his reading, horror marks a violent rejection of that which is perceived as natural: “Horror thus originates in a cultural differentiation of human from animal, a process in which taboos are created in order to police the limits that preserve a definition of humanity. Horror is thus the reversal, the expulsion of the nature” (Botting, *Limits of Horror* 175). Horror is thus constructed as a sudden disruption of normative dichotomies around which the very concept of humanity is structured: human/animal, rational/irrational, and natural/artificial. That which is deemed natural is socially constructed and time-specific, and, as has been proven by feminist criticism, the burden of the natural has been historically assigned to women in Western arts and philosophy. Grosz adds that “the female body has been constructed… as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment – not cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order” (*Volatile Bodies* 203). Grosz’s description, though deeply resonating, is quite disturbing in that it moves swiftly between two affective attachments entwined in Western attitude towards the female body, femininity and womanhood. On the one hand, the woman is a monstrous aberration, a seepage that threatens the rational, self-enclosed (male) subject with contamination. On the other hand, however, she is also an irresistible object of inquiry and a truly fascinating spectacle to behold.

Consequently, the recognition of horror is linked to the recognition of female corporeality and women’s reproductive role as well as women’s symbolic association with the intensely private (and privatized) space of a bourgeois family home. And in contemporary horror fiction by women writers, it is often this familial space (with its conventional
associations with intimacy, maternal body and safety) that turns into an uncanny (even hostile) realm through an external or internal disturbance. This, I hope, explains why the discussion of a female or feminized body, reproductive rights, romantic love, parenthood, and alternative kinship structures has been accorded such a prominent place on preceding pages.

Of course, the distinction between a human being and an animal, to which Botting alludes above, should not be read exclusively in terms of sexual difference. Bodies which are haunted, violated, harmed, transformed, celebrated and embraced in the sixteen novels discussed in this dissertation are also already naturalized and racialized via the difference they embody. As normative separations which govern everyday life are violently disrupted through particular horror and Gothic tropes and devices, interconnected systems of socio-cultural and historical oppression as well as unequal allocation of agency are laid bare within the family units in all the analyzed novels. And because the Gothic is invested in upsetting the “boundaries regulating personal and social space,” Gothic fictions are also well-suited to exploring the internal/external dichotomy also in terms of economic conditions and social class relations (Botting, Limits of Horror 59). Since homeownership and middle-class financial security have become so much more precarious under late capitalism and neoliberal economy, the concepts of family home, nuclear family and traditional kinship arrangements are losing their connotations with safety and privacy.

The uncanny space of a haunted house underscores the continuing influence of the past, family secrets and transgenerational trauma, which collectively threaten the inner workings of a family in haunted house narratives. What is more, because the uncanny hinges on an incomplete repression and the familiar/unfamiliar dyad, it also reveals the ambivalent nature of day-to-day relationships between family members and the difficulty in dealing with grief and in escaping toxic relationships – themes which feature prominently in all four novels.
analyzed in the first chapter: Holder’s *Dead in the Water*, Koja’s *The Cipher*, Brite’s *Drawing Blood* and Kiernan’s *The Red Tree*.

The application of the grotesque aesthetics in Dunn’s *Geek Love*, Kiernan’s *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir*, Massie’s *Sineater* and Murrey’s *The Inquisitor* brings into focus the highly ambivalent position accorded to the female body and female corporeality in horror production. In traditional horror fictions, it is often a female (or feminized) body which is the locus of horrific events (usually as the source of the monstrous or its direct casualty). All four works analyzed in the second chapter, however, challenge the conventional “monstrous feminine” trope and, instead, examine how women’s symbolic association with nature, their radical openness and vulnerability, lack of uniformity, and transformative potential can be used to discuss reproductive rights and the limits of reproduction, exclusive matrilineality and mother-daughter relationships, unruly female corporeality and sexuality, and the female grotesque which exceeds normative understanding of gender and sex.

In a way, the third chapter continues many of the themes discussed in the first two chapters, especially when it comes to reproduction and alternative kinship formations. Vampires which inhabit the pages of Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*, Brite’s *Lost Souls*, Engstrom’s *Black Ambrosia* and Tem’s *Prodigal* are all linked by their clear-cut association with the abject – death and corpses, blood and exchange of bodily fluids, and non-sexual reproduction. Even though all four authors approach the question of abjection somewhat differently, only Gomez suggests that the process of abjection, which rests on the repudiation of the maternal, can be stopped or even reversed. In the remaining three novels, abjection is utilized to comment on the complexity of alternative family units and the overall messiness of familial reproduction, which even in its most radical version (that is, non-sexual) remains hopelessly enmeshed with sexuality.
One could argue that the uncanny, the grotesque and the abject are not mutually exclusive concepts, which, I think, is evident in the way certain themes and interpretations overlap in the first three chapters. The fourth and final critical tool, the haunting, however, differs from the first three in several respects. First of all, the haunting cannot be treated as an aesthetics or sensibility the way, for instance, the grotesque can. More importantly, it refers to a narrative event and a process rather a characteristic of fiction or a mode of writing. Secondly, the haunting, understood here as a critical tool first theorized within spectrality studies, is still rarely applied to horror narratives. Notwithstanding this critical difficulty, the ontological indeterminacy (Derridean hauntology) that accompanies the appearance of a ghost and the event of a haunting has proven invaluable for the discussion of doubling and dis/possession, repression of corporeality, and the processes of subjectification and separation in Gran’s *Closer*, Due’s *The Between*, Ahlborn’s *Within These Walls*, Niffenegger’s *A Fearful Symmetry*.

I am aware that my critical choices and theoretical attachments constitute just one way of reading these sixteen novels. And I look forward to reading future articles and books which investigate horror fiction from such varied perspectives as disability studies and crip theory, whiteness studies and masculinity studies, feminist new materialisms and speculative realism, to name just a few emerging fields of contemporary criticism and theory. I do hope, however, that the present study offers a starting point for the discussion of contemporary horror fiction, the gendered structure and sexual politics of horror narratives, the uses and abuses of popular horror themes and devices, the continuing presence of the Gothic, and the feminist engagement with corporeality and sexuality in horror fiction by women writers.

I would like to end by emphasizing the continuing need for reading and analyzing horror. To quote Gregory A. Waller:

> horror can run the gamut from the reactionary to the radical, so it can alternately underscore, challenge, oversimplify, cloud, and explain the facts, styles, and
contradictions of American culture…. Horror defines and redefines, clarifies and obscures the relationship between the human and the monstrous, the normal and the aberrant, the sane and the mad, the natural and the supernatural, the conscious and the unconscious, the daydream and the nightmare, the civilized and the primitive – slippery categories and tenuous oppositions indeed, but the very oppositions and categories that are so essential to our sense of life. (12)
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