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POST-APARTHEID GOTHIC: WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS AND SPACE (2021) BY MÉLANIE JOSEPH-VILAIN

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Joseph-Vilain, Mélanie. *Post-Apartheid Gothic: White South African Writers and Space.* Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2021, 258 pp.

Post-Apartheid Gothic (2021) seeks to address the relevance of different physical spaces in post-apartheid South Africa and their Gothic constructions in fictional works by white South African authors. In doing so, Mélanie Joseph-Vilain aims to demonstrate the anxieties of identity for white subjects in the post-Apartheid state. Joseph-Vilain explores spaces familiar to many Gothic scholars but in specific South African contexts. For example, the home is distinctively the rural platteland of the South African *plaasroman* and semi-desert Karoo region, while the urban cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town contrast this natural space. Joseph-Vilain also explores what she terms a "non-place," drawing on Georges Didi-Huberman's examination of "the complex relationships among place, time, and haunting" (194). Joseph-Vilain allocates each of the above spaces a chapter, using twenty-first-century texts such as the works of Lynn Freed and Henrietta Rose-Innes; Damon Galgut's *The Imposter* (2008); André Brink's *Devil's Valley* (1998); Justin Cartwright's *White Lightning* (2002) and *Up Against the Night* (2015); Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010) and *Moxyland* (2008), Margie Orford's *Like Clockwork* (2006); the crime fiction of Mike Nicol; and Deon Meyer's *Fevre* (2017). The book uses this extensive selection of texts to demonstrate the Gothicisation of particular spaces and the anxieties of identity for white South Africans when the memory of Apartheid is repressed but still present.

The last chapter, and its concept of the "non-place," shows exciting potential regarding the critical overlap of Gothic and Speculative Fiction. Unfortunately, Joseph-Vilain spends so much time proving that the texts she explores 'are Gothic' and that a character's subjectivity influences their perception of space and time – what one might consider a given truism of fiction at this point – that Joseph-Vilain's argument fails to do much meaningful work about *why these observations might be important*. As such, while Joseph-Vilain offers insight into their chosen texts, the analysis is often cursory and lacks the depth one would hope to find in literary criticism.

To foreground my criticism of this book, one must understand how post- and, more recently, decolonial criticism functions when paired with Horror or Gothic studies. Crucial to arguing how any text 'is Gothic' in a post- or decolonial context is understanding how the author and/or character's position shapes a given work; what is horrific or transgressive, to who, and why? When examining

literature written by colonisers (or their descendants) in colonised spaces, these answers are rooted in race due to the colonial paradigm, which for colonisers often has strong links to Enlightenment philosophy and the Cartesian binary.[1] Therefore, the examination of the colonial paradigm in colonial literature and the foundations of the Gothic share preoccupations with dividing mind and body, the interior and exterior. For scholars of the colonial or post-colonial Gothic, explaining the specific tools of colonisation – the *specifics* of how the colonial state carries out economic and social repression based on race/religion/blood – and referring to these tools in all other discussions or analysis is paramount. Thus, critical works about Gothic colonial spaces need to account for how the colonial paradigm perpetuates or undermines itself through horror and/or terror. This is, I believe, the ethical as well as the scholarly bedrock of colonial Gothic criticism. Therefore, it is difficult to comprehend why a monograph about white writers in a colonised space claims to participate in post-colonial Gothic scholarship when there is a minimal critical engagement with how a white character's subject position *is a colonial one,* altering this monograph's engagement with sources of horror and fear.

While Joseph-Vilain foregrounds identity as a focal point of the book, her analysis lacks specific details about the material space of post-Apartheid South Africa that would have elevated the textual analysis. Except for a few sentences or footnotes, the book's methodology focuses solely on the fact that the policy of segregation ended with Apartheid, ignoring the existence of other Apartheid-era policies as well as segregation's historic role in the overall machine of the Apartheid state. This downplays the entire weight and number of Apartheid atrocities and their impact on the social, political, or economic fabric of South Africa and, therefore, the white South African psyche. The absent context leads to confusion and means that, while Joseph-Vilain certainly centres her focus on white writers, the significance *of their whiteness and what that means for the people around them who may or may not be white* is unexplored. For example, after a lengthy examination of how multiple white women protagonists in Lynn Freed's works feel unsettled in multiple potential 'homely' spaces and how this relates to Freed's own choice to leave South Africa, Joseph-Vilain writes that in Freed's *The Servant's Quarters* (2009), "[t]he servants, for instance, are all rather similar and often fulfil the same function; considered as members of the family, which is not without posing a number of ethical and political problems in novels written by a white South African writer, they usually provide a form of comic relief" (38). Beyond the acknowledgement that "problems" exist, Joseph-Vilain does not elaborate on what might constitute these ethical and political problems. Furthermore, because of this surface-level glance at the (black?) servants, any potential subversive reading of their existence in the text is unacknowledged. Are the narrators perhaps purposefully unreliable in their mental construction of black servant characters? Is there any nuance to this depiction? In leaving this avenue under-acknowledged and unexplored, Joseph-Vilain negates a deeper reading of how the text reflects – or does not reflect – the colonial paradigm that race and identity *as defined by the colonial state* are and were a tool of violence in South Africa.

Additionally, because of the indiscriminate way Joseph-Vilain deploys critical terms such as "Gothic" and "monstrosity," it is not always apparent how Joseph-Vilain is engaging with the scholarly debates of Gothic studies and how loaded these terms can be depending on the context in which they are used. Although Joseph-Vilain claims in a footnote to have "consistently" (143) defined

what she means by "Gothic," her use of the term is anything but, deploying Gothic as a genre and as a mode where it suits her analysis and often brings in examples of early British Gothic works to explore concepts like the uncanny in South African fiction of the twenty-first century. Missing from Joseph-Vilain's bibliography are also foundational works in female Gothic studies and post-colonial Gothic studies that would have turned pages of Joseph-Vilain's argument into footnotes, such as *Art of Darkness* (1995) by Anne Williams or *Imperial Leather* (1994) by Anne McClintock. The book's sources for what constitutes twenty-first-century Gothic demonstrate a lack of in-depth research and analysis and would have benefited from referencing up-to-date scholarship in the field, such as *The American Imperial Gothic* (2014) by Johan Höglund or Neil Lazarus' *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011).

Subsequently, Joseph-Vilain's exploration of monstrosity as Gothic often results in broad claims that detract from the monster's unique function in their specific South African context. In the final chapter, while examining the character Kendra in Beukes' *Moxyland*, Joseph-Vilain claims: "Gothic monstrosity is about reaffirming boundaries. The monster is the one who helps reaffirm boundaries in a given cultural system, particularly in the contexts of cultural change" (209). This conception of the monster as the double and as *specifically reinforcing boundaries* demonstrates how Joseph-Vilain utilises an exclusively Freudian lens rather than drawing on more recent Gothic criticism such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1994) which would more effectively highlight the complexities of monstrosity as a mechanism for horror. Instead, Joseph-Vilain offers a formulaic description of Gothic monstrosity: that 'X character is a double for Y, which is Gothic, and which destabilises Y's identity.' This definition of Gothic monstrosity would have also benefited from a comparative analysis with non-Gothic scholarly works like Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to highlight the nuances of subjecthood and monstrosity in post-colonial contexts. In another example, Joseph-Vilain focuses on a different Gothic trope of the ghost, summarised by her observation that "Kendra's posthuman identity raises disturbing questions about the boundaries of the individual, the boundaries between nature and technology, but also about artistic creation and social boundaries" (207). In offering only passive acknowledgements that these "social boundaries" in urban spaces and boundaries of "artistic creation" are entangled with issues of race, Joseph-Vilain's core theme of identity lacks depth. While Joseph-Vilain technically points out that Gothic tropes such as the double, the monster, and the ghost are common methods for destabilising identity in Gothic literature, this is more a given of Gothic criticism at this point. The reader is left questioning why such tropes are important for a South African context.

The result of leaving the intricacies of contemporary Gothic studies unexplored is that Joseph-Vilain's articulation of how her research fits into existing critical work remains unclear. This issue was apparent within the first chapter when Jospeh-Vilain attempts to critique Rebecca Duncan's *South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-apartheid Imagination and Beyond* (2018). She states, "[Duncan] considers Gothic only those novels that explicitly stage horror, particularly body horror," which is a complete misunderstanding of Duncan's work (19). Duncan does not deny the existence of non-body-horror-focused texts as South African Gothic but rather uses body horror to ground her argument and bring depth and focus to her analysis. Considering that

Joseph-Vilain's argument regarding post-Apartheid space is often broad and lacks focus, the irony of her critique of Duncan is difficult to miss. Furthermore, Joseph-Vilain claims that Duncan's *South African Gothic* tries "to assess the specificities of post-transitional literature, while my contention is, rather, that post-apartheid literature still explores the wounds left by colonization and apartheid" (19). Having read and reviewed Duncan's *South African Gothic* and used it in my own analysis of decolonial literature in the United States, I question this claim's logic; Duncan *also* argues that post-Apartheid literature is riddled with themes of trauma concerning colonisation and Apartheid. In fact, in her analysis of Beukes' fictional Johannesburg in *Zoo City*, Joseph-Vilain frequently cites Duncan's work regarding the subterranean nature of the city and how it is a reference both to the hidden memory of Apartheid and to the colonial history of extrapolation of resources through mining.

All these multiple breakdowns of context, close reading, and critical reflection are doubly confusing in a work that claims *place* and *identity* are key to understanding white writers in South Africa after, as Joseph-Vilain frequently calls it, "the demise" of Apartheid (149). The lack of focus or depth, unfortunately, makes it difficult to identify who would benefit from using this book in their own analysis. Deconstructing the complexities of whiteness and place in South Africa is a worthy and necessary endeavour, but the text does not do this with enough critical strength and specificity to set it apart from existing criticism. Though some of the work, particularly the work Joseph-Vilain does regarding the deconstruction of the pastoral space of the Karoo, is well-grounded in existing criticism in contrast to her work with Gothic and monstrosity, Duncan's *South African Gothic* frequently does a much more thorough job of explaining similar concepts. Similarly, while the final chapter on the "non-place" is very thought-provoking with its statement that "space becomes place and acquires meaning when it is haunted; this is […] the genius of the non-place," not enough is done with such an interesting thought to recommend the chapter – or book – as a whole for exploration of the idea (194). Therefore, while *Post-Apartheid Gothic* touches upon the critical possibilities for examining white identity in colonised spaces, it also clearly demonstrates the need for rigorous and specific methodology when discussing colonisation and its impacts.

NOTES

1. See Walter D. Mignolo "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2002, pp. 57-96; Anibal Quijano. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from the South*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 533-580; Andrew Smith and William Hughes. "Introduction." *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre*. Edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 1-12.

BIONOTE

Madelyn Marie Schoonover holds an MLitt in the Gothic Imagination and PhD from the University of Stirling, United Kingdom. She studies erasure and depictions of Indigenous Americans in contemporary Euro-American and Indigenous Gothic fiction, focusing on Euro-American Imperial Gothic, decolonial studies, masculinity studies, and eco-Gothic.