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Phantom Nation: English-Canadian Literature and the Desire for Ghosts

Zusammenfassung

In Auseinandersetzung mit der britischen „Gothic tradition“ lässt sich in Kanada eine zweigeteilte und in sich widersprüchliche kanadische Ausprägung der Gattung beobachten. Unter expliziter Berufung auf die britischen Ursprünge des Genres nutzen anglokanadische Autoren und Autorinnen die literarische Tradition vom neunzehnten Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart, um sich eine eigene kulturelle Tradition zu erschreiben, während vor allem in jüngerer Zeit diese Funktionalisierung der Tradition – die Erfindung einer kollektiven kulturellen Identität – zunehmend kritisch hinterfragt wird. Insbesondere in der postkolonialen Ausprägung der Gattung lässt sich ein spannungsvolles Nebeneinander von postkolonialer Kritik (die Präsenz des ‚Unheimlichen‘) und der Affirmation einer kulturellen nationalen Identität beobachten. Als Reaktion auf solch nationale Identitätskonstruktionen formiert sich ein von „aboriginal“ und „diasporic authors“ initiiertes Gegendiskurs.

Résumé

Au Canada, la tradition gothique est, depuis toujours, fourchue et conflictuelle. L'invocation explicite de la tradition gothique britannique a provoqué la réinvention d'un roman noir typiquement canadien ayant pour but de créer une forme qui assure-rait la survivance culturelle et, plus récemment, une forme de contestation. Cette tradition est marquée par une espèce de « désir gothique » prenant la forme d'une invocation du gothique qui non seulement serait désirable mais permettrait aussi d'affirmer une ancienneté culturelle et une légitimité nationale. Cette approche est évidente dans de nombreux textes canadiens postcoloniaux qui associent la possibilité d'appartenance à une étrange simplicité. Malgré leur interrogation postcoloniale, le tournant historique dont témoignent beaucoup de ces textes s'exprime par l'invocation du gothique comme forme d'héritage historique et d'auto-engendrement culturel. Ainsi, de nombreux textes d'auteurs canadiens diasporiques ou amérindiens se veulent des réponses « contre-discursives » aux discours gothiques nationalistes.

This essay emerges out of the research for my chapter on “Canadian Gothic” for David Punter’s *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2011) and for my forthcoming book in the “Gothic Literary Studies Series” with the University of Wales Press entitled *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History, and the Spectre of Self-Invention* (2013).¹ This book will offer a significant reassessment of the Gothic tradition in Canadian literature by tracing a distinctive reworking of the British Gothic tradition in Canada that is characterized by a summoning of the Gothic for its vitalizing rather than unsettling potential. My argument is that the Gothic tradition in Canada has been a bifurcated and conflicted one, in which authors’ self-conscious invocations of a British Gothic tradition led to a reimagining of a specifically Canadian Gothic that utilizes the genre as a form of cultural sustenance and, in more recent years, contestation. This tradition is marked by what I term ‘Gothic desire’, which manifests itself as an invocation of the Gothic as not only desirable, but also comforting and culturally sustaining.

An appropriate beginning to this discussion is J. Edward Chamberlin’s account of a meeting between an Aboriginal elder and the government officials who were laying claim to his people’s land. In response to the official’s demands, the Elder inquired: “If this is your land, where are your stories?” (2004, 1). This is an emblematic exchange in the history that I am considering because I am arguing that Canadian settler literature has from its beginnings been haunted by its struggle to ‘story’ itself. Furthermore, Chamberlin argues that it is the strangeness of stories that lures the listener, as if to say that the ‘strange’ contributes to the constitution of a psychic space that resonates as ‘home’. From early on, one of the prominent discourses that was used to approach the problem of ‘storying’ and ‘historizing’ Canada was the discourse of the Gothic. Pressed to supply their ‘storied’ rendition of the place, Canadian writers sought to create homemade legends that could provide an illusion of antiquity, origin, and memory. A sensation of haunting would thus bolster a sense of belonging in terms of what I call a desire for ‘settled unsettlement’. Canadian culture, I am arguing, has for a long time wanted to be haunted.

My book will explore the transformations the Gothic genre underwent in its transplantation to Canada, from the early 19th century when debates about Canadian national identity and Canadian literature were raging, on through the century into our contemporary moment. It is important to note that the Gothic Revival in 18th and early 19th century Europe coincided with the first attempts, in Canada, to articulate and define a Canadian literature. Canadian authors, from very early on in discussions about Canadian literary and national identity, and well into the present, have invoked elements of the Gothic to articulate a sense of Canada’s precarious-

1 I would like to acknowledge David Punter and Blackwell publishers for their earlier support of this work, and the editors of the “Gothic Literary Studies Series” for the University of Wales Press, Andrew Smith and Ben Fisher. I would also like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a Standard Research Grant in support of this project. See also Sugars/Turcotte, *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009).

ness within history. Yet I would argue that these early writers' relation to the Gothic was an uneasy one, which manifested itself in a tug-of-war with Gothic motifs and ideology as a way of asserting Canada's contradictory claim to history as lineage (an 'old' country) and to history as modernity/progress (a 'new' country). The Gothic is invoked by these authors as a way of getting at anxieties about historicity (where one belongs within history) and historicization (how one writes one's self into history), as these bear on the constitution of an emergent national consciousness.

I want to clarify that I am not interested in the Gothic as a form of supernaturalism or horror or even in ghost stories per se, but rather in what the Gothic is being used for by these authors. In other words, I am interested in the cultural work that these invocations of the Gothic are doing, especially in terms of its association with questions of historicity, inheritance, political power, and perceptions of the uncanny. The one constant in traditional Gothic literature, which is central to my interest in the ways that it circulates in Canada, is that there is always *an anxiety about history*.

In their critical introduction to the Gothic, David Punter and Glennis Byron argue that Gothic writings became a forum for working out concerns about ancestral inheritance and historical continuity, which in late 18th century Britain emerged from post-revolutionary anxieties about social legitimacy. According to this configuration, the Gothic was considered to be "prior to [...] the establishment of civilised values and a well-regulated society" (Punter 2004, 8). Yet it was also perceived as somehow necessary as a ground for a properly cultured civilization. What interests me is the way these Gothic concerns were self-consciously transposed onto colonial contexts (such as Canada) where assumptions of social privilege and historical continuity were even less viable. Projecting Gothic absence onto Canada provided an illusory control over historical self-inscription, a process that expressed a superseding of the Gothic and a lament for its absence, which would inevitably be followed by a reinscription of cultural depth. Canada, I am arguing, learned to read itself through a refracting Gothic lens (though not necessarily through the lens of the savage or haunted wilderness, as I will discuss).

1. Wilderness gothic and psychic projection

There is a long history of Gothic expression in Canadian literature, reaching back to the colonial foundations of the nation. One can argue that from the beginning the 'idea' of Canada was integrally caught up with discourses of the Gothic (which sometimes take the form of rejections of the Gothic). The maps of early explorers to North America, with illustrations representing grotesque beasts, cannibals, and sections labelled "here there be monsters," evoke the Gothic nature of peoples' early encounters with the unknown elements of the 'new world'. This tradition of Gothic presence embodied in the landscape contributed to the sense that Europeans were 'lost' inside the New World – hence Frye's suggestion that the archetypal question

for Canadians is not "Who am I?" but "Where is here?" (1965, 826) – a dilemma that marks the experience of a non-Indigenous intruder who is aware, yet typically in denial, of him/herself as a 'foreign' element. Processes of entrapment (including literal kidnappings), by which many Europeans sought to 'civilize' Aboriginal peoples, became projected onto the people and landscape themselves, whereby the European felt himself to be vulnerable to Aboriginal treachery. This paranoia is evident in numerous exploration accounts, from Jacques Cartier's suspicions, in 1535, that the Iroquois people are planning to ambush him; to Samuel Hearne's famous portrait of the Coppermine Massacre in 1771 during which he feels in danger for his life; to John Franklin's fear that the Métis translators and *voyageurs* on his 1820-22 journey are plotting mutiny. Indeed, it is widely suggested that Hearne's famous account of the massacre of the "Esquimaux" might have been substantially altered to make it more horrific and dramatic (see MacLaren 1991), which would have been in keeping with the Gothic literary style that had become popular in his day. Travel writing, by its nature, is a journey into the unknown; travel to North America in the 16th and 17th centuries was, for many, depicted as a journey into psychic disarray.

The Gothic threat of an encroaching wilderness is the primary thrust of much eastern and central Canadian writing that tells of pioneering in the Canadian backwoods. Tales of struggle and hardship in keeping the bush *out* in effect empower the external monstrosity to invade the settler from within. Such constructions led Frye to identify what he termed the "garrison mentality" in early Canadian literature, a defensive measure in which "isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological 'frontier'" cling to one another when "confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (1965, 830). One of the paradigmatic texts in this tradition is John Richardson's 1832 Gothic romance *Wacousta; or, The Prophecy*, set during the Pontiac War of 1763, yet even this text exhibits an ambivalence about the wilderness Gothic ideology through its unravelling of the Gothic dichotomies it creates. In this tale, the British garrison of Fort Detroit is attacked by a band of Aboriginal people, led by Pontiac and his advisor, the 'demonic' Wacousta. As a figure of satanic menace, Wacousta appears to be a kind of 'uber-savage,' the prototypical stuff of Canadian settlement nightmare: "His face was painted black as death; and as he stood under the arch of the gateway, [...] this formidable and mysterious enemy might have been likened to the spirit of darkness presiding over his terrible legions" (Richardson 1832, 180). The Gothic unravelling, however, hinges on the relocation of the source of Gothic threat, since Wacousta, it turns out, is in fact Sir Reginald Morton, a British officer who has 'gone native' in order to wreak revenge on Charles de Haldimar, the commander of the fort. By showing how the British garrison has in fact been 'infected' from within, the novel plays on dualities between civilization and savagery, self and other, revealing the barbaric foundations of the British imperial enterprise. The novel has elicited multiple interpretations for its psychological study of the projective mechanisms involved in colonization, by which the colonizers projected their fears onto Aboriginal

peoples, thus rendering them an apparent source of Gothic terror. The novel charts a return of the repressed in more ways than one: the British general's own duplicity comes back to haunt him in the form of an externalized Other, while the British garrison as a whole is haunted by the ambivalent desires it tries to subdue.

This experience of psychic dissolution, catalyzed by a sensation of engulfment by the Canadian wilderness, is evident in Susanna Moodie's famous account of pioneering in the backwoods of Ontario, *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852). Beginning with her arrival in Canada in 1832, the book shows the influence of the British Gothic tradition in its accounting of a lone woman at the mercy of deceitful Americans and grinning hucksters, lost amidst the sublime cathedral of the Ontario forest. "[M]y love for Canada," she writes, "was a feeling very nearly allied to that which the condemned criminal entertains for his cell – his only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave" (1852, 135). This growing paranoia reaches a peak when Moodie finds herself inside a Gothic nightmare of her own creation:

The night had closed in cold and foggy, and I could no longer distinguish any object at more than a few yards from the door. Bringing in as much wood as I thought would last me for several hours, I closed the door; and for the first time in my life I found myself at night in a house entirely alone [...] The little brook lifted up its voice in loud, hoarse wailing, or mocked, in its babbling to the stones, the sound of human voices. As it became later, my fears increased in proportion. I grew too superstitious and nervous to keep the door open. I not only closed it, but dragged a heavy box in front, for bolt there was none. (1852, 184)

The wolves that howl at her door become an objective correlative of Moodie's sense of psychic unravelling and unbelonging, placing this segment of Moodie's text (but not the entirety of the work) within a tradition of what might be termed Canadian psychological 'wilderness gothic'.

2. Haunted by a lack of ghosts

This tradition of Canadian psychological 'wilderness gothic' is an identifiable stream of Gothic writing in early Canada, but it is by no means the most prominent one. By contrast, I want to focus on an alternative and in my view more pervasive tradition of Gothic figuration in Canada that invokes the Gothic for its invigorating rather than its alienating potential. My sense has long been that much of the writing on the Canadian Gothic up to now has been missing the mark in some way, in part because it was indebted to the 'survival' or 'garrison' Gothic discourse deployed by

Margaret Atwood and Frye.² When one reads Canadian Gothic writings of the 19th Century, one in fact sees very little of the infamous “garrison mentality” identified by Frye. It is there in explorers’ accounts to delineate a sense of fear/terror in response to the unknown New World, but by the time of Susanna Moodie and other settlers, Gothic rhetoric is being invoked for a much more self-conscious purpose: as a way of establishing claims to settlement and a distinctive cultural identity. In other words, far surpassing the tradition of oppressive wilderness Gothic in Canadian literature has been an obsession with Gothic absence – and by extension, Gothic resuscitation. This has contributed to a distinctive reworking of Gothic tradition in Canada, manifested in a Freudian *fort-da* dynamic as authors obsessively summon and refute Gothic presence in a process that enables the Gothic to be conjured for very specific, revitalizing effects.

One of the most well-known early examples of this discourse of Gothic absence occurs in Catharine Parr Traill’s 1836 *The Backwoods of Canada*:

As to ghosts or spirits they appear totally banished from Canada. This is too matter-of-fact country for such supernaturals to visit. Here there are no historical associations, no legendary tales of those that came before us. [...] We have neither fay nor fairy, ghost nor bogle, satyr nor wood-nymph; our very forests disdain to shelter dryad or hamadryad. [...] No Druid claims our oaks; and instead of poring with mysterious awe among our curious limestone rocks, that are often singularly grouped together, we refer them to the geologist to exercise his skill in accounting for their appearance [...]. (Traill 1836, 153)

Invoking the imagery of Gothic hauntings – ghosts, spirits, supernaturals, legendary tales, bogles, and so on – Traill delineates what Canada is lacking. Yet, as in many of these accounts of Gothic absence, it is never quite clear whether the absence is due to some fault in the place or in the people that now inhabit it. On the one hand, Traill’s ghosts and fairies appear to reject the country – it is “too matter of fact” for them to visit, it does not offer *them* sufficient inspiration. On the other hand, the landscape appears to have rejected the fairies: it “disdains to shelter dryad or hama-dryad.” This ambiguity is further enhanced by the claim that ghosts and spirits “appear totally banished from Canada,” since the subject of the action is unstated: Who has undertaken this banishment (the land? the people?) and how can these ghosts have been banished if they were never there to begin with? The simultaneous summoning and refusal of the Gothic mode appears in the imagery itself, since banishments and exiles are a frequent theme in Gothic novels at the turn of the century. So the Gothic text of Canada that Parr Traill summons is at once an unwrit-

2 Studies such as Margot Northey’s *The Haunted Wilderness* (1976) and Gaile McGregor’s *The Wacousta Syndrome* (1985) are indebted to this figuration.

ten narrative and a rejected one. What Canada requires, in other words, is a poet (and by extension a people) capable of infusing the land with Gothic meaning through an act of storying that would be more than a transplantation of British historical tradition, yet which would bear the same mytho-political weight.

Susanna Moodie, in *Roughing It in the Bush* in 1852, put similar sentiments into the mouth of a Yankee wagon driver who carries the family to their first shelter in the woods. Moodie contemplates the “gloomy spot” and observes that “[i]n the old country, superstition would people it with ghosts” (13). The wording is important, since she says that *superstition* would people it, and not that actual spirits are present. Moodie thus attests to the fictionalizing of ghosts, the act of storying which produces a sense of cultural surfeit and counterfeit. Moodie’s sense that people would story the place by filling it with Gothic contents is scoffed at by the driver who turns on her his own version of Canadian identity in contrast to British social and cultural norms: “‘Ghosts!’ he exclaims, ‘There are no ghosts in Canada! [...] The country is too new for ghosts [...]. It is only in old countries, likes your’n, that are full of sin and wickedness, that people believe in such nonsense’” (1852, 267). Moodie ignores the man’s insult and instead proceeds to use his sentiments to characterize the ‘strange’ culture that she now inhabits, rendering the uncanny spot ‘strange’ by virtue of its inability to haunt. Hence she comments on the almost bizarre “disbelief in supernatural appearances which is common to most native-born Canadians” (268). Once again, it is the fault of the “colonials” who are incapable of infusing the scene with Gothic narration. The Yankee driver, the epitome of a utilitarian aesthetic with regard to the sublime landscape that surrounds him, is, we are to think, incapable of such poetry. Yet, by pursuing the line of thought about the origins of ghosts, Moodie comes to the conclusion that indeed, there can be no ghosts haunting the landscape expressly because there has been no history of guilt there. Ghosts thus become an index of historical legitimacy that is achieved through the fallen condition of history itself.

By the 1860s, works begin to arise that invoke the famed trope of Gothic absence as a way of positing their own Gothic tales to fill in for this vacancy.³ Andrew Learmont Spedon’s 1866 collection *Canadian Summer Evening Tales* opens with an epigraph phrased as an address to Canada:

Thou hast no tower with turrets grey,
No martyr’s cairn, or castle hoary, –
No minstrel harp, or relics famed
For legend, song, witchcraft and story;

3 For reasons of space, I shall offer only one example here, although there are many more. For a fuller discussion of this discursive trend of Gothic absence in early Canada, see Sugars, *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History, and the Spectre of Self-Invention* (forthcoming, University of Wales Press).

In the absence of this history, Spedon assigns the poet the paradoxical role of Gothic conjurer and preserver. The poet, for Spedon, must use the Gothic as a kind of charm against historical amnesia, filling in for the failure of memory through the creation of invigorating ghosts: "Oh! for the shade of Scott, Cooper, or Irving, to call up the Indian from his tomb, – the hero from the battle-field, – the mariner from the deep; to breathe upon their dry bones, – to embody them in nobler forms, and to give them a life and an immortality unknown before!" (Spedon 1866, 5). Ideally, this would resolve the predicament of Canadian culture, which was said to lack sufficiently imaginative poets and a sufficiently inspiring landscape/history. Spedon's formulation will resolve this by turning authorship itself into a form of animating haunting, which in fact improves upon the buried ghosts of the past ("embody[ing] them in nobler forms") by rescripting them into the landscape of Canada and Canadian literature. Such authors, he maintains, will rescue Canada from its historical marooning, since their role as embedded spirits will render them both Gothic spectres and writers of the Gothic at the same time.

From early on, then, Canadian authors were highly conscious of a sense of historical precariousness, so that they were manipulating their 'hauntings' in self-consciously discernible – even in self-sustaining – ways. Rather than the lack of a ghost presenting a crisis for Canadian writers, authors used the lack as a springboard to formulate how Canada was to position itself in global cultural and historical terms.

3. Postcolonial familiars and gothic infusion

This brief context provides a more complete picture of what lies behind the tradition of Gothic paradox that has worked its way through 20th and 21st-century Anglo-Canadian literature. If Canadian authors were plagued by the apparent absence of a legitimating folklore that would authenticate their experience of the place, they responded by seeking to infuse their world with Gothic presence, turning to the Gothic as a form of national substantiation. In these works, Gothic motifs are used to provide historical antiquity and cultural texture, which together help place settler descendants as secure 'inheritors' of the land and its spirit. This creation of a home-made tradition of self-invented ghosts yields up a paradox by which the inherited Gothic was defamiliarized by being rendered reassuring and 'familiar.'

In many Canadian Gothic writings from the turn of the twentieth century up to more overtly 'postcolonial' configurations of the present, the tug-of-war in the forging of suitably haunting ghosts becomes transformed into an active form of Gothic self-inscription – from L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), to Howard O'Hagan's early novel *Tay John* (1939), to Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959), to Robertson Davies's profusion of ghost stories to fill in for the Canadian ailment of what he calls "the Rational Rickets" (Davies 1982, 2), to Margaret Atwood's various

renditions of settled unsettlement, most famously in her 1970 poetry sequence *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. But I want to pause in the early 1960s to consider what is probably the most famous 20th-century statement of Canadian Gothic ambivalence. The paradoxical finale to Earle Birney's 1962 poem "Can. Lit." concludes with the startling claim: "It's only by our lack of ghosts/ we're haunted." Birney's poem has been subjected to frequent punning and quotation, and is generally interpreted to mean that Canada lacks an adequately substantive history or culture to render it "haunted" in the sense that European nations (or, indeed, the United States) are haunted. Yet, Birney's poem suggests that the ailment lies on the level of perception – Canadians are haunted by their inability to see themselves as haunted, thus echoing Parr Traill and many others regarding Canadians' inability to 'story' the landscape in front of them. Birney transposes the discourse into anti-colonial terms by suggesting that Canadians are haunted by a sense of colonial inferiority which projects an apparent lack where there is none. The poem thus expresses an anxiety about historical erasure which, in a Canadian context, is equated with the effacement of Gothic remembering and, by extension, with a sensation of alienation because the Gothic is not available to render the home space (*un*)heimlich. This desire for 'settled unsettlement' informs much post-1960 Canadian writing, which, contrary to Birney's assertion, I would argue, is invested in an obsessive resettling of local ghosts.

If one moves from these discussions about Canadians' relation (or lack of relation) to the Gothic into more recent times, it is informative to think about the ways that even a postcolonial settler Gothic tradition remains indebted to these early foundational laments about Canadian Gothic insufficiency. The obsession in so much contemporary Canadian postcolonial writing with ghosts and haunting returns to the Gothic as a form of cultural infusion, even if it is the infamous Gothic 'lack' that is taken as the signifier of a desired sense of fullness. As a result, one finds in much of this writing a desire for the haunting effect of the uncanny as a form of cultural-historical infusion, an approach that manifests itself as a quest for legitimating post-colonial ghosts of settled unsettlement and Gothic reinscription.

The desire for Gothic verification becomes tricky in a Canadian postcolonial context, however, which on one level seeks an affirmation of cultural-historical memory through the scripting of a securely national and postcolonial haunting that will provide cultural texture, but on the other hand recognizes such an impulse to be compromised, since it is both phantasmal and 'colonizing.' In this context, the notion of 'forging' and 'forgery' is significant, since by implication the national ghost can only ever be a counterfeit, a purveyor of a fiction. The compromised quest for post-colonial belonging is central to John Steffler's 1992 novel *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, in which the ghost of the historical 18th century Labrador merchant, George Cartwright, is trapped in a purgatorial existence, haunting the English landscape while yearning to be incorporated into the Labrador wilderness. The book charts a process of postcolonial atonement, as the ghost of Cartwright is forced to come to terms with his abuses of the Labrador environment and its Aboriginal peo-

ples, but it also involves a form of Gothic self-inscription, as Cartwright is literally in the process of (re)writing himself as a ghost haunting the Canadian landscape. Yet, through a curious twist, it emerges that what he is most haunted by is his failure to indigenize, to make himself a local spirit of the New World. This is achieved at the end of the novel when he is finally spirited off to Labrador and becomes incorporated into the landscape.

Gail Anderson-Dargatz's 1996 *The Cure for Death by Lightning* attempts to evade the binary of Native-White legitimation by constructing a hybrid White/Native ghost infusing the Gothic world of its adolescent settler protagonist, Beth Weeks. In this novel, the fantasy of an authentic Canadian ghost is enacted through the White settlers' possession by the Aboriginal trickster spirit Coyote. In many ways, Beth is a perfect example of a character who is haunted by a lack of ghosts. This may seem a somewhat curious observation in view of the fact that the novel is replete with Gothic effects and haunting spirits. Nevertheless, the novel relays a story of White settler desire through its dramatization of a character who contrives her placement within a Gothic history of cultural hauntings and genealogical reinvention. "You can't give birth to yourself," Beth wryly observes to her friend Nora, who tells her the story of the moon as a woman "who gives birth to herself over and over" (Anderson-Dargatz 1996, 232). Yet, this is precisely what Beth attempts to do through her storying of the fateful summer when her world turns upside-down. As a period of foundational disjunction, the summer is the catalyst for Beth's story of her entry into a world of 'Coyote Gothic'. Tormented by the failure of White settlement history to leave a mark on the landscape and on communal memory, and equally uncertain about the status of the Aboriginal spirit world that seems to infuse the woods around her with significance, Beth transposes Aboriginal spirituality into Gothic terms that she can more readily comprehend. As a coming-of-age story, the novel is concerned with the indigenization of a White settler descendant who stakes her cultural and genealogical claim in Turtle Valley (with its echoes of North America as 'Turtle Island') on the basis of a Gothic haunting.

A novel that underscores this urge for Gothic infusion is Newfoundland author Kenneth Harvey's 2003 *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* which depicts a community plagued by a strange breathing disorder in the years following the 1992 moratorium on the Newfoundland fisheries. His use of the Gothic is worth noting, however, since the characters are not unsettled by the presence of ghosts, but rather are punished for a failure to believe in their presence. Although Harvey's work has been identified for its fixation on the Gothic underside of Newfoundland communities, *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* is in fact a novel in which the Gothic has too little influence on people's lives. Here, communal settlement *requires* an infusion of the Gothic, since the only individuals who are immune to the breathing disease are those who embrace Gothic visions. In this novel, cultural memory becomes aligned with ancestral inheritance, but because Harvey's characters are in the throes of melancholic amnesia, the ancestral ghosts are presented as in need of

recuperation and, indeed, of narrativization (since it is a story-telling therapy – what one might call a ‘talking cure’ that affirms Gothic reinscription – that heals the sick and dying).

Also with a genealogical focus, Margaret Sweatman’s 2001 novel *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* takes the reader through key moments in Canadian settlement history by charting a genetic inheritance of ancestral ghosts. The notion of cyclical return is invoked in this novel as a way of securing the settlers’ place in the landscape. Because the visionary figure in each new generation is conceived when a couple mating outside is struck by a bolt of lightning, the process applies an element of predestination and mystical authorization to the fortunes of its generations of Canadian settlers. The catalyzing crime in the novel is twofold: the stealing of land from the Métis people on the western prairies and the execution of their leader Louis Riel; and the Métis assassination of the British protestant militiaman Thomas Scott. One of the most innovative elements in the book is the conjuring of the ghost of the protestant Scott rather than Riel as the haunting figure in the text: his ghost inhabits the settlers’ cabin, gurgling and burping and being disruptive. The ghost of Scott is a constant reminder of settler guilt, as he figures a loss of innocence for both settlers and Métis. But his presence is also used to provide historical and genealogical continuity, since the trace of his “kiss” (which appears in subsequent descendants as a birthmark) is passed down among the family members as a material trace of a historied past. When the ghost of Scott eventually stops visiting the cabin (and when the mystical birthmark stops appearing in the family’s descendants), people fear that his absence represents an unwelcome forgetting, which, indeed, plays itself out in future generations. The Gothic here works as an index of memory and settler emplacement, functioning as a charm against historical erasure and a descent into obsolescence.

4. Intra-national hauntings of the postcolonial uncanny

The alternative voices of diasporic authors in Canada pose an opposition to this tradition of settled unsettlement. The quest for national legitimation and cultural resonance that informs these approaches is truly unsettled by texts that stage a form of meta-haunting – a haunting of these haunted processes themselves – initiating a Gothic exposure of the haunting effects that undergird the desire for an authenticating national ghost. In Wayson Choy’s creative memoir, *Paper Shadows* (1999), and his novel *The Jade Peony* (1995), notions of diasporic relocation and national repression are overlaid with a complex taxonomy of ghosts in mid-20th century Vancouver Chinatown. In Choy’s account, there are two categories of ghosts: the white authorities who mandate against the Chinese community; and the Chinese “paper shadows” who have had to take on assumed identities in order to slip under the radar of the institutional panopticon. The latter, moreover, break

down into diverging categories of emplacement: Old World China ghosts and New World transplanted ghosts, who offer to the members of the Vancouver Chinatown community the possibility of cultural (if not strictly genealogical) ens settlement in Canada. The characters in Choy's works are simultaneously haunted by the ghosts of settler substantiation and history, while also reassured by the plethora of ghosts that have followed them from overseas into the quarters of Chinatown. The *bak kwei*, or White ghosts, haunt the Chinese, not only with very tangible terrors (like deportation), but also with the reality of Chinese-Canadian insubstantiality, thus rendering the Chinese people ghosts who are themselves condemned to haunt the interstices of the nation's sense of itself. "It's one thing to be aware of ghosts," Choy writes, "It's another to *be* one" (1999, 329). The book explores this theme through the motif of "paper shadows," the illegal Chinese immigrants whose 'official' identities are based on false papers (the papers of legal immigrants who have died) and who therefore literally inhabit the identities of the dead. These ghosts are given new life in Canada, yet are rendered both invisible (to 'real' genealogical memory) and also too highly visible (to the surveillance of state authorities). If personal and national selfhood are constituted by the internalization of a haunting Other, here Chinese-Canadians prevail through an ironic inversion as the uncanny shadow of institution-alized forgeries.

Fusing the haunting ramifications of nation-formation and postcolonialism with a tale of familial trauma marked by stifled ambition, inter-ethnic hatred, and revenge, Ann-Marie MacDonald's widely acclaimed Gothic novel *Fall on Your Knees* (1996) conjures a world that is simultaneously inflected by menace and repentance. If the seething presence of the past infuses the modern, postcolonial era, this is literally so in the extreme Gothic world of MacDonald's early 20th-century Cape Breton, where the spectre of race haunts the generations of the Piper and Mahmoud families who strive for national legitimation. Himani Bannerji has analyzed the ways Canadian nationhood, despite its embrace of multiculturalism, is defined by a naturalized slippage from European to Anglo-Celtic 'Canadian' identity, what Bannerji terms "a liberal democracy with a colonial heart" (2000: 75). In the novel, the father's racial intolerance leaves in its wake a series of monstrosities that plague his descendants. By fathering a child with his own daughter, in part to ensure a 'pure' White bloodline, he calls these demons more fully into being. The embodiment of his fears is the ghost of the drowned infant Ambrose, who returns as the guilty and haunting 'ancestral' (and incestuous) secret of the Piper family tree. MacDonald's novel takes us through the corridors of civilized atrocity and attests to the infusion of the everyday with the traces of racism's aberrant legacy, but it does so through conjuring a kind of supra-Gothic menace, where Gothic effects become compounded upon one another so as to deny any easy deciphering of homely ghosts. This inaccessible encryption is literalized in Frances's stories to her younger sister Lily, where the stories build upon and contradict one another so as to become increasingly horrific yet allegorically unintelligible. The novel thus underscores the willed amnesia that

foundations national and familial identities while also writing back to traditions of 'enabling' haunting, both of which continue to inform conceptions of a purportedly postcolonial society.

There are many other texts that invoke Gothic figures to articulate a postcolonial and/or transnational revisioning of Canadian cultural-nationalist metanarratives. Works such as Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995), Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) and *The Kappa Child* (2001), Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), and David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* (2007) all use a motif of haunting and monstrosity to get at the often repressed undercurrents that haunt the edges of Canadian nationalist paradigms, suggesting, like the many different forms of haunting that are woven through Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows*, that the ghosts of Canada past are themselves haunted, and sometimes trumped, by other unacknowledged ghosts that linger into the present. If Steffler creates a ghost who is himself haunted by his inability to haunt, many diasporic authors in Canada create characters whose silenced ghosts haunt, and in some instances dismantle, the very cultural legacy that settler ghostings have been attempting to enact. An excellent text in this context is Dionne Brand's 2010 poetry sequence *Ossuaries*, which tells the story of a community who, as Tanis MacDonald has argued, do not have the comfort of communal memory that is provided by an archived ossuary or organized haunting. Members of the Black diaspora, MacDonald argues, have been denied the privilege of an identifying ossuary. If to be able to bury one's dead (and to be haunted by them) is a form of privilege, a privilege that has been enacted by the long history of Gothic substantiation in Canadian literature, it is also important to acknowledge the absence of such recognizably ghosted memories in the ruptured histories of many who inhabit the contemporary Canadian nation-state. This is a key theme in David Chariandy's novel *Soucouyant*, which moves through a processual paradox as the mother in the story reclaims the ghosts/monsters of the past through a process of *memory loss*. As the narrator evocatively puts it, she "forgets to forget" (Chariandy 2007, 32). The narrator states that his "history is a creature nobody really believes in" (137), which treats Gothic remembrance as a form of privilege accorded to those with more visibly acceptable histories. The symbolic shedding of what is already an incomplete Canadian citizenship creates space for alternative ghosts and historical memories to make their presence felt.

5. Aboriginal de-gothicizing

The heuristics of a postcolonial Canadian Gothic achieves an illuminating inflection when read alongside the plethora of 'Gothic' writings by Canadian Aboriginal authors, from the numerous ghost plays of Daniel David Moses, to the Coyote trickster stories of Thomas King, to the Nanabush plays of Tomson Highway, to the re-

cent award-winning film by Armand Ruffo, *A Windigo Tale*. I use the term 'Gothic' in quotation marks in this context because 'Gothic' (like the term 'postcolonial') has been subject to much criticism in its application to Indigenous literatures. Jodey Castricano has argued that the "Western psychological model" of Gothic literature does a kind of violence to Aboriginal texts which are invoking the supernatural within a much different epistemology and tradition (Castricano 2006, 809). While it may seem curious to speak of the Gothic in connection with contemporary Aboriginal literature, the cross-over of influence between western and Aboriginal traditions has been cited by many of these authors as a central modality in their attempt to give voice to contemporary Aboriginal concerns and perspectives, which do not take place in an enclosed cultural vacuum, and indeed to assert control over contemporary processes of discursive representation. In turn, many of these texts offer a counter-discursive revision of the sorts of Gothic narratives that have founded many constructions of Canadian landscape, culture, and national identity. Tomson Highway, for example, has insisted on Aboriginal authors' strategic employment of transcultural influences in their work. In his view, this is not a form of assimilation or complicity, but rather an expression of a living (in his case) Cree perspective. As he put it in an interview with Ann Wilson,

I think that white culture in Canada is very much changing and transforming [...]; likewise Cree culture, native culture [...] but what I really find fascinating [...] is the searching for this new voice, this new identity, this new tradition, this magical transformation that potentially is quite magnificent. It is the combination of the best of both worlds, wherein you take a symphony or a string quartet by Beethoven [...] and apply that structure, utilize it for the telling of Cree myth made contemporary. (Highway 1990, 354)

Highway's sense of this almost 'magical' alchemy that occurs in contemporary Aboriginal writing echoes what many other authors, such as Eden Robinson, have maintained about the importance of representing Aboriginal cultures as living and vital and very much part of the contemporary world. For Highway, this strategic transformation of non-Aboriginal influences is a source of creativity and empowerment for Native authors. The British Columbian "Git Hayetsk" Dancers, Mike Dangeli and Mique'l Askren, express this well in their assertion that their artistic creations are intended to make "the contemporary traditional," or as they also put it, to express a perspective that is "traditionally contemporary" (see Dangeli/Askren 2011).

Castricano is right in suggesting that conventional Gothic workings and undercurrents cannot be applied to Aboriginal literature, which is indebted to a very different conception of monsters and ghosts. What must be kept in mind, however, is that the Gothic itself has undergone a series of metamorphoses over the centuries, and has repeatedly been adapted by authors for different, highly contemporary and

individualized, purposes. Jerrold Hogle considers the malleability of the Gothic to be linked to its usefulness in addressing “anomalies in our modern conditions” (Hogle 2002, 6), or its ability to address anxieties about the condition of modernity (ironically, in many cases, by projecting those anxieties into a premodern past and location). According to Steven Bruhm, “The Gothic has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history” (Bruhm 2002, 260), which might suggest its usefulness for Aboriginal authors who seek to counter colonialist motifs which are themselves embedded in Gothic formulations. Castricano’s analysis enables a more informed critical perspective to be brought to bear on Aboriginal revisions of Gothic motifs, which, in many cases, offer a strategic counter-discursive reconfiguration of the Gothic by subjecting Gothic prescriptions to an indigenous perspective and making them answer to Aboriginal priorities, in a sense by ‘making the contemporary Gothic traditional’ (to paraphrase Dangeli/Askren 2011) and, in a sense, by ‘de-gothicizing’ it.

The alternative vision that is evident in these works is nicely highlighted when contrasted with the politics of suspicion that has informed many critical responses to the Western Gothic tradition. Many canonical Gothic texts rely on the unreliable (or suspect) status of the supernatural effects they conjure, often falling back on what critics have labeled the ‘supernatural explained’ (a term applied to Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic writings) which comes down on the side of rationalist ‘reality testing’ (the supernatural occurrences turn out to have real-life causes). In my view, the best Gothic fictions leave the onto-epistemological status of supernatural occurrences unstable, suspending the distinction between reality and illusion and thereby retaining the uncanniness of the phenomena (their association as both familiar and strange). In the Canadian settler Gothic that I outlined earlier in this essay, the ‘haunting’ effect is key to its ability to ‘settle’ colonists (and sometimes later immigrants) in place. In these texts, the Gothic maintains its basis in the uncanny, since it is at once unsettling and sustaining. In many Aboriginal-authored texts, however, the supernatural has a different status. The visions are unquestionably real, but they are not generally a source of terror. If one considers the many ghosts that appear in Thomas King’s fictions, for example – from the four ancient ‘Indians’ who wander through the narrative in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), to the various ghosts that appear in the stories in *One Good Story, That One* (1993), to the ghost girl in *Truth and Bright Water* (1999) – the ghosts have a matter-of-fact presence that does not unsettle the Native characters who interact with them (though they often disturb the White characters!). As Jennifer Andrews describes Eden Robinson’s approach in *Monkey Beach*, “she transports the Gothic to a Native context, and, rather than depicting the Haisla characters who populate the novel as potential threats to the safety of a white, Eurocentric community, these individuals form their own world in which monsters exist but are not necessarily a destructive force” (Andrews 2009, 212). The advice of Ma-ma-oo to her granddaughter Lisa in *Monkey Beach* is applicable to many Aboriginal-authored texts that assert the ‘de-gothicized’ nature

of the Aboriginal spirit world: "You don't have to be scared of things you don't understand. They're just ghosts" (2000, 265).

In frequent interviews and commentaries on her novel, Robinson has expressed her interest in Gothic horror fiction, identifying such American Gothic writers as Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King as her key literary influences.⁴ This influence is evident in her writings, though in *Monkey Beach* Robinson adds a distinctly Aboriginal twist on the Gothic, in effect recolonizing it from an Aboriginal 'meta-gothic' perspective. CBC reviewer Rachel Giese describes the novel as "Northwestern Canadian Gothic"⁵, but she does not identify what makes Robinson's 'Gothic' vision distinctive. *Monkey Beach* offers a compelling burlesquing of the traditional Gothic – complete with rotting corpses, Ouija boards, and makeshift voodoo dolls – that historically has aligned superstition and supernaturalism with primitivism or delusion (a tradition that effectively 'de-spirited' Aboriginal cultures by gothicizing them). Such models are incommensurate with Aboriginal traditions that see the spirit world to infuse everyday reality in a harmonious and sustaining way. Robinson's conscious conjuring of classic Gothic objects lures the reader into expecting a conventionally Gothic horror fiction, yet Robinson takes this incommensurability as a central theme through her self-conscious portrayal of her teenaged protagonist, Lisamarie Hill, who has inherited the ancestral ability to see and talk to spirits. The horror effects of a novelist like Stephen King become transformed in this novel as a way of reclaiming a vibrant Aboriginal spirit world (which is replete with both threatening and benevolent spirits). Richard Lane describes Robinson's approach as a fusion of Gothic and trickster stories, emphasizing the novel's status as "a critical constellation" that rejects "a simplistic and nostalgic return to the aboriginal past" (Lane 2003, 193) In his view, "the novel asserts the importance of re-learning and re-appropriating aboriginal cultural and spiritual values in relation to, and as a part of, the present, without this relational awareness being totally subsumed by present-day values" (Lane 2003, 193). Lane makes an important point that echoes Dangeli and Askren's description of the "traditionally contemporary" (Dangeli/Askren 2011) and, indeed, Highway's accounts of cross-cultural influence. All of these authors insist on the importance of contemporizing Aboriginal culture without it becoming "subsumed by present-day values" (Lane 2003, 193). It is this precarious line that Lisa treads in the course of *Monkey Beach*: she will embrace her spiritual gifts and the lessons of her grandmother, while at the same time living in a very modern, and irrevocably westernized, world.

4 See, for example, her 2000 interview with Alan Twigg for *BC Bookworld* (http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_essay.php?id=85, accessed 10 June 2011), or her interview with Random House (http://www.randomhouse.ca/images/head_randomhouse2011.gif, accessed 10 June 2011)

5 Similarly, the *Globe and Mail* review identified it as an example of "Glorious Northern Gothic". (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/glorious-northern-gothic/article580943/>, accessed 10 June 2011)

This occupation of interfused contexts is figured in the novel through the evocation of different ways of 'reading' the supernatural. Lisa's ability to talk with ghosts is 'defamiliarized' (rendered 'strange') by her mother who has absorbed the assumptions of mainstream White society about the perceived strangeness or irrationality of Aboriginal spirituality. In the interests of 'civilizing' her daughter's inheritance, Lisa's parents send her to a city psychologist who attempts to 'cure' her of her visions. When Lisa sees the incubus attached to the doctor's neck and listens to her clichés about 'healthy' psychological adjustment, she realizes that her 'ghosts' are of a different order. In response, she strategically tells the doctor what the doctor wants to hear – "I feel a hundred times better" (Robinson 2000, 274) – in order to be left to return to her own sense of the reality of an infused spirit world. If the doctor's demon represents the spirit of self-destruction, which is in danger of infecting Lisa while she is in its presence, it communicates through lies and deception (indeed, it is whispering indignities into the doctor's ear). Lisa's monsters, by contrast, have difficulty communicating with her because she has taught herself to discount them. This is not to suggest that the Aboriginal spirits in this novel are all benign; in fact, part of Ma-ma-oo's warning to Lisa is to treat the spirits with the awe that is their due. Hence, Lisa is privy to a variety of visitations – from the crows who tell her where to search for the body of her dead brother; to the little red-haired man who creates mischievous havoc in her room whenever a death is imminent; to the "voices" in the woods that try to lure her into committing suicide. Part of the symbolic journey that is described in the book is Lisa's growing acceptance of her visions *as real* (and hence as containing significance), a knowledge she demonstrates when towards the end of the book she listens to the dream she has had of her brother on Monkey Beach and travels to that site to 'speak' with her ancestors' spirits. Together these defamiliarized hauntings reveal Robinson's self-conscious 'writing back' to conventional Gothic traditions that associate monstrosity and ghosts with psychotic hallucination and intra-psychic terror.

This process of 'writing back' to the Western Gothic tradition is epitomized in Drew Hayden Taylor's *The Night Wanderer: A Gothic Novel* (2007) which tells the tale of an Anishnaabe vampire.⁶ In the story, a young man named Owl is born during the onset of the European fur trade. Owl (later named Pierre L'Errant) leaves North America with some French traders because he wants to see the world. In France, he is bitten by a vampire and eventually wanders Europe as a vampire for centuries before deciding to return to his ancestral land to die. The Gothic infection that torments Owl is figured as a Western disease (for power, for immortality) which he seeks to overcome by returning to his ancestral village (now the Otter Lake Reserve in central Ontario) and honourably ending his life. The Gothic effect of the book is an overtly counter-discursive one, as the reader waits for the expected Gothic mo-

6 My thanks to the audience after my GKS presentation in February 2011 for their insightful contribution to this segment of the essay, and for the discussion about *The Night Wanderer*.

ments (vampire biting unsuspecting innocents) only to find these expectations subverted by the portrait of a mourning monster who yearns to be repatriated on Canadian soil. "You don't often feel sorry for vampires" (Hayden Taylor 2007, 208), one of the characters in the book states, but in this case, one does. As Pierre fails to comply with expected Gothic behaviour, the reader gradually gleans that he is in fact returning to his Aboriginal roots by cleansing himself through a fasting ceremony. He is slowly committing suicide, through a pure act of will, by first purifying himself through fasting, and at the end, by greeting the sun in a sunrise ceremony (burning sage while sitting on a hill facing east) when he will be destroyed by the light.

In the novel, Pierre L'Errant compares himself to a Windigo, and indeed, if there is a manifestly Gothic character in Aboriginal cultures, it is the figure of the Windigo. In many contemporary fictions, this monster has been transformed to emblemize the voraciousness of colonial destruction. In this case, the Gothic, which was so often used to figure Aboriginal cultures as barbaric, is turned back on the colonizer's tradition by 'gothicizing' imperial processes. Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005), and Armand Garnet Ruffo's recent award-winning film, *A Windigo Tale* (2010), conjure the Windigo as a way of critiquing colonists' efforts to erase Aboriginal presence from Canada. More profoundly, through their meditation on ideas of 'savagery,' these works play on colonialist representations of 'aboriginality' as uncanny, and, by turning the tables, reveal the barbaric and insatiable hunger of the imperialist enterprise, which continues, through the monstrous resurgence of colonial legacies, into the present day. Ultimately, if there is an 'unhomely' effect of these and other Native spirits, it is directed primarily at non-Native readers, since these spirits point not only to the incompleteness of the project of settlement, but to the incompleteness of Aboriginal *displacement*, and, perhaps, to the inadequacy of a postcolonial epistemology that relegates the past to a memory effect rather than to a material here and now.

6. Conclusion

This variety of Canadian hauntings demonstrates the ways the Gothic can be used to effect different forms of postcolonial intervention – from expressions of colonial anxiety, to anti-colonial assertion, to postcolonial atonement, to meta-Gothic disruption, to interrogations of the containing aspects of national hauntings themselves. The settler Gothic tradition in English Canada invoked Gothic spectres to initiate nation-based claims to antiquity, legitimation, and communal definition. Rather than using ghosts to highlight a state of incompleteness, these ghosts were courted as a source of inscription. Historically, hauntings became a way to close a perceived gap within history, forging a continuity between past and present which the rupture of colonization and migration had unsettled. Construing the Gothic

tradition as both a fading memory and a cultural-historical will o' the wisp, many of the authors I have been considering demonstrate how the category 'Canadian' is haunted by its uncanny relation to the Gothic tradition itself.

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