SOUTH AFRICAN GOTHIC: ANXIETY AND CREATIVE DISSENT IN *THE POST-APARTHEID IMAGINATION AND BEYOND* (2018) BY REBECCA DUNCAN

Review by Madelyn Schoonover

Duncan, Rebecca. *South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-apartheid Imagination and Beyond.* University of Wales Press, 2018. 265pp.

In *South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-apartheid Imagination and Beyond* (2018), Rebecca Duncan traces the Gothic anxieties and aesthetics in South African literature from the *plaasroman* (farm novel) of the early and mid-twentieth century to the neoliberal and Globalgothic novels of the early twenty-first century. Over the course of five chapters, including an introduction and ending coda, Duncan builds an argument that speaks to an under-recognised tradition of Gothic poetics in South Africa. Focusing her observations on what she argues are Gothic iterations of land, indigenous culture, epistemology, memory, and violence, Duncan demonstrates that there is lingering trauma in South African literature that illuminates past colonial atrocities that refuse to be laid to rest. However, Duncan also argues that the trauma and memory demonstrated by the diverse texts she explores may also have the power to, if not *heal* past wrongs, then at least address – or begin to address – a history that should not be forgotten. Although, as Duncan notes, South African Gothic studies is a relatively young and largely unrecognised field, this book contributes strongly not only to the establishment of a particularly South African set of Gothic sensibilities, but also to the wider field of Postcolonial studies as a whole.

Duncan's claim in establishing the legitimacy of a South African Gothic tradition is grounded in her useful explanation and combination of Bruno Latour's concept of modernity, Michel Foucault's concept of the utopia, and Jerrold E. Hogle's observation that – from the beginning – Gothic tropes and imagery have always represented "signs only of older signs" (quoted in Duncan 6). She posits that if, as Latour suggests, modernity represents a break between the past and the present, and if one function of Foucault's utopia is an uncanny mirror – a reflection of "society turned upside down"– then the role of the Gothic in South African contexts is to demonstrate that modernity does not exist, at least in the ways pre- and post-apartheid rhetoric and politics have largely claimed (quoted in Duncan 8). The injustices of colonisation and apartheid are brought to life in South African literature through Gothic figures such as ghosts, corpses, incestuous children, and underground labyrinths as they symbolise the inverse of a utopic 'rainbow nation.'

As Duncan analyses the skeletons hidden in South African literature, so too does she

critique the buried nature of South Africa's real historical past. Following the work of critics such as André Brink, Ingrid de Kok, and Mamood Mamdani, the author points out that apartheid history has not been exorcised despite the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and their extensive cataloguing of apartheid atrocities (93, 124). Although South Africa has tried to rebrand itself post-apartheid as a 'rainbow nation,' for Duncan, this is a largely empty sentiment. She notes that the rainbow nation, with its connection to neoliberalism and therefore renewed and rebranded racial and social inequality, "promises, after all, its own version of modernity […] it posits a present and future sharply marked off from the characteristics of the past" (34). The author posits that any attempt to forget the past would be to perpetuate its violent natures into the future, an underlying theme of many of the novels she explores. Throughout her book, Duncan illuminates the ways in which haunted ground represents a spectral colonial memory, the importance of such a memory (even when fragmented, unspeakable, or category-defying), and the ways in which global capital and neoliberalism have reinstituted the very inequalities South Africa was supposedly moving away from during the post-apartheid period.

One of the greatest strengths of Duncan's book is her engagement with criticism and her ability to intermingle her own ideas and theories with those of other authors. In fact, Duncan's explanations of critical theory, along with her descriptions of South Africa's history, are often so thorough and clear that readers do not need to be familiar with all the texts in order to follow her connections between history, theory, and the passages of novels and plays provided. By giving the reader a thorough foundation of criticism and historical fact before discussing a particular text, the author draws the reader along her line of argumentation with finesse. Overall, this gives the reader a frequently seamless read as they are asked to travel from one text, theory, or historical moment to another.

Particularly interesting and well-argued in regard to theory is Duncan's connection between Freud's uncanny and the physical space of the farmland in early twentieth century and interregnum South African *plaasroman* novels. For Duncan, as ordered and idyllic as the visible farmland in these novels may be, it is undergirded by what she called the "pastoral unconscious" or that which lies beneath – what needed to be exorcised from the white colonising consciousness in order to justify ownership of the land (46). The links between violence, territory, land ownership, a "naturalization of racial hierarchy," and the Freudian unconscious are convincing in Duncan's readings of the *plaasroman*, and easily applicable to other colonised spaces, such as the United States (45). In this way, the analysis succeeds in being specific to South African texts, but also provides a useful articulation of how the colonised ground functions as the subconscious in Postcolonial literary texts as a whole.

Convincing, also, is Duncan's argument regarding the importance of memory – and yet one which is fragmented and often unspeakable. Building off Vijay Mishra's theory that the "[g]othic topoi of death" represents "that which cannot be illuminated or understood," Duncan charts the ways in which images of horror, violence, and death mark an unspeakable South African history (115). This point, for example, is argued through her reading of wounds in South African Gothic literature

as "the sign behind which there opens up an excess of meaning that, while it cannot be contained or entirely comprehended, is nonetheless apprehensible as the point beyond which understanding cannot proceed" (130-131). Indeed, the ability to know or to speak knowledge – especially of a loss or past violence – becomes a motif Duncan returns to throughout each chapter. It is what allows her to continually relate atrocities of colonisation and apartheid to the interregnum and post-apartheid periods. What links texts like Nadine Gordimer's *Six Feet of the Country* (1956) and Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010) across time, it seems, is the continued inability of their protagonists to find meaning in a colonising epistemology that has attempted to erase a violent past.

However, there is one area of criticism that remains underexplored in the text. This is the connection – or perhaps disconnect – between Gothic and Magical Realism texts. Duncan touches on the idea of Magical Realism two distinct times in connection with two different novels. The first is in Chapter Three – "Writing Phantoms" – where she uses Lucie Armitt's definition to explain the differences between Gothic and Magical Realism (105). Although the author goes on to note that André Brink's "magical realism, woven as it is around silenced legacies of violence in South Africa, is often gothic in its attribution of a chilling priority to its haunting presences" and discusses his book *The Rights of Desire* (2000), the relationship between Gothic and Magical Realism – and how distinct that relationship is – remains underexplored (106). This is especially true in comparison to the clear articulation of other theories and areas of study mentioned above. Duncan returns to the concept of Magical Realism in the coda, with the novel *Holy Hill* (2007) by Angelina N. Sithebe. Yet again, it is largely unclear why Duncan incorporates Brenda Cooper's Magical Realist discussion of *Holy Hill* into her own understanding of the text as Gothic, since as she points out, Cooper argues that ideally, Magical Realist plots would not contain Gothic poetics, as they would instead depict an epistemological prioritisation of indigenous cultures (180-181). Duncan even goes so far as to state that *Holy Hill* is "not ideal – or not immediately ideal" in terms of Gothic criticism (181). However, this reading of *Holy Hill* is grounded in Gothic poetics. Once Duncan begins her own analysis of the novel, the Gothic elements she touches upon overshadow any Magical Realist lens. Since a textual analysis via a lens of Magical Realism is abandoned quite quickly by Duncan – or appears to be – it is surprising it is brought up to begin with, especially at the very beginning of her final, coda chapter.

This lack of definition in regards to Magical Realism appears minor, however, in relation to the breadth of historical and literary knowledge which Duncan demonstrates. The aim of this work is in part to give voice and credibility to an under-explored area of critical exploration – South African fiction as Gothic – and it can only be said that Duncan succeeds in this regard. In connecting South African Gothic both to traditional European understandings of Gothic tropes, as well as to the specific cultures and histories of the spaces in which each text she explores exists, Duncan demonstrates the creative agency that South African writers enact by their engagement with both global and local Horror. In so doing, Duncan's *South African Gothic* offers to Gothic and Postcolonial scholars alike an original reading of a wide array of texts from the early twentieth to early twenty-first centuries. Not only does Duncan contribute to a young and growing field with this work, she also manages to avoid a pitfall many other critics of Postcolonial Gothic fall prey to by re-imagining that the cycle of violence in Gothic texts is not inevitable and can one day end. Significantly, Duncan sees

violence and trauma in South African Gothic as potentially pointing towards a way out of cycles of violence.

Duncan leaves readers with this interesting possibility for the power of creative dissent in South African literature:

> Assembled in the language of the gothic, the fragments of traumas that impinge upon the present both testify to territories of violence, and they emerge in the texts as figures of mourning, remembering without remembering fully, and thus potentiating a future that – because of this ceaseless engagement – does not replicate the past. (192)

This is a refreshing interpretation of a potential meaning and sense of social progress to be found in the violence and trauma of Gothic texts. It is an interpretation informed by Judith Butler's observations on the relationship between injury, reflection, and ethical action, and by Xavier Aldana Reyes's observations on the aesthetics and affecting power of body Gothic – a horror that connects readers more viscerally to a text. As Duncan puts it, "vulnerability" in South African Gothic literature and particularly in the post-apartheid, neoliberal, and Globalgothic novel *Zoo City* "becomes the locus from which an ethical project ensues" (175).

Rooted effectively in history and criticism, and with a clear sense of purpose and style, Duncan's *South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-apartheid Imagination and Beyond* is a must-read for scholars of Postcolonial Gothic.

BIONOTE

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