The Incredible Nineteenth Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale

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About *I19*

The Incredible Nineteenth Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale (*I19*) seeks to publish the finest scholarship on the century that was, in many ways, the time period in which the modern genres of science fiction and fantasy began, and in which the academic study of fairy tale and folklore has its roots. *I19* interprets "the nineteenth century" broadly, using the dates of "The Long Nineteenth Century"—roughly, from the beginning of the French Revolution to the end of World War I—but even these dates are just notable historical markers as they approximately coincide with Romanticism and Modernism, respectively. Scholarship on works from the eighteenth century that anticipated or influenced writers in the nineteenth century or ways in which nineteenth-century literature influenced later authors both fall within the interests of this journal. *I19* also publishes scholarship on Neo-Victorianism, Steam Punk, or any other contemporary genres that react to the time periods contained within The Long Nineteenth Century. Genres such as horror and mystery, though not strictly within the realms of the fantastic, are also welcome, due to their close affinity with science fiction and fantasy. Scholarship on early film is also welcome. Additionally, *I19* is dedicated to maintaining a scope that is both multicultural and global, and we encourage submissions on works from marginalized communities and around the world.

In addition to literary scholarship, *I19* also publishes works on pedagogy. These pieces may be personal reflections, strategies on course design, innovative assignment sheets with commentary, or anything else that educators teaching nineteenth-century literature may find useful.

Finally, *I19* maintains robust Book Reviews and Media Reviews sections. Book reviews cover a wide array of recent scholarly works, and media reviews cover film, television, video games, and any other form of mass media.

Queries and submissions may be sent to i19@mtsu.edu. We accept submissions on a rolling basis, and there are no author fees. Generative AI may not be used to produce text.

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From the Editor

The International Nineteenth Century

James Hamby

In my opening remarks for the fourth annual conference of *I19*, I made the statement that I hoped, in some small way, our online gathering would serve as a reminder in these troubling times that we are all global citizens. The conference had registered attendees from seventeen different countries spread out across four continents and thirteen time zones. One panel featured presenters from Hong Kong, Wisconsin, and Poland. A professor in Sarajevo made plans to email a researcher in the United Kingdom to discuss their interest in William Morris. A graduate student from Portugal shared with her international audience that this was her first time presenting her work. A professor from Oman and her student presented on environmental sustainability in nineteenth-century British fantasy and Arabic fairy tale traditions. The conference was a place of exchanging ideas and exploring shared interests regardless of borders.

One of the founding visions of *I19* is that knowledge should be free, which is why the journal is an online open educational resource, and the conference has no registration fee and is hosted on Zoom so that nobody has to pay to travel. This is especially important for early career academics, non-tenured instructors, and anyone who does not have institutional support for travel. Breaking the financial barriers that prevent full participation in academic research conferences by *all* members of academia is becoming increasingly important in a world that is growing more hostile to free speech generally, and to academic freedom in particular, especially in the United States.

The nineteenth century, of course, has many dark legacies. Imperialism, genocide, and the slave trade of this era, among other atrocities, shaped the world in which we live. As scholars of the nineteenth century, it is important for us to remember what others suffered so that we can make a better future. In many ways, it feels that we in the twenty-first century have not only failed to correct the mistakes of the past, but that we are, in fact, repeating them. In my home state of Tennessee, congressional districts have been gerrymandered with the intent of minimizing the voices of African Americans in Memphis—a clear indication that an attempt at a new Jim Crow era is at hand.

Another foundational pillar of *I19* is that the journal and conference should be international and multicultural, and I am pleased to say that Issue 4.1 does an exemplary job in this respect. Our first article, "Science (Fiction), Ethiopianism, and the Transracial in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*" by Kieran Sommer explores the way Pauline Hopkins confronted the racism of her time, while our second article, "A Grave Error: The Duty of Declaring Death in Nineteenth-Century France" by W.

Bradley Holley looks at the medical workers responsible for declaring death (and thus preventing live burials) in France. Our Media Reviews section contains a special forum discussing Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025). The forum features an international group of scholars who take different approaches to analyzing the film, ranging from gender studies to postcolonial critiques. In addition, in our regular Media Reviews section, editor Joe Conway looks at the neoliberal inheritance of the CBS sitcom *Ghosts* (2021-) and how its characters exist in a state of tension owing to the racist transgressions of the past. Leslie Loenard's review of *Sinners* (2025) engages with themes of White vampirism, and Bethany Dahlstrom's review of a recent stage adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897) details how the stage company "imitating the dog" reworks the narrative to portray a modern British man terrified of non-European immigrants. Our Book Reviews section likewise contains multicultural offerings with reviews of Terry L. Norton's *Trickster Tales of Southeastern Native Americans* (2024) and of Kimberly J. Lau's *Specters of the Marvelous: Race and the Development of the European Fairy Tale* (2025), by Henry Kirby and Britta Kallin, respectively. Furthermore, much like the conference, this issue of *I19* features scholars from across the globe.

Most academic journals of nineteenth-century literature maintain a rigid divide between American and British literature and relegate anything outside these two traditions to the vague category of "non-Western." Though I study mainly British literature, this divide never made much sense to me, as authors on both sides of the Atlantic were writing in similar cultural and historical contexts. Furthermore, especially considering the growth of global trade networks and imperialism at this time and the cultural exchanges they enabled, it makes far more sense to study the nineteenth century with a global perspective to see the vast and profound changes that were occurring in the world at this time, and the ways that the events of the nineteenth century still impact us today.

Hopefully, this issue of *I19* will leave its readers with a sense that, as global citizens, engaging with the texts and films studied here will make us all aware of our place in an interconnected world, and of the obligations we all bear to resist the powers that want to divide us and to instead work together to make a better future for everyone.

Articles

Science (Fiction), Ethiopianism, and the Transracial in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*

Kieran Sommer

Since Pauline E. Hopkins's works were unearthed from relative obscurity by Ann Allen Shockley's biographical article in 1972 and the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers republished her novels in 1988, there has been a growing academic interest in her life and work as an author, editor, and activist and an increasing prominence of her fiction, especially of her novels (Bergman 181). Her fourth novel, *Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self* (1902–03), has been embraced and marketed as a work of early science fiction or speculative fiction: MIT Press includes it in its *Radium Age* series dedicated to proto-science fiction of the early twentieth century ("Radium Age") and its book description points towards the novel's hidden Ethiopian city anteceding Marvel Comics' Wakanda ("Of One Blood"), thus associating it with the kingdom's futuristic aesthetics. These and other descriptions[1] demonstrate that, due to its engagement with both the fantastic and the science of its time, Hopkins's *Of One Blood* can be integrated into modern science fiction traditions.[2] It is precisely through this engagement with contemporary science that the novel questions existing interracial relations in the United States and the assumptions in dominant, pseudo-scientific discourses on race. The novel presents not only a speculative future, counterfactual history, or imaginative fiction, but deals with science in the broadest sense, including history and early ethnography, to more accurately represent interracial relations and the difficulties of racial distinction.

Upon its publication in the *The Colored American Magazine* (1900-1909), the novel was actually advertized with clear references to its engagement with such nonfictional issues. Its serialization and first instalment were announced in the "Editorial and Publishers' Announcements" section of the periodical's October 1902 issue, which included the following description: "A most powerful psychological novel, it deals in no uncertain terms with both the temporal and spiritual solution of the greatest question of the age—The Negro" (478). Although the novel is associated with fictionality, the focus of the description is clearly on *Of One Blood*'s engagement with, and solution to, Black social and political issues of its time.[3]

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[1] The Broadview Press website blurb and scholar Paul R. Cooper in the 2024 essay collection *Marvels and Wonders: Reading, Researching, and Writing About Science Fiction and Fantasy,* for instance, refer to the novel as "Afro-futurist" and "Speculative Fiction" respectively, although "Afro-futurism" as a generic label can of course be questioned (see Cooper).

[2] In their writing on the novel, scholars have also identified features of other genres: Melissa Asher Daniels and Valerie Rohy, for instance, regard it as incorporating elements of the Gothic (158), the latter also regarding Hopkins drawing on Romantic adventure fiction (215), and Julie A. Fiorelli identifies it as featuring lost-race romance elements (453).

[3] This is, of course, not to say that fiction is not political.

However, this engagement is not limited by national or racial demarcations. As Adenike Marie Davidson has observed, while Hopkins's previous three novels had employed domestic settings (178), *Of One Blood* focuses on Africa and the Black Diaspora, connecting its protagonists with a fictionalized Ethiopia. This has led many scholars, such as Nadia Nurhussein, Mandy A. Reid, or Elizabeth West to focus on the novel's Pan-Africanist, Black nationalist or Ethiopianist features. As Reid explains, Ethiopianism was an element of Black nationalism that developed around the turn of the nineteenth century and conceptualized a future rebirth of a Black civilization and concomitant decline of White civilization on the basis of Psalms 68:31: "Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands to God" (94). In this time, as Davidson has shown, there was a renewed inclination among African Americans to engage in or consider African expatriation, and *Of One Blood* can be interpreted as contributing to this discourse, proposing Ethiopia as an alternative global home for people of African ancestry to develop their cultural and social potential (163–64).

At the same time, its Ethiopianist and Pan-African elements should not obscure *Of One Blood*'s commitment to conceptions of common humanity and civilizational genealogies interconnecting societies and histories of different nations and races. As Paul Gilroy argues, Black American cultures cannot be reduced to simply being on a single narrative trajectory towards geographical spaces within the boundaries drawn by the nation state, like the United States, or within a continent like Africa (30). Due to Black experiences of oppression and displacement, tensions and contradictions inherent in claims of national affiliation and contrasting identities or subjectivities have become central components of African American intellectual history (30).

Based on Gilroy's work, I would argue that Hopkins's novel, while centrally focused on the relations between a fictionalized Ethiopia and the United States, roots its arguments against racial discrimination and marginalization in a common humanity as well as transnational and transracial intellectual trajectories—"trans" in these contexts meaning that these identities extend beyond the narrow identifications with one nation or race to form new kinds of associations or affinities.[4] The multiple identifications of the novel with African Americans, the Pan-African and human commonalities can be considered one of African Americans' "inescapable pluralities," as Gilroy puts it (30). In combination with each other, these identifications can create identity multiplicities as alternatives to dominant categorizations of the racial and national that restrict African American potential and rationalize dehumanizing practices. Moreover, the various connections of African Americans with the United States, the Black Diaspora, and humanity place them firmly within intellectual and civilizational histories that counter claims of their supposed inferiority. To assert such multidirectional African American belonging, Hopkins engages with the pseudo-science of her time in *Of One Blood* by creating counternarrative around monogenetic origins and transracial civilizational history. Although the fictional components certainly add to this counternarrative against contemporary dominant science, an exclusive focus on the novel as purely fiction instead of on its engagement with (pseudo)science does not recognize the latter's argumentative potential.

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[4] The English prefix "trans" may refer to an "entrance into a new state" or "the sense of going beyond or exceeding" (Field 6–7).

In this essay, I will therefore focus not on the futuristic technologies of Hopkins's fictional Ethiopia, but on the novel's engagement with scientific discourse in combination with the novel's transracial orientations. I will analyze how Hopkins's science (fiction) counters contemporary pseudoscientific racial discourses and how it interlinks Hopkins's Ethiopianism or Pan-Africanism and transracial conceptions of humanity. Although my readings will mainly focus on *Of One Blood*, I will also examine Hopkins's non-fiction writings as these can bring new perspectives on the novel and the pseudoscientific discourses it engages with.

(Pseudo)Scientific Racialization and Ethiopian Historical Heritage

While in modern theorizations race is understood as a signifier, meaning that "racialized behavior and difference needs to be understood as a discursive, not necessarily as a genetic or biological fact," as Stuart Hall phrases it (361), numerous scholars, such as historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, have shown that from the mid-nineteenth to the twentieth century, discourses around race claimed that racial differences were biologically determined (178, see also Brooks 152). For instance, Jacobson writes that Americans categorized humanity into distinct biotic groups according to bodily and behavioral properties and interpreted physical traits as markers of mental or moral capacities (32). As social anthropologist Audrey Smedley has documented, these biotic groups and the ascribed mental capacities and inclinations in turn were used to place human social groups into racial hierarchies, which were established in popular discourse and institutionalized in United States legal and governmental practice (26–28). Jacobson shows that this pseudoscientific racism was widespread in institutions of learning, as part of intellectual or scientific corpora and in cultural productions, such as visual and vernacular representations of race (181), so much so that, as Juliet Hooker writes, any writer critically discussing race had to at least engage with these beliefs (5–6).

As scholars like Jill Bergman have established, Hopkins was one of many writers and orators doing so, both in her work as an author for publications like *The Voice of the Negro* (1904-1907) and as editor of the *The Colored American Magazine* (182). As one of the most influential African American periodicals with the largest racially mixed readership in the twentieth century's first decade (Wallinger 50, Williams 38), *The Colored American Magazine* was a medium through which Hopkins could disseminate her ideas and narratives to a relatively wide audience of both African American and White American readers.[5] A so-called "race journal," the magazine informed its readership with texts about scientific findings, political and historical developments, culture and the arts, and biography alongside its fiction (Carby xxxiv, Knight 56). Much like with its advertisements, the magazine placed various texts with differing opinions within its pages and issues, creating what C. K. Doreski terms a "marketplace of ideas" (72), in which readers could read about divergent views, weigh arguments, and make up their own minds. Through her editorial work, Hopkins aided in presenting these ideas to the magazine's readers; but, as Hanna Wallinger has shown, she also contributed a variety of texts herself, including nonfictional ones, such as biographical sketches, ethnographical texts, and essays under different pseudonyms (7). Therefore, she was not simply an editor publishing in the magazine, but a voice for her community and, to use Doreski's term, a "race historian" promoting racial awareness and pride (72). One of the ways in which she did so was through her depictions of Ethiopia in *Of One Blood.*

Nurhussein explains that mythmaking around a historical Ethiopia was central for Ethiopianism, writing on the country being a source of racial pride and uplift for African Americans more generally (279). As Davidson shows, positive depictions of Ethiopia provided proof of past glory and a history free of the savagery ascribed by White accounts to people of African ancestry on both sides of the Atlantic (169), creating a progenitor culture that associated Hopkins's fellow African Americans with an honorable historical heritage and venerability as a race. Moreover, Davidson writes that the contemporary Ethiopian Empire maintaining its independence and sovereignty during the so-called "Scramble for Africa" further provided an example of successful resistance to European imperialism (167), which also undermined the White order of racial hierarchies (Nurhussein 286).

In *Of One Blood*, Hopkins goes one step further by connecting Ethiopia with an Afro-European history of civilizations in a conversation between her protagonist Reuel Briggs, an African American scholar passing as White, and the English Professor Stone during their scientific expedition to the ancient Ethiopian city of Meroe. Stone states that Black Ethiopians are "'the most ancient source of all that you value in modern life, even antedating Egypt,'" which took on and developed Ethiopian arts, science, and knowledge (520–21). The English professor even explains that as Adam was made from the earth and that black was the original human skin color, with the actual mystery being how some humans became white (521). These novel evaluations of ancient history and biblical narrative depict Ethiopians and, more generally, Blackness as the primal origin not only of ancient civilizations, but of humanity. Reuel answers:

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[5] It should be noted that in comparison to established White publications this audience was still relatively small because, as Hazel Carby points out, approximately half of the African American population remained illiterate (xxxiv).

> "Your theories may be true, Professor, but if so, your discoveries will establish the primal existence of the Negro as the most ancient source of all that you value in modern life, even antedating Egypt. How can the Anglo-Saxon world bear the establishment of such a theory?" [To which Stone responds:] "You and I, Briggs, know that the theories of prejudice are swept away by the great tide of facts. It is a fact that Egypt drew from Ethiopia all the arts, sciences and knowledge of which she was mistress." (520–21)

Through its description of Egypt and thereby Western Europe and the United States drawing on Ethiopian civilization, the novel undermines the basis for Black discrimination and disenfranchisement by the "Anglo-Saxon" or dominant White culture, namely the pseudoscientific theories that denied them higher intellectual capacities, but also cultural and historical heritage (Reid 98). In this alternative Black ethnology, as West writes, Africa is thereby not only the place of origin for African Americans, but for a genealogy of civilizations and humanity itself (195). African Americans thereby become the inheritors of an ancient Ethiopian civilization, to which modern scientific and intellectual advancements, including those of European and White American cultures, can be traced.

Stone's claim of "theories of prejudice" being "swept away" by facts (521) is also indicative of the importance assigned to fact-based science as countering pseudoscientific rationales for racial prejudice and thereby Black oppression, linking the latter to ignorance and falsehood in contrast to the truth of fact-based scientific work. These facts include biblical references, the use of which are not unusual in the contexts of arguments about race; as Edlie Wong documents, African American ethnologies often drew on biblical texts alongside scientific ones, for instance to support monogenesis[6] (726). Walter Benn Michaels writes that the reference in Acts 17:26, translated as "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" in the King James Bible (King James Bible Online), from which the novel takes its title, thus became vital for nineteenth-century anti-racist discourse in this context (100). By presenting monogenesis as truth in *Of One Blood*, Hopkins counters arguments for inequality within humanity as a species due to different biological origins, such as the wrongful claim that Black people had a closer evolutionary relation to hominid apes.

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[6] As Pascha A. Stevenson explains, monogenesis refers to the theory that humanity shares one biological origin and is supported by evolutionary theory (422).

The reference to Adam being Black in *Of One Blood* does not simply assert monogenetic origins as argued for on the basis of biblical texts; rather, by suggesting that the whole of humanity is actually descended from a supposedly inferior race, namely a Black individual, this claim undermines the very basis for polygenesis and its advocates' attempts to isolate purportedly inferior races from the superior ones in their biological origins.

Interracial Relations and Telassar as Counterprojection

As Sarita Nyasha Cannon has shown, racial science also stressed the importance of racial purity, with cultural and pseudoscientific depictions disparaging and pathologizing mixed-race people as stunted in their development, tragic, confused, or physically and mentally inferior (4). Due to this supposed inferiority and their very existence calling into question the allegedly fixed boundaries between the races, there were many anxieties around miscegenation[7] among White Americans (Daniels-Rauterkus 72). This led United States lawmakers to attempt to control cross-racial sexuality, with most states passing laws against miscegenation in their constitutions in the latter half of the nineteenth century (72). Black and White historical experience and development were thus separated according to racially exclusive understandings of Americanness, which, as Gilroy has documented, stood in contrast to the mixed, creolized, or hybrid identities established in the Americas through immigration, displacement, and enslavement (2).

Hopkins's depiction of the city of Telassar, in which ancient Ethiopian civilization and its scientific achievements continue, can be considered a "counterprojection" to United States racial realities, as Melissa Asher Daniels phrases it (169–70). The appearances of the Ethiopians Reuel first sees are described as presenting diverse features associated with race, their complexions varying in tone from a "creamy tint to purest ebony" and their hair textures ranging from "soft, waving curls to the crispness of the most pronounced African type" (546). The diversity of the people's complexions is certainly in no way linked with decline, confusion, or inferiority; on the contrary, Telassar appears to be a socially harmonic, just, and developed society and, as Valerie Rohy writes, its highly developed science, learning, art, and politics are set against the primitivism and prehistoric status of other African countries like Ottoman-ruled Tripolitania as well as the injustices and grotesqueness of the United States (224). In fact, Telassarians seem not to deduce any social distinctions from skin pigmentation in their society.

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[7] From the Latin "miscere" (to mix) and "genus" (race), miscegenation refers to parents of different races having children together (Rutkowski 126).

In the absence of more remarks on the Ethiopian people, Hopkins's nonfiction writing can actually provide some indication of her views on appearance and race. Two years after *Of One Blood*'s publication, Hopkins writes in her concluding article of the series *The Dark Races of the Twentieth Century* for the periodical *The Voice of the Negro*: "The color of the skin, texture of the hair, the developments of the cranium and even language, are not infallible indications of race origin" (461). Written for another African American magazine and in an article series providing overviews of histories and customs of the world's non-White races, this passage indicates that she did not view race as categorizable according to individual appearance, such as pigmentation or hair texture. Though, as Pascha A. Stevenson has demonstrated, passages in *Of One Blood* may be read as Hopkins presenting physical features as indicative of mental qualities according to widespread assumptions in the United States during the Long Nineteenth Century (430), these are certainly not features that enable racial categorization. In fact, she ascribes differing developments of races to the influences of their environment in her *The Voice of the Negro* article (461). In the self-published *A Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the African Race* (1905), she attributes darker skin color to higher intensity of sunlight in hotter climates (297),[8] thus countering views of race being assigned by biological essence as reflected in an individual's appearance and of color solely being a matter of heredity.

There is no reason to assume that Hopkins changed her position on these issues between finishing the final instalment of *Of One Blood* and writing these nonfiction texts. In fact, Hopkins explicitly refers to the influence of environment on races in her descriptions of Tripoli in *Of One Blood*, in which her narrator remarks that "there is an intimate relation between the character of a country and that of its people" (509). This does not of course negate the individual culture and cultural heritage of races, but, as Daniels writes, it opposes differentiation between them as a rationale for their separation or oppression (173). The above reading of *A Primer of Facts* and the "Dark Races" article thus raises the question of why the Telassar inhabitants' skin tones vary in this way. This may be due to the intermarriage of people with different skin pigmentation from a story-world perspective or, from that of the author, to present the city as a microcosm of African ethnicities or even races of color as united in one space. Regardless of which is the case, however, Hopkins stressing that, as Professor Stone states in the novel, "'all records of history, sacred and profane, unite in placing the Ethiopian as the primal race'" (521), presents this people as the primogenitor ethnicity for all of humanity, to whom not only Black Americans can trace their origins, regardless of their skin pigmentation.

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[8] This is an example of racial environmentalism in the sciences of the Long Nineteenth Century, namely, as both Barbara Champury Lucas (66) and John David Smith (24, 33) explain, the theory that races shared a common descent, but that their environments created different conditions that led to their differences and varying developmental stages.

Hopkins also advocated for transnational identification among people of color in her nonfiction. As some scholars have noted, *A Primer of Facts*, for instance, encourages African Americans to recognize their shared transnational identity with the worldwide Black Diaspora and other lands inhabited by races of color (O'Brien 258, Wallinger 7). Similarly, the diversity of pigmentation in Telassar may imply that different communities of color can work and live together for mutual benefit. Regardless of the reasoning behind this description, it certainly seems that Hopkins wishes to depict the city as diverse and cosmopolitan and thus creates a kingdom in which people of different skin tones live together without distinctions of color being of any consequence, contrasting completely with the United States of her time.

Hopkins also includes the marriage of her protagonist Reuel Briggs with the Ethiopian Queen Candace in her novel, thus reconnecting African Americans with Ethiopian civilization and heritage through the metonymic link of a country with a representative female, a common feature of American and European writing, as Julia A. Fiorelli has shown (462, 465). Especially in the racially fraught context of the United States, marriage was the most powerful indicator of social equality between individuals and their families (Rutkowski 127), thus showing that an African American, also one of mixed racial ancestry who has passed as White, is socially equal to an Ethiopian queen. This is further symbolically reinforced by Reuel having a birthmark in the form of a lotus lily, which proves his membership in the Ethiopian royal family (535). The inheritance of royalty by blood therefore seems to be unaffected by racial backgrounds. Reuel's African ancestry is certainly not the "disgrace" it is considered in the United States, as he explains to Ai, the Ethiopian prime minister (560). Rather, Hopkins's seemingly omniscient narrator foretells that the marriage will "give to the world a dynasty of dark-skinned rulers, whose destiny should be to restore the prestige of an ancient people" (570), suggesting that Reuel and Candace's descendants as a dynasty of color are of world historical importance, possibly because they will restore Ethiopia's prestige.

In this context, Candace's and Reuel's descriptions are interesting: While the latter is of mixed racial ancestry, the former is described as having "[l]ong, jet-black hair and totally free, cover[ing] her shoulders like a silken mantle; a broad, square forehead, a warm bronze complexion; thick black eyebrows, great black eyes" and "a delicate nose with quivering nostrils, teeth of dazzling whiteness behind lips as red as a rose" (568–69). Candace is "ideally perfect" (569) according to established beauty standards and her appearance has caused Sigrid Cordell to criticize Hopkins's ideology, which "appears inconsistent, or at least problematic" because while supporting racial amalgamation, Hopkins also reproduces light-skinned beauty standards through the Ethiopian queen's description (60). This may be an indication that Hopkins herself had taken on these standards or felt obligated to reproduce them for her readers to consider Candace as the ideal of beauty that she wished to present. Stevenson, on the other hand, sees Hopkins as presenting these characters with mixed racially-coded traits as superior, whether in beauty or ability, thus asserting racial amalgamation to be positive for the progeny involved (423, 440–41).

Yet despite tendencies of colorism and differentiations between "yellow" or "mulatto" people and darker skin pigmentation, people of African ancestry in the United States considered themselves of one race, regardless of whether they were more light-skinned or had possible mixed-race backgrounds, which followed the one-drop rule logic to some extent. For instance, Michaels writes that people of mixed Black and White ancestry in the works of authors like Charles Chesnutt or Hopkins herself were considered "Negroes" (60). Therefore, readers would have considered Reuel, Candace, and the other light-skinned Ethiopians as Black and especially in Candace's, but also in Reuel's case, they are unambiguously linked to African peoples and ancestry due to being the Ethiopian monarchs.

However, Hopkins also includes a narratorial passage calling into question the demarcation of White people from the Black race entirely, asking:

> who is clear enough in vision to decide who hath black blood and who hath it not? Can any one tell? No, not one; for in His own mysterious way He has united the white race and the black race in this new continent. By the transgression of the law He proves His own infallibility: 'Of one blood have I made all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth,' is as true today as when given to the inspired writers to be recorded. No man can draw the dividing line between the two races, for they are both of one blood! (607)

This suggests that a providentially ordained union of Black and White races has been realized in North American, blurring the dividing color line that served as the basis for racial segregation and the oppression of African Americans. Read alongside *A Primer of Facts* and the "Dark Races" article series, it becomes clear that the above statements reflect Hopkins's own viewpoint and were part of a larger endeavor to question White categorizations and create an alternative understanding of transracial commonalities. Thereby, Reuel Briggs becomes not only the transatlantic link between African Americans and Ethiopians, but an embodiment of that union of Black and White Americans and, also through his ability to pass as White, the blurring of racial boundaries.

Hopkins's reference to the "transgression of the law" is somewhat ambiguous in this regard. If she is referring to United States laws, this may include all interracial unions, including consensual ones; but, if the legislation in question is higher laws—which is more likely—she may be referring to the rapes perpetrated against Black women. Stevenson criticizes Hopkins's positive depiction of amalgamation in the novel as problematic because so many mixed-race individuals in the United States were conceived due to the rape of enslaved people by enslavers (434–35). However, dismissing mixed racial ancestry due to this history risks reducing individuals born under such circumstances to the crime committed against their Black mothers. By revealing Reuel, his former love interest Dianthe, and friend-turned-enemy Aubrey as siblings fathered by an enslaver shortly before the narratorial passage quoted above (606–07), Hopkins acknowledges racial amalgamation's roots in the slavery past. Transgressions are, however, not precluded from being part of a providential plan of salvation, as evinced by interpretations of the biblical human Fall as a *felix culpa*, that is, a fortunate event, considering it eventually led to human salvation through divine providence. Moreover, Stevenson also points to the possibility of interpreting Hopkins's mixed-race characters "more as metaphors for a shared biological origin and for the benefits of a a [sic] kind of racial coming together or recognition of real equality" or as embodying humankind's monogenetic origins (423, 435). Thereby, these characters symbolize the common origins of the Black and White races and the fluidity of racial ascription.

Transcending the "Color Line"

At the beginning of the century in which W. E. B. Du Bois declared the "problem of the twentieth century" to be "the problem of the color line" and of the consequences of identifications of racial difference (125),[9] Hopkins was explicitly questioning its existence. As this essay has shown,

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[9] This was part of Du Bois's address at the first Pan-African Conference, held in London between 23 and 25 July 1900: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the question as to how far differences of race—which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair—will hereafter be made the basis of

Of One Blood is one example among many of Hopkins's writings to do so and it thereby undermines the racial categorizations that serve as a basis for the disenfranchisement and oppression of social groups. In *A Primer of Facts*, Hopkins writes that through providence "in human races, running through all shades of complexion, there is but one color, modified and intensified from the purest white to the purest black" (296). Skin pigmentation thus becomes not a marker of racial difference, but a unifying element of humanity, across the spectrum where races are positioned. They may have a place on this spectrum, but as *Of One Blood*'s narrator argues, they cannot be categorized within it in absolute terms.

In the novel, Hopkins combines fictionalized scientific exchanges, biblical references, depictions of Ethiopia, and reader addresses to envision an alternative past and present that serve as a counternarrative to dominant White scientific and political discourses of her time as well as a counter-projection to the then-contemporary United States. Hopkins creates alternative conceptions of civilizational genealogy and racial development, which establish Ethiopia and thus Black people as the origin of both, making them active contributors in these respects. In this context, science is both an indicator of past Ethiopian greatness and present Ethiopian society's developedness as well as the discursive space in which struggles for awareness of such greatness and development occur.

The Colored American Magazine created a discursive space of such kind for Hopkins's novel, one shared with nonfiction texts that delved into social, ethnographic, and political topics. Combining the fictional, scientific, political, and social, Hopkins presents the possibility of differing pigmentation not possessing negative social significance, especially prominently as regards royal marriage in Ethiopia, through her depiction of Telassar. Even those *Of One Blood* readers who remained skeptical about the veracity of the scientific discourse depicted would have been presented with an alternative to envision, such as an Afro-European civilizational genealogy traced back to the ancient Ethiopians. This depiction maintains the importance of Africa in itself, not only as a point of connection for African Americans, but as an integral part of humanity.

Due to *Of One Blood*'s literary Realism elements, *The Colored American Magazine* readers who had gained even a little knowledge of contemporary United States society would have been able to place the issues addressed in the novel in relation to their own experiences and knowledge. Merely the existence of Americans like Reuel, passing as White and thus able to transcend clear racial categories,

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denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization" (125). The first statement would be made even more famous by Du Bois reusing it for the "Forethought" of his monograph *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), yet in the original context above, Du Bois frames the issue of the "color line" as one of exclusion from civilization using racial differences as a basis.

would have been sufficient demonstration of the color line not being as clearly drawn as United States pseudoscientific discourse, legislation, and jurisprudence seemed to presuppose. Like other works in science fiction and speculative fiction, this novel therefore envisions alternatives and potentials for the past, present, and future, specifically through its challenging of existing interracial relations, racial categorizations, and the oppression based on them.

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A Grave Error: The Duty of Declaring Death in Nineteenth-Century France

W. Bradley Holley

"Dans le département de l'Indre, une institutrice fut enterrée, la fosse étant voisine de la cure, on entendit des cris épouvantables, la malheureuse fut déterrée, elle expira au moment où la fosse fut ouverte" ["In the Indre department, a school teacher was buried, the grave being next to the local priest's home, dreadful cries were heard, and when the unfortunate woman was unearthed, she died at the very moment that her grave had been opened"] (Virmaître and Buguet 255). It is difficult to be sure whether this account of a young teacher being buried alive is authentic or simply sensational.[1] However, Virmaître and Buguet go on to claim that many more such accounts are the reason a certain Dr. Thouret wanted "une infinité de précautions pour lui épargner une si horrible destinée" ["countless precautions to save one from such a horrible outcome"] (256). This same doctor, while presiding over the exhumations of graves in the *cimitère des Innocents* witnessed "un assez grand nombre de cadavres et d'ossements dont la position indiquait que ces malheureux enterrés trop précipitamment étaient revenus à la vie" ["enough cadavers and bones whose positions indicated that these unfortunate beings were buried too quickly and came back to life"] (Peron-Autret 16). Many more accounts, ranging from members of the nobility, young women, and men of the church (the case of Abbé Prévost being perhaps the most circulated), illustrate the very present danger of being mistaken as dead and subsequently buried alive. The fear of premature burial in the eighteenth and nineteenth century took such a hold on the minds of people that the introduction of a new kind of doctor sprang forth, a doctor whose sole responsibility was the verification of death (or life) within their clients, a *médecin des morts*. Even though these doctors became a part of public policy as salaried civil servants, and even though they were known to the people and families they served within Paris, literary representations depicting these doctors are few. The most well-known fictional representation can be found within Emile Zola's short story "La Mort d'Olivier Bécaille" (1884*)*, a text wherein Olivier Bécaille enters a death-like state and is buried while still alive. This claustrophobic catastrophe could have been avoided by the professional whose job was to study the body and declare definitively that Olivier was indeed alive or dead. Zola's tale, and others like it, feeds on the fear that has taken hold in the minds of the nineteenth-century French population, particularly those within the capital of Paris. This paper will explore some of the historical practices and literary examples of the *médecin des morts*, with particular attention to Zola's short story.

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[1] The account that seems the most credible from this period is still a second-hand account. Marin Bunoust explains that a surgeon, Mr. Devaux, had a house servant, Marie Isabeau, who had nearly been buried three times. She had seemed to return to life only when she was about to be put into the grave. He concludes that on the fourth time they kept her in the house for nearly a full week before finally burying her (37).

The profession of a *médecin des morts* came about as the fear of premature burial spread throughout France, spurred by urban legends and Romanticism's "morbid attention to everything mysterious and terrifying" (Cascella 346). This fear, taphophobia, certainly predates Romanticism, though. We see elements of it throughout mythology and classical literature, such as the entombment of Jesus Christ, and the tragic ending to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliette* (1597) suggests the need to verify the actual death of a loved one. What sets this period apart from the those of ages and movements before is the attachment to the medical profession with a positivist approach to the question of life and death: "Il est également bien connu que 'le problème de la définition Clinique de la mort s'est posé dès le XVII^{e} siècle, en même temps que la médecine prenait à son compte la phobie des inhumations prématurées et s'intéressait aux limites entre mort apparente et mort réelle'" ["It is equally well known that 'the problem with the clinical definition of death was asked as early as the eighteenth century, at the same time that medicine was charged with the fear of premature burial and took interest in the line between seemingly dead and real death'"] (Palumbo 161). We can see a potential counterpoint, however, from Natalia Wójcicka, who states:

> The reasons for such a pronounced presence of the subject of premature burial in the nineteenth century may be traced to the imperfect procedures of ascertaining death in the nineteenth century, and the growing feeling that professional physicians, while being the only ones qualified to proclaim it, are far too incompetent to be entrusted with such a responsibility. (177)

Andrew Mangham points out that while there are some accounts of premature burial, it is the fear of it that takes a larger role in the minds of the nineteenth-century population: "What appears to have been most terrifying about live burial, in the nineteenth century, was not the frequency of the actual event, but the epidemic status it acquired as an anxiety" (18). It seems that Zola, like other authors of his time, took pen to paper not just to describe the horrendous experience, but perhaps to exorcise the fear of it as well. Yves le Gars states, "Comme tous les vrais textes fantastiques, 'La Mort d'Olivier Bécaille' tire sa source des obsessions et des cauchemars de l'auteur" ["Like all true fantastic texts, 'La Mort d'Olivier Bécaille' takes its inspiration from its author's obsessions and nightmares"] (10).

To further illustrate the public's obsessive fear of premature burial, it is worthy to note that, as Marco Cascella says, "Many inventors tried to take advantage of the possible business related to premature burial and produced special devices to ensure it was avoided. All sorts of arrangements were made for the construction of safety coffins: glass lids for observation, escape hatches, ropes to bells for signaling, and breathing pipes for survival until rescued" (348). These devices were only useful, however, should a living person have truly been buried—the very act that the population feared. The role of the doctor was to help confirm before the fact that the patient was, indeed, truly deceased. Patents for such devices can be found not just in France, but elsewhere in Europe and the United States as well.

Distinguishing a living patient from a deceased one may seem an easy task, but the means to do so have varied over time. In the eighteenth century, there were medical debates arguing methods and practices to ensure that no errors would be made. Jeffrey Freedman observes that "doctors had suddenly begun to issue dire warnings about the difficulty of distinguishing between 'seeming death' and real death" (360). The principal debate was whether the doctors needed to wait for the putrefaction of the body or if a settling of the eyes and rigor mortis of the deceased would be sufficient. Similarly, in part of her extensive study, Anne Carol presents this debate as one starting in the mid-eighteenth century where one side advocates waiting for evidence of bodily decomposition as the sure route to prevent premature burial—essentially letting nature take its course, something anyone should be able to identify, and the other advocating for intervention by medical professionals to inspect for rigor mortis or ocular waning. The methods of inspection prior to this century can be seen as barbaric, to say the least. The title *médecin des morts* does not appear until the nineteenth century. Before the advent of this newly initiated doctor, should verification be needed, it was the domain of a *croquemort,* or undertaker, who would perform such a task. This name is derived from the verb *croquer*—to bite—and was adopted because, should we believe the etymological legend, the *croquemort* would bite the toes of the deceased to verify their death. Giovanni Palumbo argues that this is indeed the case within the *Chanson de Roland* (ca. 1040) where Charles kisses Roland's toe, stating that it was in not a kiss, but rather a bite: "Charles n'embrasse pas l'orteil (ou le talon) de Roland, mais le mord" ["Charles doesn't kiss Roland's toe (or his heel), rather bites its"] (160). Other than biting, some of the tactics put into practice were tickling the feet; pulling out hairs, introducing a sharp object underneath the fingernails; starting small fires with cotton or amadou on the belly, thighs, or arms; or placing a hot iron on the soles of the feet—to name a few.

As we consider the unnamed doctor in "La Mort d'Olivier Bécaille," we see very few of these practices put into place. Olivier has been lying in his bed all day, presumed dead by his young wife, Marguerite, and visiting neighbors, Mme Gabin and her daughter Dédé. It is well into the night when the doctor arrives, and the room is so poorly lit that he can hardly see the body when he enters. Those around Olivier seem to prepare themselves for the worst, "Marguerite s'était levée, frissonnante. Mme Gabin avait mis Dédé sur le palier, parce qu'un enfant n'a pas besoin d'assister à ça; et elle s'efforçait d'entraîner ma femme vers la fenêtre, afin de lui épargner un tel spectacle" ["Shivering, Marguerite got up. Madame Gabin sent Dédé out to the landing because a child doesn't need to be present for this; and she tried to bring my wife to the window so that she might spare her from such a spectacle"] (280). Instead of a piercing and invasive examination, however, the doctor seems to simply look over the body as a formality: "Pourtant, le médecin venait de s'approcher d'un pas rapide. Je le devinais fatigué, pressé, impatienté. M'avait-il touché la main? Avait-il posé la sienne sur mon cœur? Je ne saurais le dire. Mais il me sembla qu'il s'était simplement penché d'un air indifférent" ["However, the doctor had just quickly approached. I guessed he was tired, hurried, and impatient. I couldn't say for sure. But it seemed to me that he simply bent over with an air of indifference"] (280). The doctor concludes his visit with a brief comment about the weather and Olivier exclaims to the reader, "Ah! le misérable, dont l'habitude professionnelle avait fait une machine, et qui venait au lit des morts avec l'idée d'une simple formalité à remplir!" ["Oh! this wretched man, whose professional routine has become like a machine, and who comes to deathbeds simply to fulfill a formality!"] (280). It would seem, according to Carol, that the good doctor's visit, unfortunately, matches the expectations of the time: "À en croire leurs collègues ou les inspecteurs qui les surveillent, la visite serait bâclée et superficielle: 'quant à l'examen des médecins préposés aux décès, il se fait ordinairement si légèrement qu'il est presque illusoire'" ["To believe to colleagues or the supervisors who watch over them, the visit was rushed and superficial: 'as for the doctor's exam given to the deceased, it was normally done so briefly that it was almost an illusion'"] (157).

Another task that falls to these doctors is the collection of personal information surrounding the dead. An additional title added to *médecins des morts* is that the title of *médecins vérificateurs des décès*. "Un 'mandat de visite' est immédiatement adressé à l'un des médecins vérificateurs des décès; celui-ci se rend au domicile indiqué et s'assure par lui-même que la personne désignée est morte." ["A 'visit order' is immediately given to one of the death-verifying doctors; this doctor presents himself at the indicated residence and verifies for himself that the designated person is dead."] (Du Camp 104). During this visit, the *médecin* is charged with collecting as much information as possible, not just facts surrounding their birth and their marriage, but the salient information surrounding the deceased's illnesses and their place of residence. The doctor's visit is the fulfillment of a civic duty. The philosophy surrounding this visit is that the state already attests to the major events that affect its citizens: "[L'état civil] a noté la naissance, il a relaté le mariage; pour achever son œuvre, il lui reste à constater le décès" ["[The state] takes note of the birth, it records the marriage; to complete its work, it only needs to certify the death"] (Du Camp 104). Du Camp later notes that "[L'état] est le gardien des relations sociales; lorsque l'homme est mort, il n'a plus à s'en occuper" ["[The state] is the keeper of the social relations; once a man is dead, it no longer has to take care of him]" (105). The simple premise of having the state play a role in the documentation of its dead, though, is secondary to the much more prominent task for these doctors, which was to minimize the gravest of errors: "nous dirons avec la plupart des médecins qui ont traité la matière, que c'est précisément dans les décès sans secousse, que la mort apparente se produit le plus souvent et que les erreurs peuvent donc être les plus fréquentes" ["we say with the majority of doctors who have addressed this topic, that it is among the motionless dead that apparent death appears the most often and it is where errors can be found most frequently]" (Bénard 21).

Emile Zola's text is the most prominent one wherein a *medecin des morts* plays an important role in the development of the tale. Two other texts draw upon either a *croquemort* or the visiting physician for the verification of the deceased. The 1851 Édouard Brisebarre and Eugène Nyon play entitled *Histoire d'une Rose et d'un Croquemort* is a brief romantic tale where the titular role is a reference to the young and beautiful Annette, and her love interest is Gilbert. Unbeknownst to Annette, Gilbert is a *croquemort.* This profession is repugnant to many within the play, even to Gilbert himself. Speaking to one of his friends and colleagues, he expresses his own disdain for the work in which they are employed: "Oui, ce métier me répugne … avoir toujours sous les yeux le spectacle de la douleur, vivre de la mort et par la mort, heurter sans cesse ses regards sur l'image de la destruction, coudoyer des affligés quand on se sent Joyeux … oh! cela est horrible" ["Yes, this job is repulsive to me … always having the spectacle of suffering right under your eyes, living off of death and by death, one's gaze always crashing into the image of destruction, bumping elbows with the afflicted even when you are happy …. Oh! it's horrible"] (14). Even though this *croquemort* is seen at times with others in his profession who appear to enjoy their own lives and find no shame in their occupation, he cannot bring himself to admit to his own mother the line of work he is in. He changes into his uniform of dark robes at his friend's home and leaves all evidence there. Near the end of the tale, the shamefulness of his profession drives away Annette, and even his mother cries out, "Mon fils, sous cet habit!" ["My son, in that outfit!"] (39). The same disdain or fear of a *croquemort* expressed in this play was later put into words by the Préfet over the *medecins des morts* in 1906, wherein he explains that the doctors are poorly received in the homes of the presumed deceased citizens, rendering their task even more difficult (Carol 172). Ultimately, this tale does conclude with a "happily ever after" ending. Annette is believed to be dead, and Gilbert arrives to execute his duty. The spectators see him enter the room alone and return with her in his arms, but she is alive and professes her love to him, even while he wears his dark garments of death.

A third tale, Guy de Maupassant's "Le Diable" (1886), highlights the decision the farmer Honoré is forced to make when faced with leaving his mother to die alone or to harvest his crops. This decision is an easy one for Honoré: "Faut pourtant que j' rentre mon blé; v'la trop longtemps qu'il est à terre. L' temps est bon, justement. Qué qu' t'en dis ma mé?" ["But I gotta bring in my crop; it's been in the field too long. Weather is right. Whatcha think, ma?"] (139). Out of compassion and a sense of humanity, the doctor forces Honoré to either watch over his mother or to find someone who will, suggesting that the old lady named la Rapet could be hired. Unlike "La Mort d'Olivier Bécaille," this doctor is not bound by the responsibility of verification of death. Unable to help her any further with medicine, the doctor in "Le Diable" demonstrates how caring for the dying remains the responsibility of the family—a responsibility Honoré hopes to shirk, and which he ultimately delegates to another. Only threats from the doctor motivate him to take action: "Vous n'êtes qu'une brute, entendez-vous, et je ne vous permettrai pas de faire ça, entendez-vous! … Et si vous ne m'obéissez pas, je vous laisserai crever comme un chien, quand vous serez malade à votre tour, entendez-vous?" ["You're nothing but a dim-witted beast, you hear me, and I won't let you do that, got it? … And if you don't listen to me, I'll let you die like a dog when it's your turn to be sick, do you hear?"] (139). The unnamed doctor is dismissed from the tale and the aforementioned la Rapet is hired to wait by the mother's side. The intrigue shifts to the commodification of death—the son seeking to pay as little as possible for la Rapet to watch over his mother for as long as it takes, and la Rapet hoping for the greatest commission for the least amount of work. Maupassant's text ends with la Rapet forcing the woman's death by offering a frightful tale about the devil. Afterwards, la Rapet "ferma les yeux énormes de la morte, posa sur le lit une assiette, versa dedans l'eau du bénitier, y trempa le buis cloué sur la commode et, s'agenouillant, se mit à réciter avec ferveur les prières des trépassés qu'elle savait par cœur, par métier" ["la Rapet closed the dead woman's large eyes, placed a plate on the bed, poured in it some holy water, dipped the boxwood that was hanging from the dresser in it, and, kneeling, began to fervently recite a prayer for the departed which she knew by heart, as was her profession"] (150). These final acts—closing the woman's eyes, preparing the holy water, and offering prayers for the dead—are la Rapet's own confirmation that her duty to stay by the old woman during her passing has been fulfilled. Upon his return, Honoré recognizes them as such: "Et quand Honoré rentra, le soir venu, il la trouva priant, et calcula tout de suite qu'elle [la Rapet] gagnait encore vingt sous sur lui"

["And when Honoré returned, when night had fallen, he found her praying, and he immediately calculated that she had won an extra twenty *sous* (currency) off of him"] (150).

Lacking from these latter two tales, most notably, is the explicit discussion surrounding premature burial. When the young Annette is brought from her would-be tomb, it is a joyous occasion and the time she spent dead—or presumed as such—does nothing to focus on any fear or anxiety the victim may have undergone. In "Le Diable," Honoré's mother's suffering from her failing health is compounded with the emotional suffering produced by la Rapet. It is uniquely from Zola's text that the sense of imprisonment from burial and the subject's powerlessness is fully developed: "J'étais comme un condamné mené au lieu du supplice, hébété, attendant le coup suprême qui ne venait pas" ["I was like a condemned man being led to the place of torture, dazed, waiting for the final strike that would never come"] (287). Olivier narrates a scene, a nightmare, that passes through his mind after being placed in the ground and before regaining the use of his faculties. He describes a train full of passengers across the social strata, representative of various ages and stages of life: "Toutes les classes se mêlaient, un homme très riche, un haut fonctionnaire, disait-on, pleurait au cou d'un ouvrier, en le tutoyant" ["All of the classes mixed together, a very rich man, a civil servant, as they say, would cry on the shoulder of a laborer, as a friend would"] (288). They are all trapped, awaiting salvation from a deep grave in which their train is buried. They understand that their shared grave is an equalizer for them all.

From "La Mort d'Olivier Bécaille" and *Histoire d'une Rose et d'un Croquemort*, we see two different ways in which the role of the doctor of the dead is fulfilled. As previously mentioned, Olivier's doctor does not fulfill the duties of his profession. His lazy and seemingly disinterested approach to the verification of life or death results in the premature burial of his patient—the very fate his profession was created to prevent. We are given clues as to what Olivier expects of this doctor, feeling his hands/wrists, or placing his head against Olivier's chest, but from Olivier's account, these actions never take place, or are executed carelessly. As an aside, should the doctor perform some of the more barbaric practices upon Olivier, such as applying various sharp tools to his body, it is much more likely that he will guarantee Olivier's death than confirm his life. For Gilbert, as readers or spectators, we are given no clue as to the medical (or magical) procedures he may perform to reanimate the presumed dead Annette. Nevertheless, the revived body attests to the wisdom and value of his profession, and it certainly improves the way his patient/fiancée views his profession as a *croquemort*.

It is no surprise that, with the doctor's proximity to death, many critics analyzing "La Mort d'Olivier Bécaille" have noted the common theme of the passage between life and death, or forbidden movement. Michelle E. Bloom explains: "What makes 'La mort d'Oliver Bécaille' both fantastic and important is its investigation and representation of the liminal space between life and death along with the related ambiguity of self-definition" (76). The doctor guards this liminal space. This tale of premature burial, and by extension the role of the doctor of the dead within it, conjures images of metaphysical displacement between the living and the dead. As such, the doctor's role is to govern the forbidden movement, to act as a guardian of the passage or as an arbiter to passengers. This role, however, has been abdicated by the doctor through the non-execution of his duty and is taken up by the would-be dead narrator Olivier. At various times throughout the tale, those who have surrounded Olivier take turns to declare his death. Olivier himself is the first to pronounce it in the opening line of the text: "C'est un samedi, à six heures du matin que je suis mort après trois jours de maladie" ["It was a Saturday at six o'clock in the morning that I died following three days of illness"] (269). His young wife, Marguerite, breaking down in tears, cries, "Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Il est mort!" ["My God! My God! He is dead!"] (269). Later we hear from the neighbor Mme Gabin: "Mon Dieu! est-ce que c'est fini?" ["My God! Is it over then?"] (275). The neighbor's daughter first asks if he is sleeping, but then concludes "Il est mort, oh! Maman, il est mort" ["He is dead, oh! Mama, he is dead"] (276). Nevertheless, even after all the declarations of death made upon him, Olivier regains the use of his body and ultimately breaks free from the coffin, escaping his grave. At this point in the tale, all the preceding declarations of death are overturned, at least in the eyes of the reader and narrator. We know of Olivier's survival, or his "resurrection," as he calls it at times, but the others in his former life remain ignorant of his state.

Like Odysseus, Olivier leaves on a grand adventure, though his odyssey is internal and reflective. As Daniel Heller-Roazen explains, "Odysseus returns, but in concealment. Half the ancient epic concerns the period in which he hides himself at home, the better to set the scene of his unexpected reappearance" (221). Olivier never fully completes his return to his home, though. After some time in recovery, Olivier makes his way back to the neighborhood of his former home. Restored to life and in better health, he contemplates the future that awaits him as he faces his widowed wife. He overhears the voice of the nosey neighbor, Mme Gabin, as she gossips on the topic of the widow who recently left to spend time with the young M. Simoneau. She says, "M. Simoneau lui témoignait tant d'amitié!" ["Mr. Simoneau was such a good friend to her!"] (296) and "Sans doute, ça finira par mariage" ["Without a doubt, that is going to end up with their marriage"] (297). Finally, she concludes, "Tenez [Olivier] a bien fait de mourir" ["You know, [Olivier] did the right thing by dying"] (297). Even though this story has a pronounced focus on the apparent death of Olivier, considerable time is spent describing his life as well, most notably his brief courtship of Marguerite. The reader understands, as he comes to understand, that their love is not that of two enamored romantics, but rather a familiarity that fulfills social expectations. Olivier reflects: "Mais je n'avais jamais été son amant, c'était un frère qu'elle venait de pleurer" ["But I had never been her lover, it was a brother that she had been mourning"] (297). As Olivier comes to this new understanding, we see him take on the role of a doctor of the dead. Even though his body had been buried, and his life had been mourned, it is at the conclusion of this tale that we see the true death of Olivier Bécaille, the moment when Olivier leaves his former life behind and embraces a new and unknown future: "Allons! j'étais un brave homme, d'être mort, et je ne ferais certainement pas la bêtise cruelle de ressusciter" ["It was noble of me to die, and I would certainly not make the cruel mistake of resurrecting myself"] (298).

The profession of *médecins des morts* has been replaced; their duties and responsibilities now reside with the medical practitioner treating a patient, or other medical professionals fulfilling this particular bureaucratic task. Even after the induction of this profession, accounts of premature burial continued. Unfortunately, the veracity of many of these claims is difficult to verify. Accounts often share similar details, such as scratch marks on coffin walls or mysterious sounds from the room where a body was being held. Ultimately, these stories, whether true or fabricated, have largely become folklore and urban legends. These tales spurred the development of the *médecins des morts,* a profession that proved to be relatively short-lived. The *croquemorts*, however, continued. Whether due to their constant proximity to death or, perhaps more terrifyingly, the implication that they were required to stand as a guard against premature burial, these doctors of the dead invoked fear—a fear we see in the play *Histoire d'une Rose et d'un Croquemort.* It is a strange thing that these men inspired so much fear and shame, since their purpose was to serve as a buttress and protection against a horrifying death. Certainly, there is more to study and examine on this subject—various other literary texts and artistic representations will further enlighten our understanding of the profession, and its perception by nineteenth-century citizens. And yet, through the literary lens offered by Zola's "La Mort d'Olivier Becaille," Maupassant's "Le Diable," and Brisebarr and Nyon's play, the doctors of the dead become more than a mere historical footnote; they embody the nineteenth-century's fraught relationship with mortality, scientific authority, and the very definitions of life and death.

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Media Reviews: Forum on Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025)

Introduction

Joe Conway

In 1823, a mere five years after her deathless novel *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* was first published, Mary Shelley attended a London West End adaptation of its story by English playwright Richard Brinsley Peake titled *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein*. And ever since, her Gothic tale of a monster and his maker has been reanimated in hundreds of stage, screen, and literary adaptations around the globe, including the classic Universal and Hammer films of the twentieth century, the 2018 manga by famed Japanese artist Junji Ito, and the 2023 Turkish Netflix series *Yaratilan* (translated in English as *Creature*) created by Çağan Irmak and previously reviewed by Cenk Tan in the Spring 2025 issue of this journal (https://libjournals.mtsu.edu/index.php/I19/article/view/2611/1557). Yet rather than find any possible signs of Shelley-adaptation fatigue, when *The Incredible Nineteenth Century* published a call for someone to review Academy-Award-winning auteur Guillermo del Toro's Netflix-produced *Frankenstein* (2025), our inbox was overwhelmed to an unprecedented degree by an international array of nineteenth-century scholars eager to engage with del Toro's beautiful and idiosyncratic spin on the novel. Given the two dozen or so pitches we received, *I19* decided to organize a forum to spotlight several reviewers, each of whom makes a specific form of critical intervention.

Since Shelley herself, in the 1831 preface to a significantly revised edition of her novel, analogized her book to both a "hideous progeny" and an "offspring of happy days" that she invited "to go forth and prosper" in the world of letters, it has become a cliché to approach the text itself as a living being whose many adaptations represent so many experiments in producing a newly restitched and reanimated creature. Del Toro's film is one such cultural science project. Moving his setting from Europe in the late-eighteenth-century "Age of Revolution" to an 1857 Britain geopolitically occupied with an imperially-driven Crimean War and the violent repression of an anti-colonial uprising in India, del Toro also revises Shelley's text by providing its dark-eyed Victor (Oscar Issac) with a cruel taskmaster father (Charles Dance) and a beloved mother of Caribbean Creole descent (Mia Goth) who dies giving birth to his lone sibling, William. William, unlike the novel's strangled brat, is engaged to an Elizabeth (also played by Goth) much different than Shelley's original, as she does not grow up in the Frankenstein household (muting the quasi-incestuous love plot between her and Victor). She is also an intellectual agent who pursues her own scientific interests. In addition to coordinating a new love triangle that constellates the erotic attachments of William, Victor, and Elizabeth, del Toro adds to his *dramatis personae* a war profiteer named Henrich Harlander (Christoph Waltz), with a Peter-Thiellike desire to live forever, who finances Victor's capital-intensive immortality experiment. And finally, to add one more example of the film's revisionary efforts, its oddly beautiful Creature (Jacob Elordi) is absolved of any intentional wrongdoing when he makes real peace with his maker before Victor's death aboard an Arctic ship.

Del Toro also pointedly resists the CGI and green screen technology utilized in the assembly-line manufacture of Marvel Studios' McMovies in favor of practical special effects, exquisite monster makeup, and striking costume design. Like many other artistic renovators of Shelley's novel, del Toro changes certain original elements of her narrative while also drawing on the work of prior adaptations. His choice, for example, of dually casting Goth as both Victor's mother and Elizabeth nods to the scientist's nightmare in the novel where he sees his dead mother transform into his fiancée. Yet it also echoes James Whale's similar decision to make the legendary Elsa Lanchester take on both the roles of Mary Shelley and the Bride in his 1935 masterpiece, *Bride of Frankenstein*. Indeed, del Toro's love of that era in classic monster cinema also permeates the set design of his film's cathedral-like interiors, expressionist camera angles, and over-the-top acting reminiscent of Whale's studio films. Meanwhile, his movie's funding by the contemporary streaming behemoth Netflix may even operate as the source of an allegory whereby Victor depends upon a dubious capitalist source for his project—especially given the existential crisis such tech giants like Netflix and Amazon pose to the future of traditional moviegoing. In other words, del Toro's *Frankenstein* is an excellent example of how artistic inheritors of Shelley's legacy use her tale to both reflect on its many like-minded predecessors while also bearing witness to new concerns and material conditions of cultural production.

The contributors to *I19*'s "Forum On Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025)" address its general adaptive strategies. They also, in Gemma Lopez's helpful language, "attend" (53)to its granular details to reveal a set of issues regarding the cinematic staging of care ethics (Lopez) and post-colonial anxiety (Pamela Buck), as well as its symbolic foreclosures of queer (Bronte Cronsberry) and revolutionary (Bilal Khan) possibility. Lopez, for example, writes how Isaac and Elordi produce sensitively embodied performances that center small physical gestures of tendered and refused intimacy, which, accompanied by the film's long takes and un-Netflix-like decelerated approach to scene editing, produce a *Frankenstein* that is conceived "not as a story of monstrous terror, but as one of failed care" (52). This is not a cautionary tale about the egoistic foibles of romantic science and that *sturm-und-drang* ambition given voice by Whale's mad creator: "Now I know what it's like to be God!" Instead, Lopez locates how del Toro's Victor has been trained by his father's toxic yet culturally representative "pedagogy of abandonment" (52) to refuse his Creature's need for care. Such lack of care is stubbornly embedded in the structure of that social milieu to which the Creature is "born," something he attempts to repair by embracing a countervailing "pedagogy of need" (53) he learns from Elizabeth and the De Lacey family. The tragedy, therefore, is not the result of one man's hubris, but rather the outcome itself of a masculinist cultural system that denies a social logic of constitutive inter-human relations in favor of one that believes in private individual sources for human failure and achievement.

Lopez sees the film's visual emphasis on hand gestures that signal need and abandonment as representing a social failure to recognize those obligations we owe one another as interdependent creatures. Meanwhile, Pamela Buck approaches *Frankenstein* as a Mexican filmmaker's Global South take on how disavowals of intimate human relationships and their attendant ethical obligations on a global scale structure the colonial order itself. Noting the implied mixed-race origins of Victor's mother and a Frankenstein fortune built on plantation wealth, Buck's approach recalls Edward Said's groundbreaking post-colonial reading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814). Del Toro's racially fraught narrative is also reminiscent of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and its depiction of Rochester's disavowed Creole wife, Bertha. Indeed, Buck offers an interpretation of Shelley that might productively be extended to consider Victor's experiment set in a vaulted garret as the project of a Victorian "madwoman in the attic" as conducted in male drag. Situating the film's timeline amid Europe's imperial projects of Arctic exploration, the British Empire's participation in the Crimean War (whose battlefields provide Victor with fresh body parts supplied by his weapons-manufacturing financier), and transatlantic debates over slavery, Buck notes the corporal punishment exacted by his planter-class father on his dark-eyed, dark-haired son, and Victor's use of shackles to control the mobility of a Creature he infantilizes. Ultimately, she claims that del Toro dramatizes "how colonial histories of harm are perpetuated," an insight that resonates with Lopez's own concern for showing how the withdrawal of care operates systemically at micropolitical levels of Western liberal society.

Our contributors, as is to be expected, differ on the actual capacity of a mass cultural product like del Toro's *Frankenstein* to provide sufficient critique of those oppressive political structures that inspired Shelley and her radical intellectual circle in the aftermath of the Atlantic world's revolutions. Bilal Khan, in fact, opines that del Toro's film, by preserving its director's typical sympathetic treatment of those subjects deemed "monsters," actually defuses the emancipatory potential of revolutionary violence that a character like Shelley's proletarian-coded monster inhabits. For Khan, del Toro's monster is no monster at all, but simply an unruly child working through an all-too-bourgeois Oedipal complex. Building upon the Lacanian Slavoj Žižek's critique of Shelley's

Frankenstein for occluding references to the context of France's revolution that her late-eighteenth-century European setting would invite, Khan maintains that the resetting of the film in 1857 allows del Toro to even further distance its narrative from a politics that admits violence to be a component of revolutionary struggle. In particular, he suggests that the film's final scene on board the Arctic vessel, in which the dying creator forgives his living Creature, simulates a scenario whereby "the Monster is forgiven not because he deserves it, but because he was never really guilty to begin with. Finally, articulated as a 'son' to his 'father,' he leaves the screen reborn as a human who has nothing traumatic to offer us" (44). The film's refusal to preserve the traumatic dimensions of creation, something even Shelley herself gestured toward by leaving her own Creature's crimes and punishment ambiguous, suggests how the film valorizes sympathetic identification with those deemed "other." No amoral agent of radical change is necessary to rend the veil of Enlightenment's nightmares, because the sleep of reason breeds no monster it cannot ultimately recognize as one of its own wayward sons.

Bronte Cronsberry also takes a critical approach to the political limitations of del Toro's *Frankenstein* by situating its vision within the long tradition of reading Shelley's text as a queer allegory. In movies like the camp classic *Bride of Frankenstein* (whose director Whale's queerness and its relation to the Frankenstein mythos was dramatized in Bill Cordon's film *Gods and Monsters* (1998)) and Jim Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), as well as novels like Jeanette Winterson's *Frankisstein: A Love Story* (2019), Shelley's depiction of a socially ostracized outsider has long appealed as a vehicle to investigate the exclusionary structures of heteronormativity and the policing of gender ideology's male/female binary. Just recently, in the media review pages of *I19*, Marian Phillips (https://libjournals.mtsu.edu/index.php/I19/article/view/2613/1558) has approached Zelda Williams' 2024 film, *Lisa Frankenstein* (written by Diablo Cody), as a queer-coded cinematic text in dialogue with trans studies scholar Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." Like Phillips, Cronsberry evokes Stryker's influential text that reimagines Shelley's Creature's climatic encounter with his father to evoke the former's "monstrosity" as a figural site of marginalized embodiment that may be symbolically seized to articulate trans rage and queer possibility. In the case of del Toro's film, they acknowledge its visual power while directing viewers to how its transformation of Victor and his Creature's famous scene of confrontation into one of reunion positions their peaceful encounter as an "unearned" resolution to the Creature's experience of social persecution for possessing a body marked for marginalization. Like Khan, Cronsberry suggests that del Toro's signature desire to produce sympathetic identification with an "innocent" Monster, effectively banishes whatever subversive kernel within the symbolic order that Shelley's monstrous subject might preserve. They note how this stands in opposition to the queer tradition voiced by Stryker that "expresses what society thinks we already are—dangerous predators (often of children) who can at best be pitied because we are sick" (50), and to which Cronsberry adds: "The alignment of trans life with that of the Creature is supposed to be uncomfortable" (50).

A moment like the appearance of a globally celebrated filmmaker like Guillermo del Toro inserting his art into the legacy of *Frankenstein* invited this series of reviews from a group of methodologically diverse scholars at work in four different countries (Spain, the United States, India, and Canada) whose borders have been artificially carved out of one culturally and materially interconnected planet. As this introduction has hoped to make clear, while each marks their own critical territory and finds within its environs four different versions of del Toro's *Frankenstein*, one can only imagine that had Shelley achieved her own physical as well as narrative immortality, she would be amazed at how long "the offspring" of her literary labors has found countless and unpredictable new ways to "go forth and prosper" in the wide, wide world of gods and monsters.

Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* and the Monstrous Other Gone Missing

Bilal Khan

My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell.

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

The ambivalent ending of Mary Shelley's 1818 text quoted above suggests that the traumatic relationship between the Monster and his Creator has come to an end. Yet, after more than two centuries, the Monster refuses to sleep, and his spirit still thinks. To this day, he remains a popular image in the Hollywood machine, where more than 480 films have featured the Monster, not counting several television series and cameos. One of the most important additions to this cinematic practice is Guillermo del Toro's recent *Frankenstein* (2025). Starring Oscar Isaac as Victor Frankenstein, Jacob Elordi as the Monster, Mia Goth as Elizabeth Harlander, and Christoph Waltz as Henrich Harlandar, it has firmly established its place in the legacy of what David Pirie calls the "Frankenstein myth" (69). However, what is at stake in this adaptation is the Monster himself, who is brought into the light (much like Shelley's ending sequence) and rendered human. Hence, in this review, I want to make the uncomfortable argument that del Toro's film presents Shelley's Monster in an ideologically locked space where contradictions and political tensions are completely eradicated from the frame.

To begin with, we must ask the same question that Peter Brooks asked in his 1993 essay on *Frankenstein*: "What is a Monster?" It is important to note that Brooks reaches his answer through a Lacanian reading of the text, where the Monster is stuck between the "verbal and the visual" (202). The Monster possesses an ugly countenance, as is reiterated endlessly in the novel, guided by the pseudoscience of physiognomy. This ugliness or raw visual placement in the Imaginary is the very reason, as per Brooks, for the Monster's exclusion from the verbal or the Symbolic, even if he is the most articulate character of the novel. Brooks's argument, though sharp, falls short in the sense that physiognomy itself was a Symbolic practice. In fact, optics has a very little part to play in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and it is rather semiotics that governs the realm of the gaze (Copjec 68). Despite these limitations, one must look closely at Brooks's final answer to bring out the traumatic kernel of the Monster:

> A monster is that which cannot be placed in any of the taxonomic schemes devised by the human mind to understand and to order nature. It exceeds the very basis of classification, language itself: it is an *excess* of signification, a strange *byproduct* or *leftover* of the process of making meaning. It is an imaginary being who comes to life in

> language and, once having done so, cannot be eliminated from language. (218; emphasis added)

Any Lacanian would notice that Brooks is alluding to the third dimension of Lacan's Borromean knot, the unresolved antagonism of the Real. The Monster in this articulation represents the "Thing" that can be described as "a representation of pure loss" (Bailly 45). The unrepresentable Real then becomes the den of the Monster, which encloses the narrative of the novel itself. For example, moments like the Oedipal nightmare where Elizabeth turns into the dead body of Victor's mother occur only after the Monster qua Thing has confronted his Creator.

This unresolvable and unwritable kernel of the novel is the Monster's demand for love, for, as Lacan has suggested, every demand for love is ultimately a demand for recognition. The Monster's desire for a companion, as rightly noted by Brooks, is a consciously articulated demand born out of an unconscious desire for recognition (209). Hence, a companion would not have satisfied the Monster's longing unless he was fully articulated into the Symbolic. The ambiguity of the novel's climax is the symptom of this unresolvable knot of the Real at the heart of the novel. And perhaps it is for this reason Frankenstein remains a recurring Monster in cinema, a medium that proposes symbolization as its promise to the spectator.

Here, a disclaimer is necessary. My argument does not condone the view that adaptations must remain faithful to their source texts, nor does it rest on a direct or disavowed complaint that "the book was better than the movie" (Bérubé and Seshagiri). Rather, I want to present the opposing argument in line with James Heffernan's view that the films have time and time again not distorted Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but rather presented the repressed and hidden elements of the novel (139). Historically (and politically) significant, however, is the consistent pattern of radical creative liberties that filmmakers have taken throughout these many retellings and reframings of the Romantic text. From James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) to the more cheerful depiction in Genndy Tartakovsky's *Hotel Transylvania* series (2012-2018)—which ultimately is based on Boris Karloff's Monster—the text has gone through its own process of splicing and stitching together many different cultural contexts and repressed meanings.

Therefore, it is important to understand that del Toro's *Frankenstein* is a cinematic product to begin with. As I have mentioned earlier, the unrepresentability of the Monster is the very reason for his fame on the silver screen. In fact, Heffernan's ironic quip that a "faithful re-creation" of the film would depict no Monster at all then stands on solid ground (142). However, this negatively motivated recurrence tells us very little about how one goes about actually producing a Monster on the screen.

For del Toro, the inverse of Heffernan's point remained the directorial choice where the Monster is played by Elordi, an actor known for his perfect stature. In fact, Mike Hill, the lead makeup artist of the film, expressed his preference for Elordi from the very start to play this role in the forty-five-minute documentary *Frankenstein: The Anatomy Lesson* (2025). Hill goes on to say that to bring del Toro's vision of the Monster to life, he did not have to create "this ogre of a creature." This is further established by Hill's point that he did not think Victor to be a butcher but a man on a path to build a "beautiful man." Thus, del Toro's Monster was never supposed to inhabit the charged tension where a grotesque creature can speak and think.

The film reiterates this fact by showing how confrontations with the Monster provoke astonishment and wonder, but never the kind of vile anger that it produced in the people who could not even bear to look at him in the novel. Victor's, William's, and Elizabeth's reactions to the Monster are bereft of any disgust. Instead, Elizabeth finds him "purer" than normal human beings, going as far as to express that the Monster's being is "unrestrained by sin," making it a perfect vessel for God's breath to enter him directly. If one is to imagine Shelley as reproducing the myth of the Rousseauian "noble savage," del Toro's film takes it to its limit and almost conceives of the Monster as a prophet. This idea is only reinforced when the Dutch Captain Anderson (a substitute for Shelley's Walton) confronts the Monster, or when animals seem to find solace in his being. However, there is one instance of this neutralization that casts its shadow more seriously on the narrative than others.

In almost a picture-perfect replica of the hovel described in the novel, the Monster learns about human culture, religion, laws, and wars. His confrontation with the blind De Lacey patriarch is staged as a pedagogic and humanist moment of care and help. Through mutual affection, De Lacey even accepts the Monster as his "friend." Later, while saving the old man from wolves, the Monster is confronted with excessive violence as the other De Laceys misinterpret him to be their father's murderer. In contrasting this episode to the novel, one finds that the Monster is never really accepted by the blind De Lacey, for his inability to look at him is the very reason the conversation ever happens. Yet, the moment Felix, Agatha, and Safie enter the cabin and the Monster begs De Lacey to protect him, the old man chooses silence, and the Monster is dragged away from him. Until the very end, the Monster remains no friend to De Lacey but only a fiend.

This moment of violence against the Monster is rationalized in the film as he is portrayed as a victim of misinterpretation. This reinterpretation of the text creates a huge plot hole in the film that erases the central driving desire of the novel. The Monster is indeed recognized and understood as human by De Lacey. This recognition is echoed again at the end where he forgives his Creator, Victor, which was a lesson he learned from the blind man. The need for love in the Lacanian maneuver is never fulfilled by a demand made through signifiers, yet it is for this reason that a desire is generated, as a remainder of a legitimate demand. When this desire is denied by De Lacey in the novel, the Monster is pushed back into his Monstrosity, forcefully dragged away from the Symbolic to his *extimité* (extimate) location, Lacan's neologism for "an excluded interiority or an included exteriority; an intimate exteriority or external/foreign intimacy" (Zupančič 90).

In other words, the Monster does not need to voice his conscious demand for a companion, for he has found love and recognition among humans in the film. However, the film must carry out this plot point to stage the neutralization of another point of excess in the novel. The most original liberty taken by del Toro is the relationship he offers between Elizabeth and William. In earlier films, like Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein* (1974), Elizabeth has romantic interest in the Monster, which, again, can be read as one of the repressed ideas within the novel returning in new forms, a stage for the myth of "Beauty and the Beast" as such (Heffernan 150). Yet, a coupling of William and Elizabeth remains an interesting choice, as it removes Elizabeth from the incestuous drama of the novel, making her into a comfortable object of desire where the sin is adultery instead of incest. Consequently, the Monster's warning to Victor to appear on his wedding night never shows up in the film, as the delay to this illegitimate desire is never needed. Moreover, del Toro's Monster is so free of error that it is Victor who accidentally shoots Elizabeth, and then the Monster *accidentally* kills William on the legitimate couple's wedding night. William's pronouncement while dying rings in the spectators' ears: "You [Victor] are the Monster." The humanization of the Monster is then complete.

Much like the Aztec marine god of *The Shape of Water* (2017), del Toro's vision for the Monster is to redeem him of the wrongs done to him in Shelley's regressive Georgian novel. The beautification of the Monster and the visibility bequeathed to him then become the main reasons for the *hypervisibility* of legible cues for the cinephile audience. The Oedipal structure is obsessively pointed everywhere: Victor is obsessed with milk, has an authoritarian father, and carries a miniature model of a pregnant woman in his coat. His red scarf evokes his mother's uterine blood, and Mia Goth plays both Claire Frankenstein (Victor's mother) and Elizabeth. The film is painfully aware not just of its own legacy as a cinematic object but also as an object of analysis in academia. It holds the spectator's hand anxiously to make their traversal through the plot easy: Harlander calls Victor "Prometheus," the Monster reads the book of Genesis before he reads *Paradise Lost* (1667), and a literal Mephistopheles-like statue becomes the reason for Victor's Faustian decline.

The film treats metaphors as unnecessary problems of the Romantic text, rendered directly to the audience. In a recent work by Anna Kornbluh, this appeal to directness where the medium (here, metaphors) is dissolved for an "immanentized" experience is termed as "immediacy" (3-4). For Kornbluh, immediacy is the style of "too late capitalism," marking out the end-all ideological market-logic constraint it enacts on arts, culture, and political imagination. For Kornbluh, the notable "cinematography of immanence" in Hollywood streaming cinema—front-facing address, handheld filming, and documentary realism over narrative plots—seeks "the absorption of the camera into phenomenality" (74-6). Immediacy demands the liquidating tropes for a direct experience in the body, and the Monster's perpetually receding opacity is the exact reflection of this attitude in the film.

Despite these many differences, a secret political tryst links the novel and the film. Shelley's decision to render her Monster "eloquent and persuasive" is crucial to the plot, for it is through *his speech* that Victor is reminded of his sin and then burdened with the task of saving the human race. Therefore, the will to humanize the Monster is one of the few original ideas that the film refuses to change. But one must ask, then: why is such humanization problematic? Should we not celebrate both Shelley and del Toro for covering this ground? The answer requires us to distance ourselves from the Monster's sympathetic narrative.

For Slavoj Žižek, Shelley's gesture of humanizing her Monster was a symptom of a brewing liberal ideology. This germ of liberalism indeed is not far-fetched to understand Shelley's own ambiguous stance on the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Given that the plot is placed in a historical context where the French Revolution could have played an important part, she instead chose a complete omission. Yet, the Monster remains a creature of the Enlightenment. Hence, for Žižek, Shelley represents a safe support of the Enlightenment where its more destructive and bloody parts, like the Reign of Terror, do not appear. The consequence of her ambiguous stance towards Enlightenment thus creates a Monster who can speak and argue for his own victimization. The novel completely blames the Symbolic for his deeds, thereby embodying "the liberal attitude of freedom of speech at its most radical: everyone's point of view should be heard," and everyone can "present himself as the ultimate victim" (Žižek qtd. in Khader 28). Through the "godlike science" of language, Shelley displaces her Monster's blame onto the Age of Enlightenment.

Far from these anxieties, the film is staged during the Crimean War to provide a pseudo-critical stance on scientific progress. In an interview, del Toro explained that the war rendered an appropriate frame for Victor's "altruistic pursuit," which was "financed by death" (Whitney). Hence, traumatic is replaced by thematic in the film as a revolution is replaced by a war. Preserved in this displacement

(Freudian connotations intended) are Shelley's own fears about progress and its ugly side. Against this overtly political setting, del Toro completes Shelley's vision for a justified and sympathizable Monster who is exculpated of his evil.

In other words, the Monster's monstrosity is completely erased for an aestheticized and more easily consumable being. For Žižek, this is precisely the formula of today's capitalist society of restraint: it allows enjoyment until the dangerous excess of enjoyment is eliminated. This reveals the ideological function of del Toro's "personal" liberties. It is in line with the liberal, tolerant attitude of contemporary society, where "the respect of Otherness, openness toward it, and the obsessive fear of harassment" holds ideological importance only until "the Other is okay insofar as its presence is not intrusive, insofar as the Other is not really Other" (Žižek 508).

What we have in del Toro's film, then, is a Monster surgically created without any trace of monstrosity (even his sutures are not visible anymore). Hence, the ultimate tragedy of del Toro's *Frankenstein* is that the Monster is forgiven not because he deserves it, but because he was never really guilty to begin with. Finally, articulated as a "son" to his "father," he leaves the screen reborn as a human who has nothing traumatic to offer us.

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On Claiming the Monstrous: A Transgender Review of Guillermo Del Toro's *Frankenstein*

Bronte Cronsberry (they/them)

As has come to be expected of Guillermo del Toro, *Frankenstein* (2025) is an aesthetically stunning piece of cinema. Its visual language is complex with a compelling blend of references to high art and del Toro's typical embrace of gore and the grotesque—both of which serve him well in this adaptation of Mary Shelley's classic novel. The film is shakier, however, in its attempts to capture the central themes of Shelley's work while also making a Gothic novel legible for the screen. It does so through cuts and amalgamations of characters and locations that at times strip out some of the more complex messages of the original. In del Toro's adaptation, while the complexities of the individual (tortured) genius come through clearly, the Creature's journey to try and find community is simplified. These changes not only provide a new interpretation of Shelley's novel but also interact with other pivotal works that rely on *Frankenstein* motifs. Specifically, I am interested in discussing del Toro's adaptation in dialogue with Susan Stryker's performance essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix," which takes up the voice of the Creature to speak powerfully about experiences of transgender rage as a political stance.

To briefly summarize Stryker's work, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein" (https://www.uv.es/~fores/msaron14.html) is a performance essay first delivered in 1993 at an academic conference and then published as a text in *GLQ* the following year. The major conceit of the piece is how it frames the pivotal encounter between Victor Frankenstein and his creation in the icy mountains above Chamounix where, in Shelley's original, the Creature finally gets to present his suffering to his creator. Stryker takes up the voice of the Creature in order to express the transgender experience of fighting to define our own existence while facing continual exclusion, pressure, and often hatred from the rest of society. While Stryker's piece has become a pivotal work in the growing canon of transgender philosophy and activist writing, her work is also part of the long tradition of claiming the other-than-human as a mode of resistance. Arguably, we see this even in Mary Shelley's choices surrounding the writing and publication of *Frankenstein* (1818), from its birth in the company of prominent male writers caught up in creating their own masterworks to Shelley's choice to attach her name to the novel only for the second edition. And upon the publication of the Standard Novels edition in 1831, she responds in the author's introduction to the following question: "How I, then a young girl came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?" (5). More contemporaneous with Stryker, Donna Harraway uses the image of the cyborg for her queer-feminist text "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" in 1985. This tradition continues into the present with collections like Tania de Rozario's spectacular collection of essays *Dinner on Monster Island* (2024) that looks specifically to the monstrous creatures of horror films to explore queer identity. I provide a sense of this creative lineage both to ground Stryker's essay as a topic of consideration and to indicate that the desire to find representation of marginalized bodies in these kinds of stories is not a new expectation placed on del Toro's adaptation. Here I look to *Frankenstein* (2025) as a film that could and should be read in relation to this subversive interpretation and creative tradition.

Before moving on to thematic concerns, I do want to touch briefly on the ways that del Toro and Stryker build the aesthetic sensibilities of their respective works. Even as it moved into textual publication, Stryker ensured that the performance element of her piece was preserved: readers are given a description of the punk outfit she donned to give the original performance, featuring confrontational stickers like "Transexual Dyke" and "Fuck Your Transphobia," before moving into the body of the essay which is presented under the heading "Monologue." Here the aesthetics of Stryker's work and del Toro's film resonate well together. As mentioned in the introduction to this review, a clear strength for del Toro is his ability to create a complex visual language. He prioritizes drama and visual impact over a desire to replicate the period of Shelley's setting, as seen in the dramatic costuming of the film's women in particular, especially the flowing red fabrics on Victor's mother in the opening and the colorful dresses in which Elizabeth appears throughout. We also get a sense of both works as performance: where Stryker relies on cues like visual description and linguistic labeling like "Monologue," del Toro's film is steeped in the theatrical. Oscar Isaac as Frankenstein delivers his speeches with an intensity that evokes the drama of the stage rather than any attempt at more muted realism that often characterizes mainstream movies. Not only do these performances serve the emotion of the works well, the theatricality of both Stryker and del Toro is an important choice to align with the Gothic romanticism of the original novel.

For Stryker's readers who have seen *Frankenstein*, it will likely have already occurred that a reading of "My Words to Victor Frankenstein" alongside the film is complicated by the fact that del Toro omits the encounter between Frankenstein and his creation above the village of Chamounix—the titular reference of Stryker's piece. Instead, del Toro's Creature only tells his tale in the presence of Captain Anderson (a stand-in for Shelley's Walton) on the ship trapped in Arctic ice. Thus, Victor does not gain insight into what he has condemned his creation to until after the death of Elizabeth (whom del Toro instead positions as William's soon-to-be wife, having condensed two brothers into one and omitting the Creature's strangulation of the young William). While some changes were always going to be required in order to condense the novel into a film, and especially one that makes sense to contemporary viewers who are unlikely to have the sense of European geography that Shelley's novel assumes, the omission of the encounter above Chamounix does more than just disrupt the setting of Stryker's performance essay.

In terms of a conclusion to the story, with the Creature reconciling with his creator at least to an extent, del Toro's ending feels rushed and unearned. Where in the novel the Creature boards the ship after Frankenstein has passed, del Toro's shifting of scenes means that the two have a final moment of connection and forgiveness. But where Shelley's Frankenstein grapples with the Creature's loneliness and desire for a mate over a period of time, the Victor of the film only briefly has to truly understand what his creation has endured. In this version, most of his empathy for the Creature seems to come through his admiration of Elizabeth (who, in del Toro's adaptation, has come to love the Creature in an almost maternal sense) rather than a true understanding of the monster he has condemned the Creature to live as. Possibly in an attempt to make this conclusion more believable, del Toro also omits the Creature's undeniable crimes in the novel, which include several murders and the framing of an innocent woman. Instead, he presents a version of the Creature that is more obviously sympathetic. The overarching result is that the film's conclusion, which was likely intended to be touching, falls rather flat, and a core theme of the story is lost.

Instead of truly exploring what it means to be an outcast and what makes a being monstrous, the better developed theme in del Toro's adaptation is the isolation of genius. This Frankenstein has fewer connections and, out of all of them, only seems to care deeply about Elizabeth. Alongside his reanimation experiment's financier, Harlander, he seems concerned with proving himself through public recognition or upstaging the skeptical scientific community. The reconciliation at the end of *Frankenstein* feels almost like a consolation prize after the possibility of these rewards are lost. Even the final scene of the film ties into the question of what loss is acceptable in pursuit of greatness as the Creature pushes Anderson's ship free of the ice while the captain calls his men to turn towards home. I do not mean to suggest that these themes are not present in Shelley's novel, but rather that del Toro's cinematic choices reinforce this issue of genius above the consideration of access to community. It is from here that we can consider the uneasy way that this approach sits alongside the thematic focus of Stryker's interpretation.

The political power of claiming Victor Frankenstein's Creature as a trans symbol comes from the intense moral ambiguity of Mary Shelley's characters. Where del Toro removes murders and shifts the act of arson from the Creature onto Frankenstein, the Creature in Shelley's original does act in obviously evil ways, albeit for complicated reasons emerging from the conditions of his creation.

When Stryker takes up the Creature as a voice for expressing transgender rage, she does so not because trans people are evil, but because that is how we are imagined to be by a society that continually tries to force us out of existence. Stryker feels deep empathy with the creature, who is forced out of human society, but she also uses his voice because it expresses what society thinks we already are—dangerous predators (often of children) who can at best be pitied because we are sick. The alignment of trans life with that of the Creature is supposed to be uncomfortable.

While most of Stryker's text is spoken toward Victor Frankenstein, thus in dialogue with an individual representative of the culture that forces us into the monstrous, the final lines of Stryker's piece are ultimately oriented towards fellow creatures, towards the offspring that so scared Frankenstein, but who come into being anyway. She invites us to live in that discomfort with her, not because that is all there is to hope for, but because claiming the monstrous is a political act that can both tie us to trans folk who have come before us and push us towards ongoing action: "If this is your path, as it is mine, let me offer whatever solace you may find in this monstrous benediction: May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world" (12). It is the solidarity in the darkness that I worry is lost when Stryker's piece is read in reference to del Toro's *Frankenstein*. The directorial choices made to condense the characters and settings of the novel are understandable, but these choices also collapse the nuances of perception and identity that Stryker's text plays on. When she invites her readers into "this monstrous benediction," she does so as a person who is like us, who has experienced the accusation of being that monster, and has found a way to claim that space and move forward not just for herself, but for those who are like her.

Of course, del Toro was under no obligation to make a film that captures the transgender valences of the Creature. He set out to adapt Mary Shelley's novel, not Susan Stryker's essay. However, with a story as well-known as *Frankenstein*, it is inevitable that his contribution is going to be read as part of a larger cultural conversation about what the novel means and who might find themselves in the text. In this way, it does not seem unreasonable to come to del Toro's movie and find it lacking. For all its masterful visual language, it forecloses some of the interpretive nuances that make subversive reclaimings so powerful.

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Vulnerable Masculinity and the Ethics of Care in Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein*

Gemma López Sánchez

In the opening moments of Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025), Victor Frankenstein's hands tremble as he reaches towards the face of his creation, not in horror, but in something close to tenderness. The gesture is hesitant, suspended, unfinished, a movement towards connection that never quite completes itself. From the outset, del Toro reframes Mary Shelley's novel (1818) not as a story of monstrous terror, but as one of failed care: the ethical catastrophe that unfolds when those who bring life into being refuse to remain answerable to it.

Del Toro's adaptation shifts the moral center of Frankenstein away from the transgressive act of creation and toward what follows it. The film is less concerned with the moment Victor animates the Creature than with the moment he turns away from him. In this sense, Frankenstein becomes a meditation on vulnerability denied, on the systematic refusal to recognize dependency as an ethical claim. What haunts del Toro's film is not the Creature's difference, but Victor's incapacity to respond to need once it has been made visible.

Pedagogy of Abandonment

One of del Toro's most consequential departures from Shelley is the introduction of an explicitly abusive paternal figure for Victor Frankenstein, played with controlled severity by Charles Dance. In the film's early scenes, Victor's childhood is marked not by indulgence but by discipline, ridicule, and emotional withdrawal. Failure is met with contempt; success is appropriated rather than affirmed. Care, in this household, is conspicuous by its absence. What Victor learns from his father is not simply ambition, but a model of masculinity in which authority is exercised through distance and vulnerability is met with punishment.

This invented backstory does more than deepen Victor's psychology. It reframes *Frankenstein* as a narrative about the transmission of ethical failure. Victor's later abandonment of the Creature is not presented as a sudden moral collapse but as the repetition of an earlier lesson: that dependence is intolerable, that responsibility is evadable, that creation does not entail care. Where Shelley's Victor famously recalls a childhood marked by indulgence, kindness, and an ethos of liberal care, del Toro's reconfiguration replaces this formative security with a pedagogy structured by withdrawal and contempt. Del Toro's intervention thus functions as an act of ethical interpretation, making visible the structures of masculine socialization that Shelley's novel implies but does not anatomize.

The film renders this logic with particular force in the aftermath of the Creature's animation. Victor stands outside the laboratory door, his hand resting on the handle, immobilized. The camera lingers on Oscar Isaac's face as a sequence of emotions passes across it—wonder, fear, revulsion, shame—before settling into something colder and more familiar. The moment echoes earlier scenes with his father: the same withdrawal, the same hardening, the same refusal to remain present in the face of need. Victor's abandonment of the Creature appears less as an active choice than as a learned reflex. He does not invent cruelty; he reproduces it.

This generational framing intensifies Shelley's ethical critique. Where the novel foregrounds Victor's failure as an individual moral agent—his knowledge, his guilt, his belated recognition of responsibility—del Toro situates that failure within a pedagogy that systematically trains men to create, compete, and dominate while withholding the capacities required for care. Victor is culpable, but he is not anomalous. The film denies the audience the comfort of exceptionalism. His failure is not aberrant; it is structural.

Pedagogy of Need

If Victor embodies a pedagogy of abandonment, the Creature is shaped by what might be called a pedagogy of need: an education conducted not through instruction but through exposure, dependency, and repeated refusal. From his first moments, del Toro's Creature is defined by openness. Jacob Elordi's performance renders need visible at the level of gesture and posture: the reaching hand, the tilted head, the unguarded face. The Creature does not conceal his dependency; he does not yet know how. His vulnerability is not a strategy but a condition.

Del Toro films this exposure with an insistence that borders on discomfort. Early encounters are structured less around fear than around misrecognition. When others recoil from the Creature, the camera remains with him, registering not the violence of rejection but its intimacy—the way an offered gesture is withdrawn, the way the body learns to close itself. Shame, in this film, is not internal but produced relationally. It emerges at the precise moment when the Creature's need is made visible and refused.

The Creature's time with the De Lacey family marks a decisive ethical formation. As in Shelley's novel, he acquires language and social knowledge through observation, but del Toro shifts the emphasis from cognitive development to ethical practice. What the Creature learns is not simply how to speak, but how to attend. He watches the rhythms of care that sustain the household: shared labor, patience, responsiveness to fatigue and hunger. These scenes resonate with Eva Feder Kittay's account of "dependency work," the often-invisible labor of maintaining lives that cannot be sustained independently (29). Care here is neither heroic nor sentimental; it is repetitive, modest, and necessary.

Yet the film refuses to romanticize this capacity for care. The Creature's ethical openness is not infinite. When the De Lacey family eventually flees in terror, the loss is not merely emotional but formative. Del Toro lingers on the aftermath: the Creature remains alone in the abandoned cottage for three days. The passage of time matters. What erodes is not benevolence as such, but the possibility of reciprocity. The film stages this not as a sudden corruption but as an attrition. Care, repeatedly unmet, becomes unsustainable.

By the time the Creature sets fire to the cottage, the act reads less as revenge than as the collapse of a relational horizon. Violence emerges not from innate monstrosity but from the systematic negation of need. The film presses a difficult question: what becomes of ethical responsiveness when it is never recognized, never returned, never allowed to take root?

In this sense, the Creature is not the moral opposite of Victor but his opposite image—not a figure who negates Victor's ethics, but one who reflects them in inverted form. Where Victor denies vulnerability in others, the Creature begins by inhabiting it fully. Where Victor withdraws from responsibility, the Creature initially seeks it. The tragedy is not that the Creature becomes violent, but that the conditions required to sustain care are repeatedly withdrawn. Del Toro's Frankenstein insists that care is not a personal virtue that can survive indefinitely in isolation; it is a relational practice that depends, at minimum, on the possibility of response.

Ethics of Creation

In a revision of the novel's celebrated scene at the summit of Montanvert, the confrontation between Victor and the Creature in the Alpine ice cave becomes, in del Toro's film, an explicit reckoning with the ethics of creation. Here, the Creature does not merely demand recognition or companionship; he articulates a claim. "You made me," he tells Victor, "and making creates debt." The formulation is stark, stripped of rhetoric. Set against the language of financial obligation invoked elsewhere in the film by the capitalist patron who underwrites Victor's experiment, this "debt" acquires a pointed ethical counterforce—not a contract to be repaid or evaded, but a binding relation that cannot be discharged. Creation, the Creature insists, is not a neutral act. It establishes an obligation that precedes consent and exceeds intention.

Victor's response exposes the moral fault line of the film. He does not deny the Creature's suffering, nor does he contest the fact of creation. Instead, he appeals to ignorance and contingency:

he did not know what the Creature would become, and he could not have anticipated the consequences. Del Toro treats this defense with quiet severity. The problem is not that Victor created something unpredictable, but that once vulnerability was made visible, he refused to remain answerable to it. Ignorance does not absolve responsibility; it merely names its point of origin.

In reframing the scene this way, del Toro shifts the ethical stakes of *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley's novel dramatizes the catastrophic consequences of neglect; the film sharpens this into an argument about obligation. To bring a being into existence, whether through scientific experimentation, reproduction, or technological innovation, is to enter a relationship structured by dependency. The film insists that this relationship cannot be dissolved unilaterally. Responsibility is not elective but is generated by the very act of creation.

Read through care ethics,[1] Victor's defense is revealed not as tragic inevitability but as moral refusal: once vulnerability is made visible, responsibility becomes non-negotiable. Del Toro extends this argument beyond Victor's singular guilt. The film repeatedly asks who bears responsibility for the lives, systems, and beings we bring into the world, and under what conditions that responsibility is denied. In this sense, *Frankenstein* speaks directly to contemporary debates about reproductive ethics, technological development, and environmental stewardship. The question is not whether creation entails risk—it always does—but whether creators will accept the obligations that risk entails. Victor represents a familiar figure: the maker who claims innovation while disavowing its aftermath.

What renders this ethical failure so devastating is its ordinariness. Victor is not monstrous because he creates life; he is monstrous because he refuses relation. His tragedy is not that he transgresses a natural boundary, but that he attempts to escape the ethical consequences of his own actions. Read through the lens of care ethics, his story ceases to be one of hubris punished and becomes instead a cautionary tale about moral cowardice: the desire to create without sustaining, to initiate without remaining present, to generate dependency while denying its claims.

In del Toro's *Frankenstein*, creation is thus inseparable from care. To make is to bind oneself, whether willingly or not, to the fragile life one has brought into being. The film's insistence is uncompromising: the true horror is not that Victor creates a vulnerable being, but that, having done so, he refuses to accept what vulnerability demands of him.

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[1] See Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Development and Women's Development* (1982) and Joan C. Tronto's *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equity, and Justice* (2013).

Fidelity to Vulnerability

What gives del Toro's adaptation its interpretive force is not novelty but ethical continuity. For all its departures from Shelley's plot, the film remains profoundly faithful to the novel's central question: what do we owe to the vulnerable beings we bring into the world? That question is not abstract for Shelley. It emerges from a context saturated with loss, dependency, and failed care, conditions that lend her *Frankenstein* an urgency often muted by readings that privilege scientific ambition or Romantic excess.

Del Toro's adaptation does not depart from this ethical terrain; it returns to it. His film reads Shelley not as a cautionary tale about scientific transgression, but as an indictment of abandonment. The Creature's suffering is not incidental to the novel's moral structure; it is its organizing force. By centering vulnerability rather than monstrosity, del Toro restores what two centuries of adaptation have obscured: that the Creature's violence is intelligible only in relation to sustained neglect, and that Victor's crime is ethical before it is scientific.

This fidelity becomes especially clear in del Toro's treatment of care and loss. Where earlier adaptations frequently minimize or sentimentalize the Creature's dependence, del Toro insists on its material and emotional weight. His film returns us to Shelley's articulate, grieving Creature, not as a figure of pathos alone, but as a moral witness. The Creature does not simply suffer; he remembers. He narrates abandonment as an ethical injury, one that structures his relation to the world and to himself.

In this sense, del Toro's *Frankenstein* participates in what might be called an ethics of adaptation grounded in attentiveness rather than replication. Fidelity here is not measured by adherence to plot, but by responsiveness to what matters. Del Toro takes liberties with Shelley's narrative to remain faithful to her ethical imagination, amplifying concerns that the novel articulates obliquely but insistently: the vulnerability of the created, the responsibility of the creator, and the devastating consequences of withdrawal.

Seen this way, del Toro's additions—the abusive father, the emphasis on care as labor, the sustained attention to dependency—do not overwrite Shelley's text but make legible what is already there. They function as acts of interpretive care, refusing to abandon the Creature to the simplifying logic of popular myth. In returning *Frankenstein* to its wounded, relational core, del Toro reminds us that Shelley's novel has never been primarily about the dangers of knowledge. It is about the danger of refusing to stay with what we have made.

Adaptation as Care

Del Toro has described adaptation as a form of devotion, a sustained act of attention rather than an exercise in replication. *Frankenstein* takes this claim seriously, not as sentiment but as method. The film approaches Shelley's novel with patience, dwelling on its ethical pressure points rather than its most recognizable iconography. In doing so, del Toro models a mode of adaptation grounded less in fidelity to narrative detail than in responsiveness to vulnerability.

This approach distinguishes *Frankenstein* from a long cinematic tradition that has treated Shelley's text as a repository of images—lightning, laboratories, stitched flesh—while evacuating its ethical force. Earlier adaptations frequently reduce the Creature to mute spectacle or displace moral complexity onto Victor's tragic ambition. Del Toro resists both tendencies. His film lingers instead on scenes of dependence, hesitation, and refusal—moments that require time, proximity, and a willingness to remain with discomfort. These are not efficient cinematic choices, but they are attentive ones.

Care, as the film repeatedly suggests, is inseparable from duration. Shot by Dan Laustsen and scored by Alexandre Desplat, *Frankenstein* unfolds at a deliberate pace, privileging atmosphere and emotional texture over narrative momentum. The camera stays where other films cut away: on the Creature waiting, watching, learning; on Victor hesitating; on the slow accumulation of loss. This aesthetic patience is not incidental. It enacts, at the level of form, the ethical commitment the film advocates. To care is to remain, to resist the impulse to resolve or abandon.

In this sense, del Toro's adaptation performs the very labor it thematizes. By attending carefully to Shelley's wounded Creature, restoring his articulacy, his ethical awareness, his capacity for grief, the film refuses the long-standing cultural habit of simplifying *Frankenstein* into a story about scientific hubris alone. Instead, it insists on the persistence of vulnerability across time, reading Shelley's nineteenth-century concerns as unfinished rather than obsolete. Adaptation here becomes an act of ethical continuity, ensuring that what is most demanding in the source text is not lost to familiarity.

This ethic of care is also evident in del Toro's willingness to intervene. The film's departures from Shelley are not acts of appropriation but of clarification. They make explicit what the novel holds implicitly, translating Shelley's ethical imagination into a cinematic language capable of sustaining it. Fidelity, in this framework, is not obedience but responsibility—a commitment to carrying forward what matters, even at the cost of deviation. Such an approach challenges dominant models of adaptation that equate respect with restraint. Del Toro demonstrates that to care for a text is not to preserve it unchanged, but to remain answerable to its ethical demands as they encounter new historical conditions. In *Frankenstein*, adaptation becomes a relational practice, one that acknowledges inheritance without being bound by it, and that accepts the risk of transformation as the price of remaining present. By treating Shelley's novel not as a finished object but as a living ethical claim, del Toro offers a model of adaptation that resists both nostalgia and mastery. His *Frankenstein* does not seek to own the text, nor to surpass it, but to stay with it, to keep faith with its questions rather than its surfaces. In doing so, the film suggests that adaptation, like care, is less about making something new than about refusing to abandon what has already been made.

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Decolonizing the Gothic in Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein*

Pamela Buck

Guillermo del Toro's 2025 adaptation of *Frankenstein* departs from Mary Shelley's 1818 Gothic novel by reframing the narrative within a mid-nineteenth-century colonial context. While Shelley's work reflects the anxieties of early British imperialism, del Toro's film, set in 1857, transforms Victor's scientific ambition and monstrous creation into overt manifestations of imperial tyranny. By highlighting Victorian Arctic exploration, the Crimean War, scientific collecting, and enslavement, del Toro revitalizes Shelley's critique of empire. I argue that this shift provides a decolonial reading that subverts Eurocentric power structures and seeks a resolution to cycles of imperial trauma.

A Mexican filmmaker familiar with the Global North's history of domination, del Toro enacts his decolonial approach by telling Shelley's story from the perspective of the colonized. His choice aligns with Edward Said's observation that while "stories are at the heart" of imperial power, they also provide "the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (xii). In retaining Shelley's frame narrative, del Toro enables the "stories" that Said identifies as the heart of imperial construction to be reclaimed by the marginalized. The film's first part reframes Victor's recollections: no longer a privileged European, he is a mixed-race character whose rejection by his father fuels his contempt for the Creature and his fractured bond with Elizabeth. The second part shifts authority to the Creature, empowering him to assert a history independent of Victor's dominance. While the film opens and closes in the colonial Arctic, this becomes a space for Victor and the Creature to confront the limits of empire and reject a system predicated on the ostracism of the "Other."

Like Shelley, del Toro aligns Victor's ambitious pursuit of scientific knowledge with Arctic exploration to demonstrate its similarities with imperialism. Driven by scientific curiosity and colonial objectives, such as acquiring territory and establishing a faster, more lucrative trade route to Asia, polar expeditions surged in the early 1800s (Garrison). Most of these expeditions were failures, however, with ships arrested by pack ice (Richard 298). Shelley's novel starts with the explorer Robert Walton searching for polar magnets and the Northwest Passage, but del Toro's film begins with Captain Anderson and the Royal Danish Navy attempting to extricate their ship the *Horisont* from the ice. When a crew member complains, "We cannot keep up this pace without consequence," Anderson replies, "We signed up for a mission and we will see it to completion. We will reach the North Pole." The ship's name represents the "horizon," or goal, that he resolves to reach. After Victor is rescued, he asks Anderson if he knows the meaning of his name. Anderson replies, "I believe I do, yes.

Conqueror. One that wins it all." Since conquest is the primary mechanism through which empires are created, expanded, and maintained, Victor's question shows that he is as determined as the imperialist captain to achieve his scientific aspirations.

Del Toro strengthens Shelley's critique by leading Victor and Anderson to recognize the futility of their imperialistic endeavors. In the novel, Walton abandons his mission after his crew threatens to mutiny, but his reluctance suggests the possibility of future attempts (Wester 748). Despondent over his own unfulfilled ambition, Victor harangues the crew for quitting. Pointedly, del Toro sets his adaptation after the explorer Sir John Franklin and his crew were famously lost on a polar expedition in 1845. Franklin's disappearance challenged the self-confident assumption of superiority with which Europeans claimed the globe, and polar space came to represent the limits of empire (Hill 2, 15). The desolate expanse of white snow surrounding the Dutch ship symbolizes the faltering grasp of imperial control. When Victor recounts for Anderson how he brought the Creature to life, he states, "I never considered what would come after creation. And having reached the edge of the earth, there was no horizon left." Invoking the ship's name, his metaphor acts as a warning about the dangers of conquest without regard for the consequences. Once free from the ice, Anderson returns south with a new horizon defined by survival. In heeding Victor's caution, he acknowledges imperial ambition as a perilous and damaging fantasy.

Del Toro also sets his film against the backdrop of the Crimean War to indicate the connection between Victor's project and imperial exploitation. Victor is expelled from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh after a controversial medical presentation in which he demonstrates using an electrical current to briefly reanimate a corpse. Nonetheless, his display captivates Henrich Harlander, a wealthy arms dealer and former army surgeon who supplies him with funding and "access to specimens" or body parts of soldiers from battlefields to continue his experiments. Fought between 1853 and 1856, the Crimean War was criticized for being driven by imperial politics, resulting in high casualties and lacking long-term resolution (Tran). In Shelley's novel, Victor robs graves for bodies, but in del Toro's film, he engages in the more unscrupulous activity of war profiteering, using political crises for personal gain. He initially objects to Harlander's suggestion not because he finds it unethical, but because he worries about the quality of the materials. As he exclaims, "A battlefield? The bodies will be mangled!" The field, which is as snow-covered as the Arctic, represents a parallel imperial space, and his search for "specimens" mirrors the extractive logic of empire that turns human remains into commodities. By incorporating the Crimean War, del Toro aligns an unprincipled imperial conflict with Victor's reckless pursuit of creation.

Referencing the Crimean War further allows del Toro to show how Victor's arrogance corrupts his purpose. Elizabeth, Harlander's niece, compares Victor's project to the war. Although ostensibly inspired by "worthwhile, elevated ideas" she laments that "men are dying for them, in a decidedly unelevated way, face down in the mud, choking on blood, screaming in pain." Seeking to achieve the lofty goal of creating life, he ironically overlooks the grisly demise of those whose bodies he uses. Shelley's grotesque monster reflects Victor's equally distorted vision, but del Toro's graceful Creature contrasts with his depravity. The Creature wears a trench coat found on the battlefield, which lends him the elegance and nobility of a soldier. Scarred rather than stitched, he appears wounded, leading the old man he befriends in the cottage to ask, "Were you injured in battle?" Composed of disparate parts, he possesses "memories" of "different men." His embodiment of fallen soldiers shifts the focus from imperial conquest to the tragedy of conflict and commemoration of the dead. The Crimean War echoes a similar imperialistic mission from Shelley's era, the Napoleonic Wars. As part of his education, the Creature reads Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818), which satirizes the fleeting nature of power through the decaying ruins of an ancient tyrant. Intended as a critique of Napoleon, the poem condemns the kind of excessive pride that also blinds Victor and precipitates his downfall.

Del Toro addresses the relationship between imperial power and science through Elizabeth, who engages in the study and collection of insects. Shelley herself had scientific interests, and del Toro's Elizabeth pursues entomology. Although engaged to Victor's younger brother William, she becomes Victor's romantic interest due to their shared love of science. When Victor spots her book shopping at a market, he notes that she chooses a volume illustrated with drawings of beetles, and she explains, "My interest in science leans towards the smallest things." Her clothing, which denotes her scientific inclination, includes a patterned green dress that evokes the anatomy of beetles, a blue scarab beetle necklace, and a feather headpiece (Seth). However, nineteenth-century animal collecting directly supported colonialism by functioning as a tool for gathering scientific knowledge and demonstrating imperial power. Exotic animal products that appeared in European fashions thus served as status symbols of authority (Murfin et al. 3-4). Wearing these fashions associates Elizabeth with European control over colonial lands. She further exerts power over nature by collecting specimens. While in a park catching a butterfly, Victor asks, "Should we trap her or let her go?" and she mischievously replies, "Trap her." Her scientific pursuits seemingly fit with Victor's imperialistic goals.

Despite the relation of science to empire, Elizabeth uses her collecting to protest her subjection as a woman. When Victor confesses his feelings for her, she responds while looking at the captured butterfly, "Beautiful creature, is she not?" and notes its "three hearts" and "fascinating lack of choice." Similar to empire, nineteenth-century patriarchy operated as a hierarchical system of power in which men acted like governing authorities over women, whom they treated as colonized subjects inhabiting a separate, subordinate domestic sphere (Spencer-Wood 477). Drawing on Shelley's depiction of Elizabeth as a "summer insect" (25) del Toro has her identify with the caged butterfly to suggest her social entrapment. Her interest in its multiple hearts symbolizes her empathy, a quality Victor lacks. During a lesson on the heart, his father teaches him that there is "no emotion in a muscle." When he complains that Elizabeth denies him "what my heart wants," she scoffs, "Your heart? Of all the human anatomy, that is the organ farthest from your understanding." She further differentiates her interest in science from his exploitative approach. Focused on "the smallest things," she desires to understand "God's design" but declares of his plan, "Only monsters play God." Fearing that she would be merely another specimen, she shoves the trapped butterfly into Victor's hands and asserts "I have chosen," refusing to fall victim to his imperial patriarchal designs.

As with science, del Toro utilizes enslavement to show how race is another facet of the same imperial hierarchy. Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* at the height of the abolitionist movement in Britain, and critics frequently read the dark-skinned Creature as a racialized "Other." Del Toro reverses this power dynamic by depicting Victor as a multiracial figure. His father, a Swiss baron and surgeon, marries his French-speaking mother for her large dowry and noble lineage to preserve his rank and family estate. Victor notes that this wealth comes from slave holdings, but "two revolts and a fire on my mother's plantations dwindled the family fortune." Swiss citizens participated in the transatlantic slave trade as merchants and financiers, and affluent families like Victor's owned slave-labor plantations in the Caribbean (Purtschert et al. 291-92). Revolts in the French colonies led to abolition in 1848. Victor, who inherits his mother's features, learns racial self-hatred from his father. "The man despised us both," he laments, for "our raven black hair, our deep, dark eyes," and "nervous disposition," a stigma associated with West Indian Creoles. His father acts like an enslaver, and the "entire household bent to his will." Much as he once whipped Victor when he faltered in his anatomy lessons, Victor beats the Creature when he does not obey his commands. His internalized colonial perspective and mirroring of his father's cruelty reveal how colonial histories of harm are perpetuated.

Victor's treatment of the Creature evokes both the violence of enslavement as well as colonial domination. Like Shelley, del Toro incorporates the language of mastery and slavery to depict Victor's relationship with his creation. When he shackles the Creature in the basement of the tower, Elizabeth asks, "Why is he chained here?" Victor claims it is "For his own safety and for mine … And it doesn't know any better." He assumes the Creature is dangerous and unintelligent and dehumanizes him through a shift in pronouns. Instead of sympathizing with the Creature as a fellow outsider, Victor adopts the Eurocentric view of enslaved Africans as inferior, primitive beings (Ball 36). As in Shelley's novel, though, this dynamic switches once the Creature gains knowledge. He asserts his humanity, telling Victor that "You made someone. Me … I think. I feel." He also determines that "You may be my creator," but "I will be your master." Taking on the role of abuser, he uses Victor's words against him when he says, "You only listen when I hurt you." Victor's relationship with the Creature mirrors that of Europeans who, acting as imperial parents to their colonial children, were brutal, self-serving, negligent, and ultimately accountable for the societal monstrosities that resulted from their mistreatment (Ball 44).

Although Shelley's tale ends in tragedy, del Toro poses a more optimistic ending to refute imperial ideology. In the novel, the Creature turns violent from rejection, killing all of Victor's loved ones and inciting a continuous cycle of revenge. Once Victor dies, it is too late to make amends, leaving the Creature to seek his own immolation. In the film, however, Victor's attempt to destroy the Creature causes him to mistakenly murder Elizabeth and mortally injure William, who tells him, "You are the monster." Seeing the Creature as an innocent victim triggers Victor's empathy and remorse, and he admits, "I am sorry. Regret consumes me." In offering reparation, he succeeds in taking the responsibility that colonizers did not (Wester 731). The Creature forgives him, responding, "Perhaps now we can both be human." Finding his heart and humanity, Victor acknowledges his creation as a complete being and advises, "forgive yourself into existence." After the Creature is first animated, Victor introduces him to sunlight, which he calls "life." Consequently, when the horizon returns as a closing metaphor, the Creature walks toward a rising sun that signifies his renewal. His evolution beyond abuse and abandonment to become an autonomous person renders him the true "victor" of the story.

Del Toro's *Frankenstein* reimagines Shelley's Gothic tale as a critique of European imperialism. Relocating the story to the mid-nineteenth century, he links Victor's overzealous ambition to the predatory and dehumanizing practices of Arctic exploration, Crimean War profiteering, scientific collection, and enslavement. Through the perspectives of marginalized characters, his film exposes how imperial hierarchies perpetuate trauma, but it departs from Shelley's narrative by offering a vision of reparative justice. With his decolonial adaptation, del Toro demonstrates that the story of the colonial subject triumphing over an imperial system possesses enduring relevance for the modern era.

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Media Reviews

Ghosts and the Afterlife of the American Century Sitcom

Part 1 of a series, *Mourning in America*

Joe Conway

Since the ongoing collapse around 2008 of the postwar liberal order of U.S. cultural hegemony *Time* dubbed "The American Century," populist ethno-nationalism has surged around the globe as a reactionary response to the failures of globalization. As the first essay of a series examining the effects of this on media narratives of posthumous life produced in the U.S., I will focus on American culture; but what I am calling the development of the "afterlife sitcom" cannot be extricated from geopolitical shifts from Argentina and Hungary to India and the Philippines. Indeed, the shows I analyze, while preoccupied by national fantasy, are disillusioned by myths of American exceptionalism. Also, they materially exist outside a strong liberal state's regulatory oversight (the FCC is a New Deal invention) and central distribution by a network TV system that more easily disseminated homogenous cultural messages. Existing instead within a fractured post-network media environment of streaming monopolies at war with one another, afterlife sitcoms tend to focus on quarreling groups of atomic individuals alienated from the dominant culture, rather than tight-knit nuclear families who embody it. The first great midcentury situation comedy on network TV, *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1955-1957), codified the thirty-minute form that for decades disseminated a middle-class value system centered on images of heterosexual union forged between entrepreneurial strivers for an audience of patriotic consumers imagined to resemble them. To extend claims made by Sianne Nagai, shows like *Lucy* helped ideologically consolidate an imagined national community at its moment of imperial triumph—akin to how realist Anglophone novels crystallized popular patterns of nineteenth-century liberal (mis)perception for readers in the age of British global hegemony.

And yet, as journals such as this one attest, an alternative Gothic novel tradition emerged beside the realism. Anglophone Gothic of the late eighteenth century appeared in a period of Atlantic World revolt against a decrepit social order of churches and kings. Skeptical of nascent liberalism's power to replace an old system of feudal relations without new forms of domination, Gothic tales set in the excessive domestic spaces of Radcliffe's monasteries, Shelley's and Wells's laboratories, or Stoker's castles produced counterimages to realism's pictures of a modernity suffused with reformist possibility. Though network sitcoms of the American Century like *The Munsters* (CBS, 1964-1966) and *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-1966) employed Gothic tropes borrowed from the likes of Shelley and Stoker, they featured conventional stories of domestic life's innocuous challenges familiar to any viewer of midcentury dreck like *Father Knows Best* (CBS and NBC, 1954-1960). To find any sign of liberalism's bad conscience on network television, one turns to sf and horror-adjacent anthologies like *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959-1964) or *The Outer Limits* (ABC, 1963-1965). Yet contemporary illiberal America is awash with White conservative nostalgia for the world of *Father Knows Best.* Thus, afterlife sitcoms turn to anti-realist modes of representation like the Gothic as a cultural strategy for generating liberal counter-nostalgia to MAGA's preferred world: one where White Christian men provide for the White wives who serve them, while vilified others inside the nation's borders are paranoidly coded as alien others—whether signaled by race, religion, culture, gender, sexuality, language, or place of birth. As Gothic novels dredged up remnants of feudalism to critique the ascendent liberal order, afterlife sitcoms of twenty-first century America produced by a post-network culture industry reanimate the moribund forms of network TV, though supplementing them with Gothic tropes to signal profound anxiety about liberal democracy's always already-failed capacity to deliver on outsized promises of the good life. Thus, while these shows provide a Gothic archive of nineteenth-century haunted houses, Old World bloodsuckers, and frontier spirits, they also, to borrow Barthes's Frankenstein-like description in 1967's "Death of the Author" essay, stitch together a "tissue of quotations" from previously existing TV shows in their narratives.

Here I will consider *Ghosts* (CBS, 2021-), in one essay in a series called *Mourning in America* that puns on the campaign slogan "It's Morning in America" used by Ronald Reagan. As a representative of the neoliberal ascendency that itself was armed with a fad for the midcentury's sitcom featuring pro-Reagan sons of hippies like *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-1989) and infallible patriarchs like *The Cosby* Show (NBC, 1984-1992), Reagan projected a happy face on the White resentment he leveraged to dismantle the progressive social and economic gains achieved by New Deal and Great Society liberalism. Though it has a weekly time slot on CBS, *Ghosts* is one of the most watched scripted shows streamed on Paramount+. Since 2005, CBS has been owned by Paramount, one of the original "Big Five" Hollywood studios. Paramount now belongs to Skydance Media and its pro-Trump CEO, David Ellison, who has since remade the CBS news division into a pro-administration mouthpiece. After a contentious bidding war with media behemoth Netflix, Skydance will soon own Warner Brothers—another legacy studio with HBO in its corporate media portfolio. The classic network monopoly of CBS, NBC, and ABC that provided the American Century with its nightly entertainment diet has wobbled since the 1970s' advent of cable channels like HBO. But in the digital age of streaming, lorded over by media empires like Skydance, Amazon, and Netflix, a Humpty Dumpty-like monoculture has shattered into countless shards of microtargeted consumer attention. The center did not hold, and corporate merger wars and cultural anarchy is loose upon the world. All that is left for contemporary sitcoms is to write that old new world's epitaph.

Take, for example, the Season 5 Thanksgiving episode of *Ghosts*. Its situation features a financially struggling New York City couple, White Sam and her Indian-American husband, Jay, who inherit a Gilded Age estate in the Hudson Valley, a region first made famous in literature by Washington Irving's Gothic stories "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820). Like Rip confronted by the spirits of New Amsterdam's first Dutch settlers or Ichabod's haunting by a headless horseman killed in the American Revolution, Sam, who sees and speaks with the dead, and Jay, who cannot, live among specters who died on its property. They represent periods and types from a settler colonial nation's past: a Viking (Thor), a Lenape storyteller (Sassapis), a gay Continental Captain (Issac Higgintoot), a Gilded Age matron (Hetty Woodstone), a Jazz Age singer (Alberta Haynes), a hippie (Flower Montero), a 1980s travel agent (Pete Martino), and a stockbroker from the 1990s' dot-com boom (Trevor Lefkowitz). Other recurring ghosts include a Puritan woman, Patience, and a population of cholera victims who dwell in the basement, thus adding an "Upstairs/Downstairs" system of class relations to the afterworld. This is in keeping with how the property line confines the estate's ghosts its invisible orbit, suggesting private ownership in the show is a principle of physics akin to gravity.

Jay and Sam want to celebrate Thanksgiving, but ask the Native American Sass if he is ok with it. Sass is just pleased to be asked and gives his blessing, provided they cook a yam casserole with marshmallows. The smell of processed food they are incapable of eating, like watching TV (Sass and Thor obsess over reality shows), provides a reliable medium for social communion among the sitcom's band of multicultural and multitemporal ghosts. Jay loves greasy burgers from the fast-food chain Sonic, and in general the show evinces deep nostalgia for the simulation of social comity that homogenous cultural consumption patterns once fostered for citizens of the American Century, and that now bond the dead and "the livings" in the show. But *Ghosts* also recognizes the colonial violence against native people at the nation's origin. Thus, it shares in a Gothic tradition of White Americans haunted by their ancestral genocide, such as novelist Charles Brockden Brown's frontier fever dream *Edgar Huntly* (1799) and 1982's *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper), where spirits menace White Reagan-era suburbanites in their new home that was erected upon an old Native American burial ground.

Yet, *Ghosts* and other afterlife sitcoms specifically splice Gothic DNA with sitcom conventions, and Thanksgiving episodes offer some of the most celebrated entries for viewers of classic network TV. NBC's *Friends* (1994-2004), to offer a strong example, was known for its many

Thanksgiving episodes, none more so than Season 5's "The One with All the Thanksgivings," which features a series of flashbacks to holidays past, including Phoebe's Whitmanian past life as a Civil War nurse. Historical pastiche like this is a hallmark of afterlife sitcoms, as is a focus on friend groups rather than family units. *Friends* offered present-tense stories of beautiful White people struggling to succeed and find love in Giuliani's Manhattan while renting apartments they could not possibly afford. Yet "Thanksgivings" stands apart as a series of period pieces aesthetically coded by hair and fashion choices. Chandler, for example, appears in 1987 with a Flock-of-Seagulls look before returning in another flashback set a year later dressed with Ross as Sonny Crockett and Rico Tubbs from *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-1989). Chandler, "the boy who hates Thanksgiving," is the main character of the episode. In it he sarcastically laments, "Reliving past pain and getting depressed is what Thanksgiving is all about. You know for me anyway, and of course the Indians." His seasonal depression begins one Thanksgiving when he learns his father is gay. To be queer, in the homophobic logic that structures the bourgeois fantasy of *Friends*, is an act of betrayal. Ross sulks through the episode too, recently divorced, because his wife left him for a woman. Joey, meanwhile, the show's proxy for viewers, watches the cast recount post-meal stories, devouring his giant Hershey's chocolate bar on a couch.

Junk food in *Friends* and *Ghosts* acts as a metonym for mass cultural products like the sitcom form itself. The domestic monocultural media ecosystem fashioned by the parallel monopolies of the old Hollywood studio and network TV systems disseminated a set of common values that helped ideologically consolidate mass consumers into an imagined community of American citizens. The oft-panned genre of the thirty-minute sitcom has been accused of being the cultural equivalent of processed food, yet *Ghosts* engages its "lowness" to wistfully recall the ameliorating social effects that dubious food and network TV can produce. But before returning to *Ghosts*' Thanksgiving, I will note one more cultural artifact of the network era beloved around the globe that, like Mickey Mouse, is an American Century totem: Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*.

A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving first aired on CBS on November 20, 1973, less than three weeks after Congress, amid the war in Vietnam, passed the War Powers Resolution over Richard Nixon's attempted veto that curbed executive control of U.S. military action. The present administration has vociferously rejected this law in the current war against Iran. Charlie Brown, a disaffected White male forerunner to Chandler Bing, is depressed, as always, by holidays. Peppermint Patty invites herself and some friends to his house for a dinner of candy and popcorn prepared by Snoopy. One of Patty's friends is Franklin, *Peanuts*' first Black character, introduced to the comics in 1968 after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. A few Southern stations protested Franklin sitting at a table with White children, but CBS executives, in a golden-age of sitcom liberalism dominated by the socially progressive work of Norman Lear, let it air. After Patty complains about her "meal," Linus makes a speech about the "First Thanksgiving," where Pilgrims like William Bradford and Miles Standish broke bread with "the great Indian Chief Massasoit" and eighty of his warriors. He ends in prayer: "We thank God for the opportunity to create a new world for freedom and justice." Patty's anger subsides, and they go to celebrate at Charlie Brown's grandmother's house. In the car, they sing "Over the River and through the Woods," written by Lydia Maria Child in 1844. One wonders what Child, a strong abolitionist, feminist, and Native American rights activist would make of Linus's patriotic piety.

No one can watch *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* today unless they pay for Apple TV+, which owns the licensing rights to stream *Peanuts* content. The weekly network primetime schedule provided a regularized temporal rhythm for administering a daily dose of mass culture, encouraging its consumer citizens, though rarely so overtly as Linus, to see themselves living in "a new world of freedom and justice." But Thanksgiving shows, as forms of synecdoche, bring into microcosm the liberal consensus model of multicultural democratic unity whereby a group's differences may be set aside in one collective act of shared consumption. Greater diversity came to sitcoms in the post-60s era, and even if by the mid-80s Bill Cosby dominated ratings with his *Father Knows Best* schtick, a Black family serving as representative of bourgeois family values represents cultural progress. Suffice to say by the time of *Ghosts*, we are far removed from Linus's blithe religious worship of civic history and Chandler's smirking liberal identification with colonially oppressed Native Americans. Yet, even as Sass gives his blessing, his assent depends upon a right to marshmallows, thus participating in the same junk-food trope from *Peanuts* and *Friends*. Pop culture offers excessive and potentially harmful pleasure. Mass illusions of social comity can only hold for so long, though, and so it is worth asking what sort of excessive narrative content exceeds the wholesome nationalist intentions that construct the nostalgic frame of sitcom liberalism in *Ghosts*.

Before Sass responds to Jay and Sam's question, several ghosts insist they were not the ones to blame for genocide. Thor only killed Europeans, Hetty has Irish ancestors, Trevor is Jewish, and Pete says he is "from the 80s and drove a Datsun," implying his Japanese car confirms he is not a racist, rather than a sign of his being alive after a postindustrial turn toward globalization. As Higgintoot stammers for an excuse, the African American Alberta calls him a colonizer. He defends himself: "I'm gay! Is that something? What about our Puritan friend Patience? Where is she?" He runs from the room: "Patience! We need you!" Rather than a symbolic means of multicultural unity, Puritanism, as it once did for Hawthorne, encodes a colonial history of illiberalism and genocide. But the storyteller

Sass understands narrative power, noting they were raised on a Linus-like "idyllic story about Thanksgiving, and obviously there's much more to it." But the episode itself forms an idyll, culminating in a dinner where Jay has cooked "what the Lenape refer to as the three sisters: corn beans, and squash." Sass rolls his eyes at the guilty liberal gesture, and only wants his marshmallow yams. "Happy Thanksgiving, Everyone," Hetty says, "even to Isaac, who is a colonizer." "*Gay* Colonizer!" he insists.

Given the gay panic humor that *Friends* repeats *ad nauseum*, the coding of the American revolution as queer with Isaac registers cultural progress. To his "I'm gay! Is that something?" the answer is yes. But his identification with Sass as a persecuted minority is *Ghosts*' own version of Chandler's joke about "the Indians." The show's vision of history is progressive, symbolized, as it once was by Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, in an interracial marriage of striving entrepreneurs. The ghosts' sudden access to present social knowledge through Sam allows them to grow: Isaac leaves the closet, finance bro Trevor respects female autonomy after he learns of a daughter, Hetty ceases to hate the Irish after a genealogical discovery, and so on. Such gains provide cases of personal development. And none, as in the Thanksgiving exchange between Sam and Jay and those Isaac calls "My Fellow Ghost Americans," are blamed for the most illiberal aspects of their former worlds. Hetty may be a ruthless hater of Irish immigrants, poor folk, and workers, but she was forced to marry a man against her will in deference to Victorian gender ideology. For truly irredeemable members of the liberal American covenant, the show has created a hell where Hetty's Robber Baron husband, Elias Woodstone, lives.

Elias, the first owner of the mansion, serves the devil and often tries to steal the souls of both living and dead tenants of his former home. His secret sexual and economic affairs drove Hetty to suicide after she inherited his massive debts when he died. Their son also murdered Alberta, due to jealousy over her bisexual Black boyfriend, whom he loved. Despite the multiple social traumas it contains, Hetty adores Woodstone Manor and treats it as hers—the heir Sam is a last living descendent whose economic precarity and social egalitarianism irks her. Thus, she wants to own the last word and wish her companions, and the show's viewers, a Happy Thanksgiving. She speaks from her family's right to a home built from the profits of a manufacturing empire whose factories, much to the living delight of Hetty and Elias, exploited its child and immigrant workers. The show's double-exposure of past and present superimposes a late nineteenth-century haunted mansion from an era notorious for its many inequalities over scenes of the present, often called a "Second Gilded Age," replete with its own brutal menagerie of Robber Barons like Skydance CEO Ellison, who ultimately claims *Ghosts* itself as his private property.

Ghosts is an Americanized version of a UK sitcom. BBC One's *Ghosts* (2019-2023) told a similar story of an interracial couple in modern London beset by financial anxiety who inherit a country house haunted by archetypes of Britain's past. The formula has also been exported to France, Greece, Germany, and Australia. As the form of the western liberal state enters crisis, unsurprisingly a show like *Ghosts*, that gently analyzes the dream contents of national fantasy, has thrived in many places. Authoritarian populism depends upon the purity lies of ethno-nationalist nostalgia: Trump's MAGA, Farage's Reform UK, and Modi's BJP are but some of its most visible political expressions. Yet pop culture of the American Century, packaged to attract as many consumers as possible without offending dominant social sensibilities, was always charged with, albeit in less toxic form, populist feelings that only occasionally deviated from its canon of narrative patterns—like Schulz adding Franklin after (tellingly, not before) King's murder. But *Ghosts* has nothing like the tens of millions of viewers who made time the same day each week to watch *Cosby* or *Friends*. Pete, a 1980s travel agent is a superfan of another sitcom set in a B&B run by a liberal married couple from New York City surrounded by eccentrics, CBS's *Newhart* (1982-1990). Thus, Jay and Sam, having fled the economic pressures of city life, are themselves "Fellow Ghost Americans," and implied faded copies of images original to a vanished era when scripted situation comedies reached a truly mass audience. They haunt a digital media landscape as specters of striving sitcom couples' past like *Newhart*'s Dick and Joanna Loudon.

Thus, I will complete this excursion into considering *Ghosts* as a nostalgic fantasy for American Century entertainment and the national model of liberal consensus it championed by briefly exploring the second plot of its Thanksgiving episode. The day before Thanksgiving, Sam has a book signing in Chicago. She is accompanied on her travels by Pete, whose "ghost power" allows him to wander off the property for short stints. In addition to running the B&B, Sam hustles as a freelancer who writes a biography of Isaac. Her publishers only agree to publish it if she promises to add vampires. History, she is told, is boring and must be enlivened with supernatural elements. In other words, her book, like *Ghosts*, is supernatural historical fiction. Nobody comes to the signing, as cosmopolitan consumer cultural centers like Chicago have no taste for the middlebrow. Neither books nor scripted TV, no matter how spiced up with ghosts and vampires, command wide cultural attention like they once did. Despondent, she waits with Pete for a flight home, but the airline workers go on strike. They rent a car for a road trip home.

A running gag is that Pete's job has been made obsolete by the internet. E-commerce has intensified the impersonal system of capitalist exchange. Yet with encyclopedic knowledge of the U.S. road-system accumulated while alive, Pete attempts to prove himself by taking Sam on a shortcut to their house, but the Ohio byway he remembers is now a defunct and muddy road. They get stuck. First showing anger, Sam comes to sympathize with Pete. Her dream to be a professional writer seems on a similar path of anachronism, for while progress is reflected by the diachronic history synchronically contained by Woodstone Manor, Jay and Sam fight bankruptcy throughout the show. They are only able to stay afloat when Trevor, formerly of Lehman Brothers (RIP 2008), lands a job as a remote employee for a private Manhattan equity firm. The mordant joke is that a dead financial professional from a disgraced bank is in demand more than his living roommates who aspire to be independent entrepreneurs. Pete has a former client in the area whom they call for help. Though the client died, a son recalls his dad talking about a great travel agent named Pete. He arrives in a helicopter to extract them from both the physical mud and their shared spiritual wallowing in a feeling of cultural redundancy.

I argue above that the nineteenth-century Gilded Age remembered widely for its Robber Barons—if less so for the Haymarket Affair, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and the Wounded Knee Massacre—provides a Gothic and uncanny chronological "double" that helps to situate the contemporary illiberal America inhabited by Sam and Jay. But the twinning of Sam and Pete's obsolescence also suggests the contemporary is embedded in the history of globalization. The offshoring of Detroit manufacturing jobs helped to make Pete's purchase of a Nissan Datsun instead of a Ford possible, and the labor action in the airport also recalls Reagan's war against the air traffic control union. Alongside Hetty and Elias's ethnocentric and elitist contempt for workers, the show's political unconscious coordinates various kinds of struggle that bind marginalized American lives across time, whether placed in struggles of the 1780s, 1880s, 1980s, or now—not to mention all those colonizers and colonized subjects prior to the national era. Yet I am hardly saying *Ghosts* is a coherent expression of anti-capitalist or even pro-labor sentiment. Pete and Sam rejoin their companions for a shared Thanksgiving meal because the narrative sentimentalizes, in classic "separate spheres" fashion, domestic relations produced in the home and market relations produced outside of it: a son fondly remembers his dad speaking feelingly of an ultra-competent professional whose face-to-face services he purchased. The immaterial bonds produced by families and markets are imagined to linger long after loved ones die or whole segments of the labor market collapse. Conversely, collectivized workers just create an inconvenience for Sam whose publisher is helping to finance her national book tour.

But people do not go to sitcoms for history lessons. Following the logic of Sam's publisher, if media consumers are to learn that gay men have contributed to this nation since its inception, there had better be ghosts and vampires to make the rest palatable, like toasted marshmallows served atop vegetables. Gothic aspects in afterlife sitcoms like *Ghosts* aim to cultivate new attention and appetite for a scripted form often declared dead and buried with the liberal order of culture that birthed it. And yet this particular episode's *deus ex machina* ending of a helicopter sent to rescue Sam and Pete can only take its culturally and socioeconomically eclipsed pair as far as Woodstone Manor. The civic and cultural ritual of a Thanksgiving feast awaits them alongside fellow stalled-out souls lingering in a domestic space-turned-purgatory. The American Century persists, but only in the haunted house of *Ghosts,* where the dead far outnumber the living in its vision of a nation that takes the once-familiar shape of an open table.

The Mythic Past of Ryan Coogler's *Sinners*: Culture, Community, and Black Survival in the Face of White Vampirism

Leslie Leonard

Sinners (2025), set in 1932, situates itself firmly within a mythical moment in Black musical history: Robert Johnson's sale of his soul to the devil at the crossroads in Clarksdale, Mississippi (the same setting as the film), in the early 1930s. Other choices, such as Buddy Guy's portrayal of the elder Sammie, Coogler's choice to cast Michael B. Jordan as twins Smoke and Stack (a play on Howlin' Wolf's 1956 song of the same name), and Stack's insistence that Sammie's guitar once belonged to Charley Patton, further intertwine the film within a genealogy of Blues music as experienced in a mythic, supernatural version of American history.

The film serves to remind audiences that this moment (mythicized or not) is also inextricably entangled with the violent past of the nineteenth century and the ongoing violence of the twenty-first. As Siddhant Adlakha's review deftly notes, "from the characters' ragged attire, to their ramshackle wooden lodgings and churches, to the endless fields of cotton in which they toil … the legacy of American slavery hasn't so much been erased by this point in time as much as it has simply mutated" ("The Incredible Long-Take"). Viewers see this legacy in the chain gangs of prisoners and their forced field labor—direct remnants of chattel slavery—as well as in the constant threat of White violence, particularly Klan-perpetrated violence, that lies ever-present in each White encounter. The characters' obsession with clear racial boundaries is also a pervasive remnant of nineteenth-century anxieties: Mary's slippery status as a White-passing "octaroon" woman and the third-space occupied by Bo, Grace, and Lisa Chow, as Chinese-Americans who defy the neat (or not so neat) divisions of Whiteness and Blackness. At the same time, however, the film shows how these depicted pasts beget the modern South as well. Viewers overhear the patrons of Chow's grocery complain of Black-on-Black violence using surprisingly modern rhetoric; or, it may be more accurate to say that the racist talking points of modern America lazily draw from the unaltered rhetoric of the past.

These continuous threads—of past, present, and future—that weave their way throughout the film culminate in the movie's longest scene and its ultimate thesis. Before the arrival of Remmick and his Klan-vampires, audiences see Sammie's musical debut at Stack and Smoke's juke. As Sammie plays and sings, the music changes subtly and dancers and musicians from across Black musical history (past, present, and imagined future) join in. Among the represented styles of dance and music, viewers see Zaouli mask dancing, modern ballet, the Lindy Hop, Walking, Twerking, futuristic West African dance, B-Boy-style break dancing, futuristic hip-hop fusion, Peking opera dancing, and others

(Centeno). This ability to conjure ghosts speaks to Sammie's musical connectedness, and as Larry Neal's essay "The Ethos of the Blues" notes, "the blues singer [acts] as ritual poet" and "informed by a social history of mental and physical hardships" reflects culture outwards, making the symbolic literal for listeners (42). Sammie's music, powerful enough to draw forth figures of the past and future, is the power of the Blues made visual for audiences.

These mythic visitors, arriving from past and future, are a connected chain of lives born out of one another and existing in a mythic reality distinct but never fully separate from our own. In this way, *Sinners* is about ghosts as much as it is about vampires, and ghosts are always about our relationship to the past and to the dead. As Annie says at one point, vampires are different from haints (a type of malevolent Southern ghost) in that their "soul gets stuck in the body" and "can't join the ancestors." Instead, she says, they are "forced to go on living with all that hate." Thus, the film establishes a dichotomy for audiences. On the one side there are the ancestors, joined together peacefully and lovingly in death, and on the other there are vampires, trapped in a purgatorial state of neither life nor death, stuck in a cycle of hunger and violence that removes them from the ancestral chain of past and future. With the inclusion of the ancestors and their opposites (the violent and all-consuming vampires), Coogler's film presents a complex dissertation on the past and how we relate to it. Through *Sinners*, he suggests that there are two relationships we have to the past, always in conflict and always entangled. For Black community members in particular, this conflict contains further layers and considerations given their existence within anti-Black systems.

In his most famous speech, delivered only eighty years prior to the events of *Sinners*, Frederick Douglass insists that "we have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future" (5). Coogler similarly suggests the need for a relationship to the past that is additive, and the dichotomy he builds in *Sinners* is one between an appropriate relationship to the past and an inappropriate one. In one iteration—the path of ancestor veneration, of stories, songs, culture, and community—the past nurtures us, prepares the way for a better future, a better us, able to actualize the wildest dreams of those who came before. In the other iteration, the past is a place we are trapped in, unable to change—it is the place where Remmick dwells (against his will, it seems, at times) and the place where Sammie's conservative father stays as well. This past is not an anchor but a stone, dragging the young backwards. Remmick's world of vampirism is a never-ending night where change only ever occurs beyond oneself, a world that moves around him but cannot touch him. It is the difference between a past that is additive—like the spirits of Sammie's song who contribute to the music—or destructive, like the extractive violence of vampirism.

The supernatural inclusion in the film serves, as Mary Holiman writes, to reveal "a powerful truth," that "there is magic in being Black and Southern, and in the rich ecosystem of the Mississippi Delta. There's magic in the food, the music, the land, and the spirituality" (Holiman). Part of it, however, is also to express plainly what cannot be expressed through any other means. How better to show deep ancestral connection than to literally draw the ancestors forth to dance alongside their descendants? How better to portray White greed and violence than through the metaphor of vampirism?

Through *Sinners*, Coogler takes audiences back to the roots of vampires, away from modern adaptations that sell vampirism as a dazzling path to powerful immortality (vampires are themselves of course another carryover from the nineteenth century). Here vampirism is back to its folkloric roots –the unending hungry night where vampires are mouths—always hungry, violent, and out of touch with their humanity. Furthermore, the vampire hive mind is merely another form of White assimilation through the erasure of culture, art, and true community in favor of a flattened and washed-out melting pot in which there is still hierarchy and control under the banner of White supremacy. Remmick preaches community and love but only so long as he ultimately remains in charge, stealing the language, music, and ultimately minds of all those in his thrall. "The Black horror/horror noir genre frequently situates racial terror as the fundamental dread from which Black characters must escape" and Coogler's film is no different in that regard (Bowles 4). The vampires in *Sinners* are merely another aspect of the White violence that the characters face daily.

Remmick's purpose for targeting the juke is to use Sammie's ancestor-conjuring power to see his own people once more. Remmick, like all anti-Black Whites, is desperate to bring the past back, and to exploit Black labor and enact violence to do so. His rhetoric of family and love is merely the first of many tactics to enslave Sammie under his control and bring about a return to a fictionalized past in which his own people are unconquered by White British oppression. Remmick has no interest in sharing culture, only in consuming, dominating, and replacing it with his own, dragging everyone he consumes backward into the past with him—a fictional past of his own creation and desire. His community is built upon forced connection through a hive mind in which he remains in control, and with this power audiences see him literally mind-control his Black victims out of their bodily autonomy, forcing them to dance an Irish jig as puppets with him featured at the center as their master and orchestrator.

Importantly, it is not Sammie's faith that saves him from Remmick's influence (no crucifixes held in shaking hands) but his guitar. This, of course, is the point—it is art and music and culture that will save the community, not religion. In fact, Christianity here (especially the Southern Black Christianity portrayed in the film) is an impediment to Sammie's music, an impediment to culture and community—it breeds fear, not connection. As Delta Slim tells Sammie, "Blues wasn't forced on us like that religion … we brought [the Blues] with us from home." As Slim reminds Sammie and viewers, the Blues are "magic … sacred and big." Sammie's playing, of course, confirms this as his music is quite literally magic. The film's forced opposition between Sammie's preacher father and his musical/magical ability further solidifies the "sacred" and true magic of the Blues as more powerful and potent than that of religious faith; as we see, Sammie's attempts to pray the vampires away are only mocked as the empty and powerless words that they are.

Holiman writes that "through a supernatural lens, [Coogler] tells a story where the real magic is survival itself," but this magic of survival, significantly, only comes from the connection born of music, love, and art; a meaningful connection to the past and future; and an understanding of one's role in the long line of ancestral hardship that situates a single life within a larger communal context (Holiman). There is magic, quite literally, in Sammie's playing and in Remmick's vampiric power, but this magic only serves to illustrate clearly for audiences the true magic at the heart of *Sinners*—the art, culture, and community that generates survival and power (or that, in Remmick's case, is corrupted and co-opted for evil).

Sammie's ultimate survival is also due in part to the participation of his community. When Remmick offers the juke attendees survival in exchange for Sammie, they unwaveringly refuse. It is clear that the group is not only disgusted at the idea of giving up one of their own, but moreover that it is specifically the idea of giving up their young that they find particularly repulsive. In sparing his brother, Smoke makes Stack promise to leave Sammie untouched and to "let [him] live out [his] life," to age and to grow old. In the wake of Black Lives Matter, in a nation built upon violence against Black individuals, and constructed and reliant upon Black deaths, the film emphasizes Sammie's ability to not only survive against Remmick, but to *age*. The film recognizes that it is a victory and a privilege for Sammie to be allowed to grow old. It is Sammie himself who clarifies this stance, as he refuses Stack's offer of immortality via vampirism, because it represents an eternity stuck, unable to move on or join the ancestors, Sammie understands, and would negate the sacrifices of those who died at the juke protecting his right to age, to die, and to eventually join the ancestral line.

Like Sammie's survival, Smoke's death is a means of moving on and joining his family, a fate that is not simply closure, but that is preferable to eternal life under the curse of vampirism. By contrast, though Stack and Mary may "survive" the encounter and stride confident, beautiful, and ever-young into the post-credits scene of the 1990s, the audience understands that their fate is a tragedy, not a triumph. They remain frozen in time, unable to move on, unable even to move freely without invitation (a new take on segregation)—their minds never their own, insatiably hungry, and their existence dependent upon violence and death. They have become the cycle of violence that Sammie escaped through survival and that Smoke escaped through death.

Stack and Mary, of course, are the perfect candidates for the continuation of vampirism as it is Stack's greed and Mary's naivety (born from her status as White-passing) that initially open the doors to Remmick. And though they reappear dressed in the costume of the present, they ultimately produce nothing, create nothing, and, as we know, can only consume. This is the ultimate crux of Coogler's point within *Sinners*. Vampirism (violence, Whiteness, and exploitation all in one) is a sickness of consumption. Remmick needs Sammie's musical power because he has none of his own, he needs the Black community's kinship because he is incapable of producing genuine bonds of community himself without perverting it into a hierarchical hive mind, and he needs the death and pain of others just to continue his very existence. By the end of the film, Mary and Stack have become the same. They can buy Sammie's records, but cannot make anything of value themselves, and their existence is predicated upon a continuation of death and horror that they participate in nightly. They are barred from any reunion with their ancestors or beloved dead and instead waste their eternal youth in a purgatorial world that will soon no longer be legible to them.

While vampirism has long been used in Black horror to depict any number of dangers (STDs in *Def by Temptation* (1990), the afterlife of enslavement in *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), the Othering of Blackness in *Fledgling* (2005), and so on), *Sinners* emphasizes the vampiric nature of appetite and thrall in order to show plainly the violence inherent in White extraction of Black talent, community, art, music, culture, and power. Yet, as viewers see in the spiritually transcendent moment in which the ancestors gather to join their living counterparts in the joy that only culture can bring, it is community care and artistic creation that stand as the final defenses against this violent extraction. Meanwhile, Sammie's music, his guitar, and his kin (by blood and otherwise) ensure his survival, his ability to age, and his ultimate reunion with all those who came before and will come after.

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Leslie Leonard received their doctorate from The University of Massachusetts in 2022. Their work in nineteenth-century literature centers Black iterations of community and kinship post-enslavement. Their most public contribution to the field remains their discovery of a previously unpublished essay by Frederick Douglass featured in the ninth volume of *J19*. They currently teach writing through College Unbound, a higher education program dedicated to adult learners from historically underserved communities. They also work in the public sector as a Business Development Manager and occasionally host a horror podcast.

Mediated Terror and the Colonial Mirror: A Review of imitating the dog's *War of the Worlds*

Bethany Dahlstrom

There is a specific, enduring kind of dread that H. G. Wells tapped into in *The War of the Worlds* in 1897—the sudden realization that humanity is not the undisputed master of its own world. In their latest production, which I had the pleasure of seeing at The Dukes in Lancaster, United Kingdom, in late February 2026, a multimedia theatre company, imitating the dog, managed to strip away the Hollywood polish of recent adaptations, revealing something far more visceral, British, and unsettling. By blending high-concept stagecraft with the haunting rhetoric of twenty-first-century British politics, the production transforms Wells's Martian invasion into a searing interrogation of contemporary xenophobia.

In any stage production by imitating the dog, the stage is never just a stage—it is a film set, a laboratory, and a canvas. Their adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* is no exception as they utilize a sophisticated array of live-feed cameras that dissect the action in real time. This multiperspective storytelling is where the production finds its true genius. While the four actors move across the stage, their faces are simultaneously projected above it in towering, cinematic close-ups (see fig. 1). This combination creates a fascinating duality: the audience sees the sweat and effort of the physical performer, but also the polished, curated "myth" of the invasion on screen. The actors double as camera operators, moving fluidly between marks on the stage so quickly that the eye hardly knows where to look, except at the big screen above the stage.

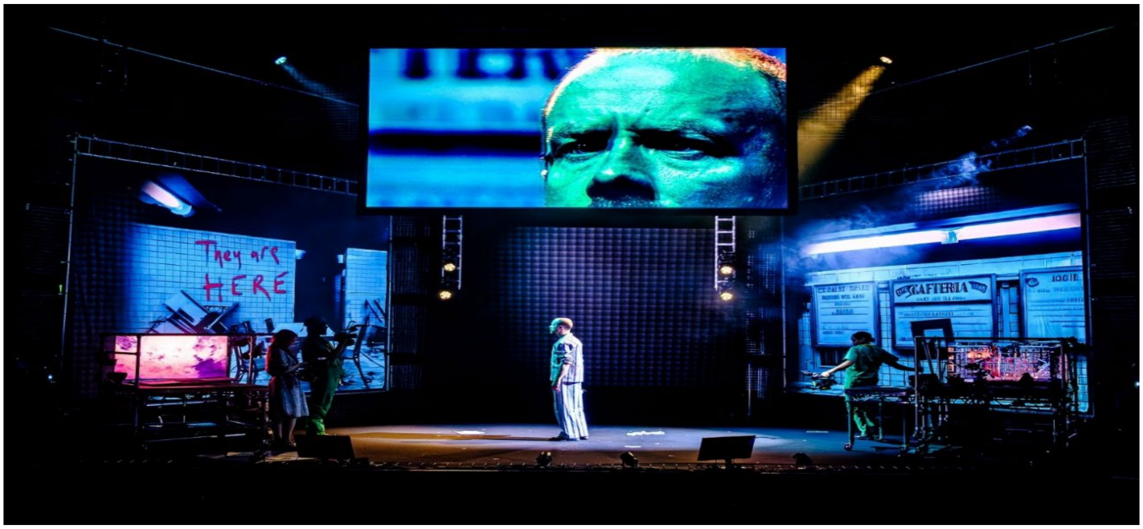

Fig. 1 (Courtesy of imitating the dog)

The production opens with a voiceover by a doctor and nurses as they attempt to resuscitate someone, and the audience sees the protagonist, played by the brilliant Gareth Cassidy, seemingly come to life in an abandoned hospital ward. The cameras, operated by the actors, show close-ups of the protagonist's face as he processes the turbulence around him. This technical choice serves a profound thematic purpose. By showing the audience the "making of" the catastrophe, imitating the dog forces them to grapple with the mediation of news and terror, mirroring our modern relationship with large-scale disaster on a miniature screen projected upward. Just as the Victorian public in Wells's novel relies on frantic telegrams and newspapers, modern viewers and readers rely on digital screens. Furthermore, there is a very clear voyeuristic nature to the show, where the audience can see both the actions on stage and the protagonist's perspective. This aligns with the voyeuristic nature of witnessing modern immigration crises: while the audience watches the protagonist's "delusions" through a digital lens, that same lens is used to produce consumable images of real-world migration crises globally. The precision required for such a feat cannot be overstated. The actors are not merely performing for the stalls; they are performing for the "eye" of the camera, hitting marks with mathematical accuracy so that the digital overlays align perfectly. This is perhaps best seen in the opening shots of the protagonist walking through the hospital, as well as in the car scenes, where a miniature Volkswagen Beetle is used to show the protagonist and his wife fleeing to Dover (see fig. 2). These scenes and this accuracy create a stage tension that perfectly mirrors the narrative.

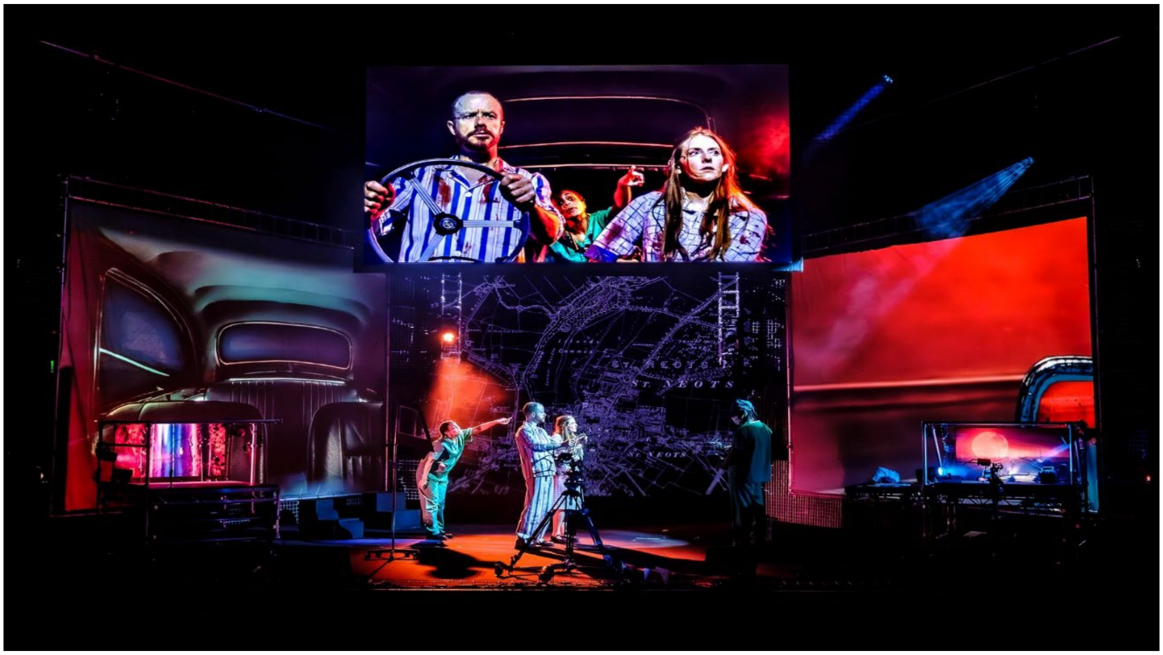

Fig. 2 (Courtesy of imitating the dog)

A central pillar of imitating the dog's methodology supports the tension between the physical "real" and the digital "ideal." In this production, the use of the miniature Volkswagen Beetle to represent the flight to Dover is not merely a stylistic quirk; it functions as a potent metaphor for the shrinking of the British global perspective. By forcing the audience to watch a toy car navigate a simulated landscape while Cassidy's protagonist undergoes a psychological collapse, the production highlights the "miniaturization" of British influence in a post-colonial world. This technical choice forces the viewer into a state of voyeuristic complicity. The audience is granted a dual vantage point: they see the "making of" the catastrophe on the stage floor—the frantic and fluid movement of actors and cameras—and the "result" of the catastrophe on the screen above. This view mirrors the modern consumption of global crises, where harrowing events are processed through the sanitizing, often distorting lens of a digital screen. The multiperspective storytelling thus becomes a critique of how media can simultaneously document and distance the audience from the "Other." As with the camera movements, there is no room for error when the "Others" begin their assault on British soil. In many ways, the production uses a subjective, unreliable lens—that of the protagonist's literal vision—to explore the protagonist's internalized xenophobia and colonial anxieties, themes which resonate resoundingly through modern British society.

Perhaps imitating the dog's most provocative choice is the repeated use of Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, delivered in Birmingham in 1968, which evokes a sense of historical vertigo and continuity, reminding viewers that the British have been grappling with many of the themes of Wells's story for centuries, and perhaps serving as the production's most aggressive—and thoughtful –political intervention. In his speech, Powell strongly criticizes immigration rates from Commonwealth countries to the United Kingdom, particularly after World War II, and warns that the United Kingdom would soon follow in the path of the United States, with its race riots, civil rights laws, and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

> That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. Indeed, it has all but come. In numerical terms, it will be of American proportions long before the end of the century. Only resolute and urgent action will avert it even now. Whether there will be the public will to demand and obtain that action, I do not know. All I know is that to see, and not to speak, would be the great betrayal. (50)

By placing Powell's warnings of a "tragic and intractable phenomenon" alongside a literal alien invasion, the play exposes the absurdity of xenophobic hysteria while acknowledging its persistent power. The production suggests that the "alien" in the British imagination has shifted from Wells's extraterrestrials to the Commonwealth immigrant, a transition that evokes this profound sense of historical vertigo.

Powell's anti-immigrant sentiments struck a rhetorical chord with many, something that the United Kingdom is seeing even today. Whereas the United States is often referred to as a "melting pot," a place where anyone can arrive and make a life for themselves while retaining their original culture and sharing it with others, the United Kingdom has often struggled to identify what exactly encompasses "British values," especially in the face of rising immigration challenges and skyrocketing anti-immigration rhetoric and actions. The protagonist awakens from a medical procedure into a world that has become unrecognizable to him. In his delusional state, he perceives the "Others" not as extraterrestrials (although those are invading as well), but as a more domestic invasion; he perceives the Black characters he encounters as threats representing a "savage" takeover. Cassidy's character is allowed these delusions because he is a White man navigating a world he no longer recognizes.

The characters he meets along the way, played by Bonnie Baddoo and Morgan Bailey, are often eccentric, difficult to understand, and perhaps even psychologically volatile. The historical vertigo mentioned above is reinforced through the protagonist's interactions with these Black characters. Because the audience sees them through the protagonist's subjective, unreliable lens, their eccentricity and perceived psychological volatility are revealed as products of the protagonist's own internalized colonial anxieties. The play, therefore, argues that the "invasion" is not happening on British soil, but within the calcified ideological structures of the protagonist's mind.

The protagonist continually sees visions of his wife, played by Amy Dunn, with whom he is trying to reconnect as he attempts to escape Britain via Dover to France. Here, the audience is subjected to a subversion: rather than the dinghies being brought across the Channel *from* Dover, Brits are trying to escape *to* France from Dover to get away from the "Others" who have come to plague Britain. The subversion of the Dover crossing—portraying Britons as the ones desperate to reach France—functions as a necessary empathy experiment for a contemporary audience. By flipping the geography of the refugee crisis, the production strips away the exclusionary "British values" often cited by modern political factions. It forces the viewer to inhabit the position of the displaced, effectively using Wells's "war of extermination" to question who, in the twenty-first century, we have deemed "inferior" enough to exclude.

This tension with the "Others" is most evident in the protagonist's conversations with the people he meets along the way, who all seem to know one another and are related. Instead of the integration that many United States citizens perhaps perceive on their own soil, conservative Britons—perhaps Reform UK most of all—have echoed ideas from Powell's speech that immigrants would live in exclusionary communities rather than integrating into British society. When the Race Relations Act became law, Britain saw an even greater influx of immigrants from various countries, not just the Commonwealth, and arguably, it has become a more diverse and inclusive society, thriving. However, not everyone shares these sentiments, as seen by the rise of parties like Reform UK and the newly-formed Restore party.

Ultimately, Cassidy's character is portrayed as ideologically unsavable. The doctor's and nurses' voices cut back in, as they did at the start, and one of them says, "We've lost him." As his lifeless body sinks into the Channel, stained by red blood, the production offers a stark reminder that those who refuse to adapt to a shifting, diverse world are often lost causes. Here, I think, we should return to Wells's novel, citing a passage from Book One:

> And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (3)

The production concludes by returning to the core of Wells's text. imitating the dog asks a vital question for our modern age: when faced with those with whom we seemingly have no cultural connection, will we succumb to fear, or will we choose to embrace, learn, and grow?

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Bethany Dahlstrom is an independent scholar who recently completed her PhD at Lancaster University. Her research focuses on human-bird relations, ecofeminism, and the cultural politics of species in the Long Nineteenth Century, with recent work examining bird migration, early protectionist movements, and representations of birds across popular periodicals. She is particularly interested in how women entered male-dominated scientific and social spaces, forming societies devoted to bird protection and strategically aligned themselves with birds to challenge restrictive cultural narratives. Her broader research considers how ideas about gender, species, and environment shaped public debates around conservation and ecological care.

Book Reviews

Norton, Terry L. *Trickster Tales of Southeastern Native Americans.* McFarland, 2023. **https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/trickster-tales-of-southeastern-native-americans/?srsltid=AfmBOoqsVzjF9AeNEhCeQ2vqTifkUqF_-ZGW8D5Ua5DTQBLbmHv3XJy5**

Review by Henry Kirby

Trickster Tales of Southeastern Native Americans collects and presents more than sixty examples of trickster stories from eight Native nations who claim homelands in what is now the southeastern United States. Unlike other anthologies of Native oral literatures such as Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz's *American Indian Myths and Legends* (1984) or William Bright's *A Coyote Reader* (1993), which organize their contents thematically, *Trickster Tales* organizes its offerings according to national tradition, with sections devoted to Creek (Muskogee), Hitchiti, Alabama, Koasati (Coushatta), Natchez, Seminole, Catawba, and Cherokee stories. Unsurprisingly, the sections on Creek and Cherokee stories contain the most examples and are thus slightly overrepresented, but the Hitchiti, Alabama, Koasati, Natchez, Seminole, and Catawba stories constitute over half the stories in the book, indicating Norton's interest in representing these nations less well-known to non-Native readers.

Norton, whose academic training is in literacy education and children's and young adult literature rather than anthropology, did not collect these stories himself nor did he translate them from their original Native languages. As he discusses in his preface to the book, Norton gathered his examples from the annals of twentieth-century anthropology, namely John R. Swanton's *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians* (1929), Frank Speck's *Catawba Texts* (1934), James Mooney's famous *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (1900), and also from academic articles published by Speck, L. G. Carr, and Robert F. Greenlee in *The Journal of American Folklore.*

Norton derives his nations-based organizational schema from Swanton, whose 1929 text is also broken up into sections of Creek, Hitchiti, Alabama, Koasati, and Natchez stories. The Seminole stories based on Greenlee's recordings come next "because of some historical connections to the Creek" (2), followed by the Catawba and Cherokee stories. Within these cultural and geographical groupings, Norton organizes his stories to create a narrative arc of sorts for Trickster. He explains that he places three retellings of Creek Rabbit stories first in his collection because "they are *pourquoi* tales that introduce and explain the how's and why's of Rabbit's roguish nature as an indigenous trickster" (2). He likewise concludes the book with his versions of Cherokee stories because "one of the stories ("What Happened to Rabbit") explains how the preeminent trickster of Southeast vanished from the current world of animals and people" (3). Though the story section of *Trickster Tales* thus closes with Rabbit's apparent vanishment from our world, readers should not conclude that either Trickster or the Indigenous worldviews embodied in Native trickster stories have similarly disappeared. Just as Indigenous communities persist despite the systematic efforts by settler states to remove, assimilate, eradicate, and erase them, Rabbit is "there even now" (126).

A main strength of *Trickster Tales* is the way Norton updates and refreshes his ethnographic sources. Among the critical apparatuses that make up the back matter of *Trickster Tales*, Norton includes charts indexing his adaptations alongside their earlier publications. This makes comparative analysis of Norton's versions easy and allows the reader to appreciate more fully Norton's storytelling techniques. A good example of Norton's approach is his story "Rabbit, Wolf, and Buzzard," which retells the Hitchiti story Swanton records as "Rabbit and Wolf" in *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians*. Norton effectively clarifies the action of Swanton's version, resulting in a more dynamic and enjoyable story. For example, Swanton's text begins:

> Rabbit was disturbing a garden when they caught and tied him to a tree intending to pour boiling water over him. While he was sitting there waiting for the sentence to be executed, Wolf, in passing by, found him. Rabbit said, "My friend, they told me to devour a big hog and I said I would not do it, so they tied me up, and therefore I am sitting here." When Rabbit told Wolf that Wolf said, "Well then, I will eat that up." (107)

In Norton's retelling:

> One day, some people caught Rabbit while he was disturbing their garden. To punish him, they tethered him to a tree and planned to douse him with scalding water. They went to boil the water and left Rabbit waiting.
>
> Just then, Wolf passed by the garden and saw Rabbit tied to the tree. Rabbit called out to him a low voice. "Wolf, my old friend, the people here want me to swallow a huge hog, but I refused, So, they tethered me here, and here I sit."
>
> Wolf thought a minute, then said, "Well, why don't I eat the hog for you?" (53)

Narratively, Norton's plot proceeds more clearly and characters' motivations, such as the gardeners' decision to punish Rabbit with scalding and Wolf's decision to eat the hog on Rabbit's behalf, are more readily understood. These subtle changes increase readability and comprehension for contemporary audiences, particularly young readers and listeners.

One further intervention Norton makes with respect to Swanton's stories specifically is his translation of the latter's Latin glosses of "objectionable" material back into English. Sexual content and bawdy humor are important ingredients in many Indigenous trickster stories. When he records these moments, Swanton translated his sources' original wording into Latin. In an essay dedicated to this subject included in the appendices of *Trickster Tales*, Norton historicizes *Myths and Tales* within the social climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, detailing how "restrictions and sanctions against indecency were rife in Swanton's time" (146). Norton argues that Swanton used the "esoteric language" of Latin as a "gatekeeper of secret information" (149). Because only academics and select other elite members of American society could read Latin, "erudition became the means of denying women, children, and the poorer classes from obtaining admission to supposed taboos in print" (149). Norton restores this earthiness to his versions of the stories. However, because Swanton's 1929 text does not present its stories in his informants' Native languages, readers have no way of measuring the authenticity of Swanton's Latin renderings. One wonders how Norton's innuendos further alter Trickster's sexual dimensions from how a Native speaker would understand them.

This leads us to the biggest issue with *Trickster Tales*, which is its lack of Indigenous voices. For decades, Native scholars have insisted that discussions about Indigenous expressive culture must center Indigenous scholarship and tribally-specific epistemologies. To root our readings of Indigenous cultural products, perhaps most especially stories, in traditional and local knowledges is to assert Native communities' right to self-determination outside the confines of Western European intellectual traditions (what has been called variously intellectual, hermeneutical, and narrative sovereignty) that have been used to contain and colonize them for centuries under the guise of academic "research." All writers, but especially non-Native writers, should listen to these calls to honor Indigenous ways of knowing.

Norton's gesture toward the important issue of Native intellectual sovereignty is disappointing. In an essay on "Appropriation and Sovereignty," included in the book's critical apparatus as Appendix B, Norton considers the question of whether "non-natives who know and respect the history and culture of Native Americans can write authoritatively about them" (143). He concludes that, while some literary genres "like lyric poetry, which is written to convey deep personal feelings; modern realism; and obviously autobiography" might require "lived experience" as "a member of a cultural group," writers working in genres like "folktales, mythology, and legends" need mainly "a knowledge of … fanciful plots, talking animals, supernatural phenomena, magic markers, and other unreal characters" that "can be gained through study and inquiry" and that "may not be aspects and preoccupations of the daily lives of members of a culture from whom the lore derived in the distant past has been erased from memory or only spottily recalled" (143-44).

Norton is, of course, correct that non-Natives can write authoritatively and respectfully about Native culture. Kelly Wisecup and Drew Lopenzina are but two non-Native intellectuals in the fields of early American literature and Native Studies who do so. The difference is that Wisecup and Lopenzina remain in close conversation with Indigenous knowledge-keepers (community elders, first language speakers, and academics) and their scholarship centers those perspectives. Neither the discussion of sovereignty nor the comparative introductory essay on the nature of the trickster figure in this volume ever cite an Indigenous author. The sense of the trickster that emerges from *Trickster Tales* is thus a thoroughly Westernized one, isolated (assimilated?) from its Indigenous roots, that ignores what Trickster represents to contemporary Native communities and what lessons he actively teaches today.

Trickster Tales of Southeastern Native Americans is lively reading. Norton's retellings are entertaining and accessible and will appeal to general readers far more than its anthropological source material. However, students of folklore and other academic readers will not gain a good sense of Trickster as a specifically *Indigenous* figure, but as merely one manifestation of "the trickster" trope of global literature and folklore.

Henry Kirby specializes in early American literature, Native Studies, and humor studies. His research examines the cultural, political, and performative dimensions of humor in early Indigenous English-language texts. He is currently a postdoctoral lecturer at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where he defended his dissertation on early Native humor in 2024.

Fleming, Patrick C. ***British Children's Literature of the 19th Century: A Companion.*** **McFarland Companions to 19th Century Literature. McFarland, 2025.**

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/british-childrens-literature-of-the-19th-century/

Review by Richard Fulton

British Children's Literature of the 19th Century: *A Companion* is a handbook consisting of seventy-three entries describing and summarizing the most important contributors to the study of children's literature in the nineteenth century as a discrete field of inquiry. Patrick C. Fleming provides a short preface in which he explains the reasons for including (and excluding) certain figures and movements, and he describes the parameters of his collection (no American writers, no translated writers other than Hans Christian Anderson and Jules Verne, focus on genre over mode). In his introduction, he first describes the often-contradictory ideas of childhood in the nineteenth century as it was conceived of by philosophers, politicians, philanthropists, religious leaders, and a host of others. Ultimately, four conceptualizations of childhood were resolved in the Long Nineteenth Century: as sinful, as neutral, as innocent, and as biological. These were the childhoods, then, that were stuffed into the books of children's writers. By mid-century those books numbered in the thousands because, as Fleming notes, by that time children's literature was firmly entrenched in the British publishing world.

In a second section of the introduction Fleming surveys the marketing of children's literature and the presumed reading practices associated with its marketing. He touches on textbooks in this section because after all a child must learn how to read before books can be created for instruction and pleasure. He also surveys some popular (at least among children's literature authorities like Eleanor Fenn, Sarah Trimmer, and later, Charlotte Yonge) nursery books devoted to teaching reading. Fleming emphasizes that many books associated with children, both in the nineteenth century and currently, blur the lines between adult and children's literature. Fleming touches on both the middle-class nature of most children's literature, and the influence of religion on what was considered acceptable for children. Literature written by middle-class authors for lower-class children invariably emphasized middle-class and (often Evangelical) Christian values. The fact that religious publishing houses like the Religious Tract Society (RTS), the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), and the Sunday School Union (SSU) churned out most of the reading material available to lower-class children assured both a Christian message and middle-class values. Finally, Fleming provides a useful summary of the current state of scholarship in children's literature and suggests some important future initiatives.

Two important elements are missing from the introduction: a context for the demographics of nineteenth-century children, and a close look at *what* those children read and *how* they read. As for the former, it is important to know the size of the potential market for children's books; thus, it would be useful to know in general the population of children between the ages of, say six and eighteen, even if population can only be discussed at certain points in time, in say 1840, 1860, and 1880. Other questions also arise: What social classes were represented in the population? How many children were in school, and at what standard level? How well could they read? What reading material did they buy and in what quantities? What did their textbooks look like? Should we consider school texts as literature? What influence might school reading have had on what they read? While all this seems like a lot for a brief companion to children's literature, these topics could be covered in a couple of introductory paragraphs, and the information would sharpen the readers' view of the child readers this book surveys.

As for the latter, what did they read, what did they understand from it, and what does that reading material tell us? Getting to the answer of this question is not easy; simple sales figures or publication records can tell us what might have been intended for them to read, but did children read the Sunday School Union tracts exhorting them to a Christian life? The Band of Hope tracts exhorting temperance? The prize books, many published by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, that exhorted them to a moral life? Research into all these categories of juvenile books casts doubt on whether children truly read material thrust upon them by well-meaning adults, and a brief summary of the arguments concerning children's reading habits, like the summaries of arguments concerning the various conceptualizations of childhood, would be useful.

In part because he neglects these questions, Fleming's companion is a guide to what a long line of adult experts have determined to be the requirements for children's literature rather than to children's literature itself. For the most part he ignores what children themselves selected as children's literature, including most adventure periodicals, shilling shockers, and classics from the likes of Scott and Goldsmith. Granted, Fleming does not propose to write about best-selling juvenile literature, but surely there should be at least one entry for best-selling books to juveniles; there may not be records for who bought used copies of Kenilworth or the new cheap editions of Fielding, but there are records indicating who bought *Boys of England* (1866-1899) and *Boys' Own Magazine* (1855-1890), and there is ample information tucked away in autobiographies (both middle-class and working-class) to help form some conclusions as to what young people actually read. Answers to questions in these two elements help define the market for children's literature in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, particularly in his discussions of early contributors, Fleming ignores class issues and makes assertions of universality that are, in fact, only universal for the middle class.

In regards to sources, Fleming unfortunately leans heavily on Edward Salmon throughout the book as his primary source for what young people read in the latter part of the century. The twenty-three-year-old Salmon, at the beginning of his writing career, wrote a series of periodical pieces on the reading habits of young people that he collected into *Juvenile Literature as It Is* (1888). Salmon was an almost stereotypical late-Victorian middle-class prig who in several essays condescended to the working classes and belittled their reading material; perhaps because of his middle-class condescension his *Juvenile Literature* received what may be best described as mixed reviews. Fleming would have provided a more accurate account of young working-class reading material had he instead consulted Louis James, Jonathan Rose, John Burnett, or Richard Altick, all of whom provide lists of reading material actually read by working people and working-class children.

Fleming's entries are organized alphabetically, but can be grouped thematically as writers, texts, and modes and genres of reading material. Readers may cavil with some of the items or people included or left out, but he does manage to provide a comprehensive listing of influences on nineteenth-century children's literature.

The writers include all of the important British authors who impacted nineteenth-century children's literature. Fleming may have made too much of the late eighteenth-century writers—Anna Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, Eleanor Fenn, Sara Trimmer, the Godwins, the Lambs, and the Kilners among them—whose influence was undeniable, but also much of a piece. Their literature for children was unrelentingly didactic and emphasized Christian morality, proper approaches to life, and middle-class values. The teaching texts written by the Edgeworths and Barbaulds assumed that children were educated by their mothers, which further assumes that the mothers were themselves educated—which was not the case among nearly all of the working classes prior to 1850. Among the later writers a pattern emerges: stories by women writers like Julia Ewing, L. T. Meade, and Mary Louise Molesworth are gendered, often domestic, but equally often focused on the lives of girls who can be all they can be. Except for Charles Lamb, Walter Scott, and William Godwin, no men writers before about mid-century are included. The men who are included—George Fenn, G. A. Henty, W. H. G. Kingston, and of course Robert Louis Stevenson—wrote most of the adventure fiction that characterized juvenile literature in the last half of the century.

Entries for "adventure fiction," "boyhood and boys' literature," "girlhood and girls' literature," "juvenile magazines and periodicals," "novels for children," and even "juvenile nonfiction" emphasize the influence of early works such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) on the increasingly gendered, adventure-focused fiction for boys and domestic fiction for girls. While the entries are useful to some extent, Fleming tends to focus only on the "respectable" periodicals published by the Religious Tract Society and ignores the wildly popular boys' periodicals published by Edwin J. Brett, the Emmet brothers, Charles Fox, Samuel Beeton, John Allingham, and others whose million-copy circulation in fact goaded the RTS into establishing the *Boys' Own Paper* (1879-1967) and *Girls' Own Paper* (1880-1956). He would have done well to have examined sample copies of several periodicals for content; besides the serial adventure story and/or school story, all of the Brett publications carried nonfiction articles on topics like hunting tigers in India, or coyotes in America, or building a canoe, or comparing the needle gun and the Enfield. Besides the sensational discourse, there is very little in many of the adventure magazines that could be construed as morally objectionable.

It is in the entry for "imperialism" that Fleming becomes distracted by an academic theory that is becoming unraveled, that propaganda for Empire is embedded everywhere in late nineteenth-century children's literature and somehow manages to colonize children. For juvenile readers, it is arguable that any mention of tea or tiger hunting affects their attitude toward the Empire or even reminds them that there is such a thing as an Empire. There is little evidence among the school inspectors' reports that children had much of an idea what the Empire even was. However, Fleming's conclusion to the "imperialism" entry, that more study needs to be undertaken on the children's literature being produced in the colonies, is spot on.

One of the strengths of the companion is the material at the end of each entry that directs the reader to related entries. For "imperialism," for example, the reader is directed to "adventure fiction," "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*," "animal stories," "Ballantyne, R. M.," "boyhood and boys' literature," "Burnet, Frances Hodgson," "Day, Thomas," "domestic fiction," and nineteen more. In addition, "Further Reading" includes helpful secondary sources such as *Colonial Girlhood in Literature, Culture, and History, 1840-1950*, edited by Kristine Moruzi and Michelle Smith, and published by Palgrave in 2014.

As a companion to the study of nineteenth-century children's literature, this is a useful volume. The entries are complete enough (in some cases, perhaps too complete) to help scholars find bits of information on important, if in some cases obscure, individuals, and Fleming offers several suggestions for further research on important but little-examined subjects. I only regret that the entries for adventure fiction and imperialism seem to repeat some misinformation on those topics, but in the great scheme of the book, that is a minor quibble.

Richard Fulton is a retired academic administrator and still-active Victorian scholar. His last book is *Warrior Generation 1865-1885: Militarism and British Woking Class Boys* (2022), and his last published piece is a review of Peter Hoffenberg's *Durable Monuments: Claiming Bodies, Souls, and the Past in Colonial Australia* (2024), published in *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 2025.

Moruzi, Kristine. ***Philanthropy in Children's Periodicals, 1840-1930: The Charitable Child.*** **Edinburgh UP, 2024. https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-philanthropy-in-children-s-periodicals-1840-1930.html**

Review by Elisabeth McClanahan Harris

The nexus of children and charity often evokes the image of a stereotypical Dickensian child: clothed in rags, covered in chilblains, and shivering in a workhouse while hoping for another drop of gruel. In *Philanthropy in Children's Periodicals, 1840-1930: The Charitable Child*, Kristine Moruzi deliberately decenters the image of a child as primarily an object of charity. Instead, as the title suggests, her book takes up the vast print networks that recruited and trained Victorian children to exercise charity towards others who were less fortunate. Covering an ambitious archival scope, this book offers a thoughtful analysis of the many rhetorical tactics that children's periodicals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries employed to cultivate charity in their readers.

In her introduction, Moruzi adeptly weaves together two of the cultural, philosophical, and technological forces in the Long Nineteenth Century that culminated in new forms of print culture: children's magazines and children's columns in adult newspapers. With the rapid growth of cities and relative dearth of social welfare structures, new charitable organizations sprang up to care for the urban poor. From the start, these organizations framed charity as an enterprise not just for adults. Children regularly appear in print culture of the time as "people who could and should help others" (6). This "charitable ethic" (4), as Moruzi terms it, emerged alongside new theories of childhood that defined it as a distinct season warranting age-appropriate reading materials. Cheaper paper and advances in print technology made periodicals more accessible than ever before and, to provide an alternative to the penny dreadfuls flooding the market, charitable and religious organizations began circulating children's periodicals aimed at cultivating habits of virtue and generosity that would continue into adulthood.

Across six chapters, Moruzi develops a loosely chronological account of the ways that children's periodicals "helped to reflect, but also to produce, the understanding of children as charitable" in the Long Nineteenth Century (6). Chapters are organized around thematic concepts, each functioning as a case study for how print culture cultivated charitable communities, agency, motivation, subjectivity, and habits among children. Beginning with religious magazines published in London starting in the 1840s like *Band of Hope Review and Sunday Scholar Friend* (1851-1937) and the *Wesleyan Juvenile Offering* (1844-78), Moruzi concludes with several of the Junior Red Cross magazines published in Canada, Australia, and the United States following World War I. As this trajectory demonstrates, religious publications increasingly gave way to secular ones, even as children's periodicals were increasingly produced across the current and former British Empire.

While individual children's periodicals from this period have received previous scholarly attention, one of the key contributions of Moruzi's approach is to illuminate continuities in rhetorical tactics across a wide swath of periodicals. Across different charitable causes, intended audiences, and geographical spheres of circulation, children's periodicals from this period relied on a remarkably similar set of methods to cultivate charitable habits in their readers. Riffing on Lauren Berlant's theory of "intimate publics" and Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities," Moruzi develops how "charitable publics" formed and flourished around children's periodicals (24). Magazines featured clearly defined causes, printed narratives of children who were already contributing to them, and offered regular updates on their success. Causes ranged from hosting a Christmas dinner for London street children to raising relief funds for victims of famine in India and an earthquake in Japan. Letters by and about the children already supporting these causes offered entrepreneurial and sacrificial models that readers could emulate: one girl wrote that she raised funds by hemming pocket-handkerchiefs, while another chose to forgo a daily morning biscuit so her family could reallocate the pennies saved to a missionary society. Examples like these reassured readers that they could join the charitable public regardless of the size of their contribution, while regular reports of contribution totals gave children the satisfaction of participating in causes with large collective impact.

Moruzi also usefully points out ways in which charity and seriality can be mutually reinforcing. Each issue of a periodical is self-contained, and yet the success of its charitable causes relies largely on its iterability, thereby developing a sense of community and responsibility in its readers over time. *Aunt Judy's Magazine* (1866-85), for example, conducted an extended campaign inviting children to fund "Aunt Judy's Magazine Cot," a bed at a new children's hospital in London. Across many issues and drawing on multiple genres, the magazine published letters from hospital administrators, journalistic descriptions of the hospital, poignantly illustrated sentimental poetry featuring sick children, and vignettes of the children assigned to the cot during their hospital stay. Perhaps most effectively, the magazine regularly published subscription lists with the names of donors and the precise amount of their donations. By the turn of the twentieth century, visual print technologies had developed such that *At Home and Abroad* (1879-1974) offered to publish not only the names, but also the photographs, of children who had raised at least two pounds the previous year. The publication was apparently so flooded with contributions that the threshold amount for a child to have their picture featured in the magazine swiftly doubled. While no single issue might convince a child to part with their pocket money, the cumulative effect of these narratives combined with the desire to see their names (and eventually pictures) in print was highly motivational to child readers.

Moruzi's work will be interesting to scholars working in children's literature, childhood studies, and periodical studies. Her monograph offers a generative contribution to growing conversations about the transnational scope of children's periodicals, as well as the intersection of childhood and religious studies in this period. Scholars who work broadly across the Long Nineteenth Century will certainly discover archives that warrant further exploration. Indigeneity and colonialism feature briefly, in representations of Māori children in New Zealand (68), the travels of the *John Wesley* missionary ship around the South Pacific (82), and a Junior Red Cross branch at an Indian boarding school in Saskatchewan (205). Disability makes a similarly brief appearance in Moruzi's discussions of illustrated narratives in the *Young Helpers' League Magazine* (1892-1929?) (106, 120) and the *Canadian Red Cross Junior* (1922-71) (210). The book contains nearly twenty illustrations and offers some discussion of them, but scholars wishing to build on Moruzi's work could fruitfully analyze how visual rhetorics across these periodicals reinforce or complicate their verbal registers. Class and gender receive more extended treatment in the fifth chapter ("Charitable Subjectivity") where Moruzi traces how "British Home Children" who were resettled in Canada are represented in *Ups and Downs* (1895-1914). In one of the few extended discussions of working-class readers, Moruzi demonstrates how the periodical's contributors were expected to express gratitude for receiving charity by becoming charitable donors themselves. Of particular interest are the gendered modes by which the periodical constructed "charitable girlhood" and "charitable boyhood," separating donations by gender to encourage (and shame) boys or girls, depending on which fund received more donations.

Moruzi maintains a restrained approach throughout, neither applauding nor condemning the periodicals' charitable causes and methods of convincing their child readers to donate. While I appreciate this even-handed treatment, it does occasionally leave me wanting more critical nuance. At a minimum, it is worth highlighting the social harms caused by offensive representations of Indigenous people and people with disabilities, not to mention the frankly eugenic rhetoric animating discussions of health in early-twentieth-century Junior Red Cross periodicals. More broadly, I would like to see a candid assessment of whether and where these periodicals' persuasive rhetorical techniques veer over into sheer manipulation or propaganda. Though Moruzi remains largely silent on these questions, her book nonetheless offers a valuable foray into an expansive and understudied archive that will reward further scholarly inquiry.

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Sanna, Antonio, editor. *Alice in Wonderland in Film and Popular Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-02257-9

Review by Jennifer Geer

Alice and her adventures in Wonderland were first introduced to the public through Lewis Carroll's novels for children, but their cultural impact has never been confined to the printed page. Carroll's tales of Wonderland began as oral stories, were accompanied by John Tenniel's now-iconic illustrations to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), and almost immediately began to be adapted, reinterpreted, reimagined, and alluded to in cultural artifacts of almost every form imaginable. *Alice in Wonderland in Film and Popular Culture* looks more deeply into the cultural proliferation of Alice. Scholarly studies on this topic are of course plentiful, but this well-researched and wide-ranging collection is a useful and engaging addition to the bookshelf.

In spite of its title, *Alice in Wonderland in Film and Popular Culture* focuses more closely on Alice and Wonderland in popular culture than on film. This is not a weakness of the collection; in fact, the number and variety of cultural texts that this volume examines are one of its strengths. A more accurate title, however, might have been *Alice in Wonderland in Popular Culture and Film*. Analyses of films such as Disney's animated 1951 *Alice in Wonderland* and Tim Burton's 2010 *Alice in Wonderland* do appear, but only about one-third of the essays in the collection primarily focus on film. Many of these examine films or series that incorporate motifs from Carroll's books but are not the traditionally familiar adaptations. Most of the essays in this collection center on other types of text and media, from contemporary fiction, children's poetry, illustrations, graphic novels, comics, video games, and Japanese music videos to public art installments such as the bronze *Alice in Wonderland* (1959) sculpture in New York City's Central Park. Taken together, the essays in this collection present a picture of Alice in film and popular culture that spans time, space, and genre in a fascinatingly varied array. The contributors, too, are drawn from multiple disciplines and geographic locations, with a nice mix of established and early career academic researchers, plus a few creative writers and independent scholars.

The eighteen essays in *Alice in Wonderland in Film and Popular Culture* are divided into three sections of six chapters each, plus an introduction. In this introduction, Sanna explains that the collection uses a variety of methodologies and disciplinary approaches to examine what might be called the afterlife of Alice in twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular culture: "how the meaning of the original books has been re-negotiated through adaptations, appropriations, and transmediality" (10). The volume's general focus is thus on the ways in which later authors, filmmakers, illustrators, and artists have crafted their own meanings out of Alice's adventures, meanings which then often circle round to inform popular perceptions of Alice, Wonderland, and Carroll himself. These new perceptions, in turn, help inspire yet more incarnations of Alice and her adventures in popular culture and media.

Sanna's introductory essay, "Alice and the Critics," also serves as a succinct and clear review of some of the best-known trends in scholarship about Carroll and his *Alice* books. These are grouped thematically and include such topics as biographical studies of Carroll himself, interpretations of the ways the books portray Alice's development and her Victorian social world, the books' use of nonsense and mathematics, and interpretations that focus on psychoanalysis or comparisons with drug-induced mental states. The introduction also provides a concise but well-researched review of existing scholarship on the literary and cultural texts that reference Alice, from Tenniel's illustrations and Disney films to erotica and horror.

The six essays in the first section, "Alice on the Page," examine written texts, illustrations, graphic novels, and comics. This section begins with another overview: Sanna's chapter, "A History of the Literary and Graphic Adaptations and Appropriations of *Alice*." This essay is of course not comprehensive—none could be—but it gives a clear and helpful compilation on the topic, from Tenniel's Victorian illustrations to allusions to Carroll's characters and themes in contemporary texts that are thematically and structurally quite different from the *Alice* books themselves. Sanna's essay moves easily between discussing visual art, nineteenth-century children's books, modern fiction, science fiction, nonfiction, poetry, satire, and graphic novels.

Beginning in chapter three, the collection moves into analyses of some of the many textual and cultural manifestations of Alice, her adventures, and her creator. Olga Bukhina uses Julie Sanders's idea of appropriation to look at the ways in which American and Russian children's books allude to Alice's transformations as a result of eating or drinking, appropriating Carroll's themes and wordplay into their own distinct cultural contexts. Maciej Skowera's chapter, on the other hand, focuses on popular cultural beliefs about Carroll's life, particularly the dichotomy of his being both "a famous children's author and an alleged pedophile" (54). Skowera traces the ways in which Carroll's "mythobiography," or the set of popular beliefs about his life, permeates picture books for children and fiction for adult readers, and also examines how these cultural myths have informed twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship about the *Alice* books and their author.

The last three chapters in this first section analyze graphic novels and comics. Brigid Cherry examines graphic novels such as Bryan Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* (2007), Alan Moore's *Lost Girls* (2009), and Bill Willingham's *Jack of Fables* (2006-11) through the lens of Bolter and Grusin's work on remediation. These texts rework Carroll's novels and Tenniel's illustrations into another, newer, media form, that of the graphic novel. Eileen M. Harney and Rick Hudson close out this first section by looking at DC Comics' *Batwoman* and *Batman* series, respectively. Harney argues that the character of Alice in the *Batwoman: Elegy* (2009-2010) series revises Carroll's heroine into a madwoman who serves as the "fractured reflection, twin sister, and proto-adversary" for Batwoman, whom she notes is "the first eponymous queer female character in DC Comics' history" (96). Here, references and quotations from Carroll's Alice mix with popular cultural stereotypes of the Victorian-era madwoman to reveal how restrictive gender norms work to trap and traumatize nonconforming women. Hudson's essay also examines the ways in which both protagonists and antagonists exhibit madness in DC Comics, this time in the Batman comics and the television series *Gotham* (2014-19). Hudson uses Carroll's allusions to madness and Cohen's monster theory to explore the enduring appeal of the villainous Mad Hatter who stalks the world of DC's Batman.

The second section of this collection, "Film Adaptations," focuses on films and television series. As with Harney, Joy E. Morrow and Christopher Flavin also focus on conflict between a protagonist and a villain, in this case the interactions between Alice and the Queen of Hearts in film adaptations of Carroll's novels. Morrow and Flavin look at films from Cecil Hepworth's 1903 *Alice in Wonderland* to Disney's 2016 *Alice Through the Looking Glass* to trace changing cultural representations of gender and class conflict across this period. Alexandra Heatwole provides another analysis of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* in her chapter, reading it and Tim Burton's 2010 *Alice in Wonderland* as a fantasy about a girl's maturation process. Martin F. Nordin, on the other hand, examines a far lesser-known film: Disney's 1959 *Donald in Mathmagic Land*, which uses Donald Duck and references to Lewis Carroll "to introduce its viewers to basic mathematical concepts, a history of mathematical thinking in the Western world, and the place of math in music, art, architecture, sports, games, optics, mechanics, and nature" (133). Noting that many of the animators who created the animated sections of this film had also worked on Disney's 1951 *Alice in Wonderland*, Nordin guides readers through a series of fascinating connections (and contrasts) between Carroll's use of mathematics and nonsense, and the Walt Disney Corporation's Cold-War-fueled attempt to educate American children about math.

The three chapters that conclude this second section look at films and a television series that combine elements of Alice with other genres such as horror, agitprop, and romantic comedy. Lindsey Scott uses Sanders's concept of appropriation "to consider the increasingly fluid intersections between horror and children's popular culture" through readings of Guillermo Del Toro's 2006 film *Pan's*

Labyrinth, the 2010 film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*, and the television series *Stranger Things* (2016-25) (167). Andrew Grossman, on the other hand, traces the ways in which Alice's adventures became symbols of cultural rebellion in the American counterculture of the late 1960s. Grossman takes as his main example Kerry Feltham's *Chicago 70* (1970), which juxtaposes the nonsense of the Knave's trial in Wonderland with transcripts of the Chicago Seven trial to advocate rebellion against a dominant culture that is portrayed as hopelessly cruel, absurd, and corrupt. Carla Fusco examines a very different sort of film, Woody Allen's fantasy comedy *Alice* (1990), reading it as a film that virtually ignores Carroll's plot and characters but retains the spirit of its namesake in its focus on fantasy and nonsense as means of growth and representations of desire.

The third and final section of this collection, "Alice's Adventures in Other Media," focuses on the ways in which Alice and her adventures have been represented in "the space of the city, videogames, photographs, music videos, theatrical plays, and madness and nonsense studies" (Sanna 11). In their essay "(In)Appropriating Alice: The Neo-Victorian Sexualization of Carroll's Wonderland," Anne-Marie Beller and Claire O'Callaghan examine how contemporary interpretations and reimaginings of Carroll's novels, photographs, and life are haunted by cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality, sexual traumas, and girlhood. This essay, like a later essay by Dominique Angela M. Juntado and Antonio Sanna, includes an analysis of the videogame *American McGee's Alice* (2000) and its sequel. Beller and O'Callaghan briefly discuss the ways in which the games portray childhood trauma and abuse, while Juntado and Sanna take an extended look at "the progressive acquisition of autonomy and assertiveness on the part of the protagonist" as she moves through the world of the game (274).

The two essays by Joanna Madloch and Masafumi Monden, on the other hand, focus on references to Alice in public display and performance. Madloch's essay guides readers on a tour through *Alice*-inspired names, objects, and events in urban centers, from souvenirs and shop names to immersive theater productions and public art sculptures. Monden, for his part, examines how Carroll's British texts have been adapted and transformed in Japanese popular culture. Monden uses a close reading of a 2019 music video by the pop singer Aimer to demonstrate the ways in which Alice "resonates with the Japanese feminine constructions of *shōjo*" (258). While many cultural reimaginings of the Alice books focus on Alice herself, Amanda Rutherford and Sarah Baker's essay on "The Immortal Hatter" looks squarely at the Hatter, positioning him as an outsider who may either act as a "nonconforming villain" or offer wisdom from "an alternative point of view" (290). The collection ends by returning to Carroll's original novel, with an analysis of "Madness and Nonsense in *Alice's*

Adventures in Wonderland" by Emily Scherzinger and Jeffery Donaldson. Scherzinger and Donaldson provide an insightful extension of scholarship on literary nonsense by asking readers to move beyond theories of nonsense that are based on binary oppositions between nonsense and sense, or that privilege nonsense over madness in ways that perpetuate ableist or gendered hierarchies. Instead, they argue that nonsense forms part of the logic of madness, and as such can productively destabilize fixed binaries and cultural hierarchies.

Sanna notes that "the Alice story world … is vast and always growing" (12). The essays in this collection provide thought-provoking analyses of this story world. Its examinations of what Will Brooker in his 2004 book *Alice's Adventures: Lewis Carroll in Popular Culture* calls the "cultural myths" of Carroll and Alice extend Brooker's insights by examining texts from the later 2000s and 2010s. Its interdisciplinary approach and attention to transmedia storytelling and adaptation theory also allow this collection to sit comfortably beside studies such as Anna Kérchy's *Alice in Transmedia Wonderland* (2016) and Sissy Helff and Nadia Butt's *"Tantalizing Alice": Approaches, Concepts, and Case-Studies in Adaptations of a Classic* (2016). While its approach complements those of these earlier studies, many of the *Alice*-related texts and cultural objects discussed here have not been studied at length in this context. Scholars interested in the ways Alice and her adventures have been portrayed in twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular culture would find *Alice in Wonderland in Film and Popular Culture* a valuable addition to their libraries.

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Fleming, Patrick C. *Animating the Victorians: Disney's Literary History*. UP of Mississippi, 2025. https://www.upress.state.ms.us/Books/A/Animating-the-Victorians

Review by Kellie Holzer

With its academic rigor and popular appeal, *Animating the Victorians: Disney's Literary History* by Patrick C. Fleming is a crossover book that will speak to experts in multiple academic fields while also attracting general readers. In an appendix located in the back of the book (to accommodate the non-specialist), Fleming provides the introductory content expected of a scholarly monograph. There, he reviews early academic work on the Walt Disney Company by children's literature, film studies, and feminist scholars from the 1960s to 1990s. Since these critiques (for instance, that Disney promotes a toxic princess culture) have grown mainstream, Disney Studies has grown more nuanced, as evidenced in the 2025 debut of the *International Journal of Disney Studies*. Fleming's book is certainly part of this trend: what makes it distinct is the assiduous deployment of his Victorianist training to historicize Disney's adaptations of nineteenth-century works, as well as his compelling claim that the ideology undergirding Disney media has always been heterogeneous.

This approach enables the book's emphasis on Disney's capacity to evolve in tandem with social mores. For example, while twentieth-century Disney princesses have been amply criticized for reinforcing the gendered norms of separate spheres ideology, the films featuring Elsa (*Frozen* 2013), Merida (*Brave* 2012), and the eponymous Moana (2016) lack a typical romance plot. More recently, changing cultural norms prompted Disney's commitment to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion, yielding the progressive "Reimagine Tomorrow" initiative to pursue more inclusive storytelling, and the addition of content warnings about outdated representations to older movies like *The Jungle Book* (1967). Of course, since this book's publication, many of Disney's progressive moves have been rolled back to appease a changing political landscape. Nevertheless, *Animating the Victorians* will achieve one of its author's primary aspirations, that Victorian Studies scholars reconsider what Disney has to offer.

The book demonstrates a myriad of ways the Walt Disney Company was indebted to Victorian society both for content and corporate structure. The first chapter lays groundwork for Disney's appropriation of the Victorian tradition. Chapters two and three build in-depth case studies of adaptations of the work of Lewis Carroll and Hans Christian Andersen, unpacking the textual histories behind Disney favorites *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Chapter four situates the Disney Princess and Pirate brands in the context of gender and queer theory, suggesting that Disney's ideas about gender and sexuality are more plastic and progressive than has been recognized by cultural critics.

Fleming's argument that Victorian culture, institutions, and technological and legal advancements enabled and influenced the development of the Walt Disney Company's ethos and products is approached strategically in chapter one. Accommodating different audiences, Fleming provides brief background information about the Golden Age of Children's Literature, Victorian cultural phenomena like musical theatricals and public entertainments, nineteenth-century developments in copyright law and commerce, and advancements in media technologies such as photography, moving pictures, and phonograph recordings. Fleming finds a provocative parallel between Disney franchises (in which a film spawns a soundtrack, television specials, and merchandise) and Victorian works: both generated a "proliferation of adaptations in new media technologies" (Fleming 16). Charles Dickens's oeuvre supplies evidence, as his novels were illustrated, read aloud, performed on stage, and imitated, and their popularity prompted "unlicensed spin-off's …, unauthorized illustrations, and all manner of consumer products" (Fleming 17). Here, Fleming suggests that both Disney and Dickens "brands" are promiscuous. A case study of Disney's adaptation of Dickens's 1837 classic *Oliver Twist* follows in which Fleming illustrates how textual criticism was integral to the company's creative process. The 1988 animated canine musical *Oliver and Company* is a textual variant that was influenced by a century and a half of prior stage and cinematic adaptations that minimized Dickens's political critique, and, alternately, elevated the roles of Nancy or the Artful Dodger, and emphasized either Sykes's or Fagin's villainy.

Chapter two commences with the premise that modern perceptions of Victorian classics like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* have been indelibly shaped by Disney's animated films. However, as Fleming shows, these products themselves are the result of a dynamic process of research and revision. Fleming assembles a fascinating textual history behind the 1951 animated feature film *Alice in Wonderland*, observing that Walt Disney toyed with Lewis Carroll's works for twenty-five years trying to find the right balance between animation and live action, and between the original texts' episodic structure and an extended cinematic narrative. One charming discovery for this reader is the 1923 silent short, *Alice's Wonderland*, in which a four-year-old actress Virginia Davis enters an animated landscape filled with cartoon gags (this truly is worth finding online to watch). As the company attempted to adapt Carroll's books to film, they faced the challenge of turning gags (to which, Fleming points out, Carroll's work was formally suited) into a coherent full-length narrative, and Disney's signature storyboarding method was innovated as a result. The chapter then describes several abandoned adaptation projects (involving Mary Pickford, Al Perkins, and even Aldous Huxley) before arriving at the 1951 feature-length animated film. Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* was a critical disappointment, but it launched a successful franchise that has infiltrated popular culture.

Chapter three, which covers Disney versions of Hans Christian Andersen's works, provides further examples of how Disney adaptations such as *The Little Mermaid* have superseded their urtexts. Fleming asserts that shifting perceptions of Andersen's life led to different interpretations of his stories. Andersen, who was not English but nevertheless "omnipresent in the Victorian world," was a master of self-promotion whose autobiographical writings mythologized his rags-to-riches story (77). According to Fleming, Walt Disney leaned heavily on this version of Andersen's life story: his adaptations of Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" (1931 and 1939) emphasize the theme of an outsider's intrinsic value eventually being recognized and rewarded. Later, as biographers unveiled Andersen's non-normative sexuality, it became possible to identify themes of thwarted desire and camp aesthetics in *The Little Mermaid* and queer subtext in *Frozen*, which adapts elements of two Andersen stories, "The Snow Queen" and "The Snow Man." These more contemporary variations on Andersen's work, along with other twenty-first-century Disney films, have earned the company a new reputation for "bending to a progressive agenda" (106) and even for being "too 'woke'" (155).

I most enjoyed the fourth chapter on "Princesses and Pirates," which follows divergent paths: redeeming the princess brand and building a textual history for the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. These paths eventually converge in Fleming's claim that Disney's princess and pirate tropes boast a surprising degree of fluidity when it comes to gender and sexuality, thereby destabilizing the norms they supposedly buttress. He applies theoretical ideas from Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to substantiate that "the princess's femininity changes through satire and revision and the pirate's masculinity is inescapably fluid" (118). The chapter's section on what Fleming dubs "the Victorian Princess Brand" will appeal to his Victorianist audience. Here, he leads the reader through an analysis of Tennyson's 1847 poem *The Princess*, offering the edgy claim that the work rejects gender binaries altogether. To arrive at this claim, Fleming discusses two anti-feminist adaptations of Tennyson's narrative poem as well as competing critical readings of it as either a feminist text championing women's higher education or a conservative comedy that reinforces gender norms. He then closely analyzes lines from Part VII of the poem to conclude that it promotes "an elision of sexual distinction" (138).

Fleming next turns his attention to Disney's pirate brand, encapsulated in the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, which opened at Disneyland in 1967, and the corresponding media franchise featuring Johnny Depp as the outlandish buccaneer Captain Jack Sparrow. As with the princess trope, Fleming reads the pirate trope against the grain, pointing out its internal contradictions. These contradictions, he asserts, originate in early British representations of pirates in history, literature, and the early nineteenth-century nautical melodramas that dramatized Britain's various naval victories and were later parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan. The Victorian literary tradition of pirates, specifically Robert Louis Stevenson's Long John Silver and J. M. Barrie's Captain Hook, prompted Disney's first live-action feature film produced in 1950, *Treasure Island*, and the animated *Peter Pan* (1953). These films are precursors to the immersive theme park ride that features Audio-Animatronics pirates that are "simultaneously fun and frightening, playful and transgressive" (39). And, as with the princess brand, the Pirates of the Caribbean ride has been revised to reflect changing gender ideologies: the old "bride auction" scene was replaced in 2018 with a well-armed pirate woman, reflecting scholarship on real female pirates.

If there is a weakness to this book, it is that some chapter sections go, as Carroll put it, "down the rabbit hole." Chapter four's pages on Queen Victoria and her possibly proto-feminist daughters seem superfluous. Likewise, the treatment of Disney's transformation of Andersen's tragic mermaid tale into a cartoon musical with a singing crab is nearly derailed by exegesis about Andersen's sexuality. And yet Fleming skillfully braids this biographical material back into his arguments. Ultimately, if the purpose governing the work is to redeem Disney adaptations from disparaging charges of "Disneyfication," Fleming succeeds because of his meticulous historicization. The conclusion of the book accounts for gaps in coverage (*A Christmas Carol* (2009) and *The Jungle Book* are two examples) with refreshing frankness. Fleming also begins to conceptualize "post-corporate literature," using intriguing examples of Cory Doctorow's dystopian novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003) and Banksy's collaborative "Dismaland" (2015) exhibition. Both of these moves almost certainly ensure that *Animating the Victorians* will inspire further scholarship on Disney media. I anticipate that individual chapters will easily find their way into university courses (including my own) that seek to identify continuities between the Victorian period and our own.

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Smith, Andrew, editor. *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*. Edinburgh UP, 2025. https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-the-victorian-ghost-story.html

Review by Matthew Harrington

The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion, edited by Andrew Smith, presents a collection of essays that serve both as a critical survey of the genre and as a specific analysis of how ghost stories address the central concerns of the Victorian Era, including gender, imperialism, and more (12). It is part of the *Edinburgh Companions to the Gothic* collection, co-founded by William Hughes and Andrew Smith, that explores the Gothic from the eighteenth century to today, with titles including *The Victorian Ghost Story*, *Queer Gothic* (2025), *The Vampire* (2025), and more. According to edinburghuniversitypress.com, "This series provides a comprehensive overview of the Gothic from the eighteenth century to the present day. Each volume takes either a period, place, or theme and explores their diverse attributes, contexts and texts via completely original essays. The volumes provide an authoritative critical tool for both scholars and students of the Gothic." The contributors to *The Victorian Ghost Story* examine how prominent authors—including Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, and Henry James—utilize the motif of the ghost to explore issues such as scientific progress, individual identity, gender, nationhood, and class. Although numerous studies of the Victorian ghost story exist, Smith notes in his introduction that this collection demonstrates innovation through its diverse range of topics and issues (5). These innovations are explored through the collection's four distinct sections: "Historical Contexts," "Critical Contexts," "Authors," and "Places." Rather than serving as a simple anthology, this volume offers a comprehensive and critical examination of the ghost story, engaging with critical contexts such as imperialism and gender that inform the development of the Victorian ghost story.

The "Historical Contexts" section traces the evolution of the ghost story from its Gothic and Romantic origins through Victorian culture, highlighting how the genre reflected shifting cultural anxieties. Scholars, including Dale Townsend, Anthony Mandal, Nick Freeman, and Marie-Luise Kohlke explore the ghost story's evolution from its Gothic roots (Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)), showing how eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fiction drew on much older supernatural traditions before Gothic novels briefly flourished and then gave way to the rise of realism. Later chapters examine how Dickens's darker themes influenced ghost stories in the late nineteenth century and how works like *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and neo-Victorian fiction reimagined these spectral encounters, blurring the boundaries between past and present. This section lays the groundwork by showing the ghost story's progression over time, illustrating its response to changing societal concerns. These chapters, rather than focusing on individual authors or themes, examine the ghost story as a literary form inherently tied to historical concerns. These chapters also explore how authors/writers reach audiences through differing mediums, such as periodicals and annuals, illustrating the genre's expanding readership and enduring influence. This foundational overview prepares readers for the collection's subsequent thematic and author-centered analyses, providing both historical perspective and literary context.

The essays in the "Critical Contexts" section explore how the Victorian ghost story intersected with major cultural changes or anxieties, such as shifting economic practices and the intangibility of wealth, the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, women's voices in literature, colonial expansion, and religious belief. Although the primary focus is on British literature, the collection also addresses American ghost stories and the transatlantic exchange of literary influences. This section also traces how ghost stories reflected anxieties in American contexts and remained tied to seasonal traditions such as Christmas, showing the genre's adaptability across social, political, and cultural spheres. This thematic approach provides a transition to the subsequent author-focused analyses.

The "Authors" section examines how individual writers such as Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, and Henry James utilized the ghost story and the uncanny to engage audiences and conduct social critique. The essays of this section analyze the ways in which specific authors influenced the development of the genre and its cultural impact. The discussion connects individual creative strategies to the broader thematic issues previously outlined. The analysis then shifts from authorial perspectives to the importance of setting within the genre.

The final section, "Places," examines how ghost stories utilize specific locations to accentuate the uncanny and imbue physical and cultural environments with spectral significance. In these chapters, the contributors examine the varied settings of Victorian ghost stories, showing how hauntings extend beyond domestic interiors to the sea, haunted houses, libraries, museums, and even exotic locales such as pyramids. The texts reveal how the environment shapes the narrative, from intimate bedrooms to vast maritime spaces, and reflect Victorian anxieties concerning domesticity, empire, knowledge, and the enduring presence of the past.

Although the collection offers substantial information, it does not sufficiently explain the rationale behind its sectional divisions. As a result, readers may struggle to understand how each part builds upon or diverges from the others, potentially undermining the collection's coherence as a whole. The connections between the categories and their significance in understanding the Victorian ghost story remain unclear. The inclusion of a thematic guide or, perhaps, an introduction to each section that provides the rationale or connections between other sections could help illustrate the relationships and enhance comprehension. Furthermore, the disproportionate length of sections, with "Critical Contexts" and "Authors" receiving more attention than "Places," results in an imbalance in coverage.

This volume offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary introduction to the Victorian ghost story, making it accessible to a broad readership. Its clear language will facilitate engagement for readers of varied backgrounds, making it particularly suitable for undergraduate instruction. The collection presents diverse scholarly approaches and offers structured pathways for analysis and interpretation. For graduate students and researchers, it introduces new perspectives and methodologies. Overall, the volume serves as a valuable resource for those seeking to understand or teach the Victorian ghost story.

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Wiggins, Steve A. ***Sleepy Hollow as American Myth: Irving's Story Retold, Adapted and Cemented in Popular Culture*****. McFarland, 2025.**
https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/sleepy-hollow-as-american-myth/

Review by Brian P. Elliott

"Sleepy Hollow has become one of America's best-recognized myths, but how did it become one?" (1) asks Steve A. Wiggins in the opening lines of his study's preface, immediately foregrounding the book's central question. Fittingly, he follows this with one of its main metaphors: "I hope you like mazes" (1). Wiggins's answer to this question does indeed feel labyrinthine thanks to the book's structure and organization, as this exploration of Irving's most famous story frequently branches off and doubles back on itself as it works its way to cataloging the feature-length films, novels, shorts, and series based on it. More of a casual stroll through this maze than a deep academic expedition into its winding passages, Wiggins's work is an interesting tour of the continuing impact "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) has had on American media and the variety of ways the initial tale has been adapted over the two centuries since its publication.

"The path through this labyrinth is mostly chronological," (6) states Wiggins early in his introduction, with the book's fourteen chapters running from the first chapter's basic presentation of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" through its final chapter's explorations of recent Sleepy Hollow-connected productions like Jonathan Kruk's one-man performance of *The Misadventures of Ichabod Crane* (2020) and the comedic web series *Headless: A Sleepy Hollow Story* (2022). Along the way Wiggins discusses the Headless Horseman's role (Chapter Two) and the place of religion, primarily via Tarrytown's Old Dutch Church (Chapter Three) before engaging both with versions of Irving's tale starting in Chapter Four and the cultural and contextual connections in the United States, such as the growth of Halloween as a holiday and horror as a popular genre, that develop alongside the story's afterlives. It is these latter points of engagement that often break the otherwise chronological trajectory of the text, the winding ways of Wiggins's labyrinth that prevent a pure, straightforward path from the story's initial publication to the present day. Similarly, Wiggins tracks Sleepy Hollow's forward movement in popular culture through three Disney landmark productions: *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949), Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), and Fox's *Sleepy Hollow* television series (2013-2017), with continual glances ahead and behind to these variations on Irving throughout the book's other chapters.

Together, these non-chronological gestures, along with the relatively short sections that make up each chapter—Chapter One, "The Basic Story," has seven sections while only being seven pages long, for example, and the longest chapter, "Burton's Aftermath," has seven sections in seventeen pages—give the text a feeling of moving quickly from point to point while simultaneously feeling slow due to the relatively light engagement per point, the frequency of source summary, and the repetition that gradually builds up over the course of the book. Essentially, this structure for the study results in a higher volume of pages needed for its ideas to coalesce and advance, making it an easy read that nonetheless takes patience for charting something beyond simple chronological progress.

"If you read literary analysts on the story, the Horseman is decidedly downplayed. Here we'll make him central. He's responsible for the tale's becoming both horror and mythic," (24) Wiggins holds, and this statement captures in many ways how he undertakes his examination. Although the text contains numerous references and a "Useful Reading" section at its end, the project as a whole presents as aimed at a general rather than scholarly audience, both in style and substance. The prose is conversational and accessible, focused primarily on following the popular appearance and expansion of Sleepy Hollow-related productions, along with related concepts and common tropes; its approach to examining these is to summarize them and provide a brief recounting of their relationship in a given source to the larger body of Sleepy Hollow variations. This gives the text a rather breezy feel lacking the depth a reader may expect from the aforementioned literary analysts; but, as Wiggins indicates, his goal is to trace development, not engage in the usual analytic method. This idea is reiterated in the study's concluding section: "This book has been a mere sketch of Sleepy Hollow and its labyrinthine influence," (201) a relatively light, descriptive exploration of the various versions and related topics covered rather than a deep analysis of the content of any specific item.

Wiggins's text is at its best when it sticks to that sketching in chronological order, laying out the progression of Sleepy Hollow's place in the landscape of American popular culture and giving a brief recounting of how a given occurrence of Irving-related media compares to those that have come before and, in the gestures forward, will come after. Of particular interest in this vein are the major tropes and shared elements Wiggins follows throughout: the role of religion, the development and shifting place of characters, and the associative and stylistic elements added over time like the jack-o-lantern, covered bridge, and connections to Halloween. As these elements build over the history of the productions Wiggins traces, they paint a picture of both the changes of Irving's tale over time and the associated cultural impulses that Wiggins believes take Sleepy Hollow "from a comic, yet gothic, tale to a full-blown horror movie and on to American myth" (6-7).

Wiggins's work breaks down when it moves away from this type of coverage and into analysis, often presenting in the same brief style topics that would generate significant discussion in more scholarly examinations, leaving the engagement with them feeling quite superficial. He writes, for example, "Prior to Disney there were—often unflatteringly portrayed—African American characters" (77). Toward the end of the section on Disney's landmark adaptation he goes on to say:

> Irving plays on them for comic effect, although they aren't presented as slaves. That comic effect is picked up by both Venturini and Iwerks, each in their own ways presenting Black servants or musicians. Disney makes the cast all white. In this it's followed by Burton and others. The African American element will only come into its own again with the Fox television series starting in 2013. (77)

This is the extent of the typical analysis of race Wiggins provides: a general overview of the role non-White characters play in a given piece of media, sometimes with quotations or descriptions of a scene, sometimes without. Rarely does the text dig more deeply into the topic, despite the notion that "the historical and continuing nightmares of America—our issues with diversity and equity, and our relationship with American Indians—our ghosts—will also appear at many turns" (13).

In Chapter Fourteen, "Unseen Ghostly Characters," Wiggins takes up "ghosts" of America's dispossessed and disenfranchised one final time, holding that "our current moment is one of awakening our awareness that people of the First Nations, African Americans, women of any ethnic heritage, and many others have been systematically suppressed. They've become America's ghosts" (194). The next subsection, "Ghosts of Race," covers fewer than two pages; "Ghosts of Gender" less than one. While it is perhaps unreasonable, and indeed unfair, to expect Wiggins to analyze such complex topics in any significant depth in a book built around rapid-fire engagement with multiple popular entertainment sources over the span of two hundred years, the light treatment of this weighty material feels shallow to the point of glibness at times, with very little gained beyond the above recognition that African Americans do or do not appear in significant roles in a given version or that women are more active or passive in a specific adaptation.

How entertaining or useful a given readership will find Wiggins's text likely hinges on these questions of depth. For a general audience or one looking for an overview of the afterlives of Irving's tale in popular media, the book delivers decently and includes reasonable coverage of related topics, although some areas of discussion may feel tangential given the limited attention they receive. For those with a scholarly or academic interest, including many readers of *I19*, the text in all likelihood lacks depth and engagement with any given source, making it most useful as a bibliography and source of plot summaries for more in-depth projects. Overall, Wiggins has taken on a complicated task—although overused at times to the point of tediousness, his choice of the maze analogy is an apt one—

in attempting a popular history of Washington Irving's best-known short story. The result of that undertaking is mostly successful, with some predictable flaws given its scope and style; still, it marks a worthy attempt to trace the evolution of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and the long shadow it has cast in the American imagination.

Brian P. Elliott teaches at the University of Montana Western in Dillon, Montana. His research and teaching interests include early American literature, Transatlantic Romanticism, depictions of violence in literary texts, and lately, graphic novels. Brian is currently in the early stages of a project on the psychology of lying and deception in early American literature.

Adam Roberts. *Fantasy: A Short History*. Bloomsbury, 2025.

https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/search/?q=Fantasy%3A%20A%20Short%20History

Review by James Hamby

Adam Roberts's *Fantasy: A Short History* walks the reader through the development of the fantasy genre, beginning with early-modern texts such as Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596) or John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and ending with the fantasy novels, films, and video games of the 2020s. Roberts's text offers a keen analysis of how the genre originated and grew, noting the developments at each stage of the genre's formation. Running throughout Roberts's text is the assertion that fantasy is shaped by real-world experiences and social realities, and thus serves as a way for readers to understand the world around them, often in more meaningful ways than "realistic" fiction does. Roberts divides his study into three parts: "The Roots of Modern Fantasy," "Fantasy in the Twentieth Century," and "Twenty-First-Century Fantasy." Each section notes how the fantasy of its time reacts to the social conditions in which it was created.

The first section of this work is probably the strongest as Roberts looks at how folk and fairy tales, medieval legends, and early-modern literature coalesced in the nineteenth century to form what we today recognize as the fantasy genre. Fairy tales had long been popular forms of fantastic literature, and the fantasy authors of the nineteenth century found in them ready-made characters, plots, and motifs useful in crafting their own narratives. Roberts discusses how many European nations in the early nineteenth century began to look to fairy tales as a part of their social identity, and he notes that these stories began "to occupy an increasingly important position, as a reservoir of genuineness, authentic social identity, Völkish truth and therefore as a portal back to a form of 'enchanted' original being-in-the-world" (19). Additionally, Roberts discusses how the medieval legends of King Arthur regained new popularity in the nineteenth century, and how they still serve today as the basis for much medieval- or quest-inspired fantasy. He says, "Both the mood and the specific narrative shapes of the Arthurian legendarium are present in a thousand genre fantasy novels" (29). Using traditional stories and legends, many nineteenth-century authors, such as Richard Wagner, Charles Waterhouse, and others, began writing stories that laid the foundations of modern fantasy.

One text Roberts cites as seminal for fantasy is one that perhaps would not be at the forefront of people's thoughts when asked what books helped to form the genre. In his commentary on Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Roberts argues that this text establishes the paradigm for modern fantasy. He argues that "Bunyan's great novel worked … as fantasy, and as a profound influence on the way fantasy, in the sense in which the present study is interested came to be written" (5). Roberts argues that one of the most significant aspects of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is that the story functions on both a literal and a metaphorical level. He observes that "*The Pilgrim's progress* superposes two ways of understanding reality: a chronological lived-experience 'real world' way and an allegorical spiritual fantastical way" (21). The manner in which this allegorical novel portrays a symbolic journey through a "fantasyland" exerted a profound influence on later fantasy writers.

Part One concludes with chapters on Richard Wagner and J. R. R. Tolkien, children's fantasy, and William Morris, demonstrating how earlier traditions contributed to nineteenth-century fantasy, and how those nineteenth-century writers in turn influenced twentieth-century fantasy. In his discussion on Wagner and Tolkien, Roberts notes how Wagner's operas evolved out of the interest across Europe in resurrecting folk culture and bolstering national identities. Likewise, Tolkien's legendarium, Roberts says, "draws on the same broader cultural, mythic, northern-European heritage as Wagner" (37). What distinguishes *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) from Wagner, however, "is that it is not about Germany, or about England; or to be more precise, that it is about England and Germany only secondarily" (37). The universalism of Tolkien's appeal is a major part of what has led to his popularity for decades. Another type of fantasy that arose in the nineteenth century is what we now recognize as children's literature. Roberts suggests that the influence of *The Pilgrim's Progress* may be felt here as well, especially in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books (1865, 1871), which he calls "Bunyanesque allegory shorn of those markers, or set free from them" (46), and in Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863), which he describes as "a Bunyanesque progress from sin to Protestant redemption" (44). Finally, the last nineteenth-century author Roberts discusses is William Morris, who had a profound influence on later writers, especially C. S. Lewis and Tolkien. Roberts argues that one of Morris's most important contributions to fantasy was to ensure that it remained sincere while telling of the fantastic. Roberts says Morris believed that fantasy could not "be artificial, for Morris employed artifice in manifold ways, but that it must apprehend sincerity in order to work—that without the currency of authenticity it decays into whimsy and triviality" (52). Such a commitment to realism of human emotion and experience remains a core element of serious fantasy writers.

Once Roberts establishes the sources and early examples of fantasy writing, he then turns his attention in Part 2 to fantasy in the twentieth century. As one might expect, World War One had a profound effect on this genre, and Chapter 11 is devoted entirely to the fantasy works inspired by this conflict. Roberts argues that World War I "is of particular importance to the development of twentieth-century fantasy, not least because several of the key writers of the mode fought in it, transmuting their experience into fiction that in turn went on to shape and inform much of the work written in the late-century boom in the mode" (64). Roberts's argument that fantasy is a way of reacting to reality is at its most salient in this chapter, and it remains an important point in discussing fantasy post-World War II and into the current century. Roberts makes an interesting observation about the link between World War I-inspired fantasy and the current war in Ukraine, noting that the Ukrainian army "talks explicitly of the Russian invaders as 'orcs' and Vladimir Putin as 'Sauron'" (69), thus reinforcing that fantasy offers its audience a framework for viewing their own lives.

The works of Tolkien were heavily influenced by WWI, and Tolkien's presence is greatly felt in this section. Indeed, everything in Roberts's history in the twentieth century before Tolkien feels like a run-up to him, and everything afterwards has to contend with his Middle-earth legendarium in some way. Tolkien's greatest contribution to fantasy (as many have observed) is the depth of his wholly-realized other world. While many critics note Tolkien's influences from his studies of Anglo-Saxon literature, Roberts focuses more on the nineteenth-century writers and literary movements that inspired Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth. As he observes, "*The Lord of the Rings* is truly a summation of tradition from Romantic art, Scott, Victorian Arthuriana, MacDonaldisian and Morrisian fantastical apprehension" (131). Roberts especially notes the influence of Walter Scott on Tolkien pointing out how Scott's protagonists influenced the humble Bilbo and Frodo: "Scott's protagonists are ordinary people, removed from the centers of historical power" (24). Both authors created stories of common people embroiled in extraordinary world events, much as Tolkien had been caught up in World War I. Robets concludes his chapter on Tolkien by saying that a "re-enchanted world" that reveals a faith in humanity "is the compelling strength of Tolkien's recovered, escapist, consoling fantasy" (132). Devastated by the horrors of two world wars and the uncertainty of modern times, Tolkien's readers found solace in the fantasy world he created where characters are able to find courage, goodness, and hope in the face of overwhelming evil.

After Tolkien, many fantasy authors tried to replicate his success with similar stories, and they were encouraged by a publishing industry eager to cash in on this newly-popular genre. The titles of Chapter 15 and 16, "1960s-70s: The Boom," and "1980s-1990s: Expansion and Imitation," give an indication of the extent that fantasy works imitative of Tolkien fueled and were fueled by the publishing industry. Roberts observes that "Through the 1970s the popular success of Tolkien in the 1960s was consolidated via a considerable number of new fantasy works written in more-or-less straight imitation of *Lord of the Rings*" (156). Unfortunately, at this point Roberts's text becomes over reliant on plot summary and does not offer the same level of analysis as found in earlier chapters. While discussing the post-Tolkien fantasy fiction of the late twentieth century, Roberts summarizes novel after novel and trilogy after trilogy without giving much analysis or explaining why they are important to the development of the genre.

As Roberts's history moves into the twenty-first century, there is again too much plot summary, and some of the chapters, especially Chapter 17 "Global Fantasy" and Chapter 18 "Video Games," are notably shorter than other chapters, thus giving the subjects uneven treatment and making them feel underdeveloped. One notably good chapter in Part 3, however, is Chapter 19 "Grimdark" where Roberts breaks away from plot summary and offers interesting analysis of the Grimdark subgenre within fantasy. Grimdark, as the name suggests, takes a darker view of humanity that reflects the pessimism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Roberts notes that "There is nothing wholesome, idealized, beautiful, noble or pure in these worlds; life is struggle and pain, man is wolf to man. Though people may pretend to follow higher ideals, few if any actually believes them: cynicism and power-plays are the true motivations of humankind" (230). The book's closing chapters on current fantasy unfortunately are not as good as the Grimdark chapter as they once again are heavy with plot summary, but they nevertheless catalogue some of the more notable fantasy works of the past two decades.

Roberts's work offers a comprehensive look at the history of fantasy in which readers can see the genre's development from its roots to the current day. As mentioned above, the strongest part of this work (which would be of special interest to researchers of nineteenth-century literature) is Robert's discussion of the formation of the genre during the nineteenth century, but fantasy scholars of any era should find value in this history. Moreover, Roberts's history demonstrates how fantasy offers its audience a lens through which to view the world in a way that comforts them and makes their lives more meaningful, whether they are hearing fairy tales in dark medieval forests or reading fantasy novels amidst the uncertainty of the 2020s.

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Kimberly J. Lau. *Specters of the Marvelous: Race and the Development of the European Fairy Tale.* Wayne State UP, 2025. https://wsupress.wayne.edu/9780814341346/

Review by Britta Kallin

In *Specters of the Marvelous: Race and the Development of the European Fairy Tale*, Kimberly J. Lau examines the history of racism in the European fairy-tale tradition over several centuries. The study is part of the Donald Haase Series in Fairy-Tale Studies and adds much needed research on ethnicity and race to the previously published books on fairy-tale scholarship. The author focuses on four distinct European traditions when she sets out to analyze the political developments of colonial powers and ambitions and the literary adoption of the superiority of Whiteness as norm versus non-White bodies as exception and dangerous other that appear in fairy tales. In the introduction, the author explains that she plans to look behind the curtain of the Whiteness of the fairy-tale world that has dominated many of the fairy tales in the Western world and that she would like to see the book "in dialogue with the extensive world of fairy-tale scholarship that seeks to identify and contextualize the misogyny, heterosexism, classism, and ableism … encapsulated and naturalized in the European fairy-tale tradition" (15).

In the first chapter, Lau discusses Italy's tradition during 1634-36 when Giambattista Basile published *The Tale of Tales* in which he incorporates ideas about non-White people that are based on ancient racist ideas about White European civilization, barbarians, and migrants. The threat of the other is an underlying presence when Lau explores the connections between the Roman love elegy and *The Tale of Tales*' figurative "language of slavery from the prodigious use of metaphor" (29). The lovers in his texts use the metaphor of "slavery" to offer themselves with chains and yokes to convey their love and attraction. Therefore, the author convincingly argues that the figure of the slave reveals Basile's *Tales* as unacknowledged origins "at the nexus of slavery as a racialized cultural phenomenon and Roman elegy as a hyperbolic expression of romantic love" (50). In Chapter 2, Lau examines Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's *Fairy Tales* (1697). Lau explains her approach with the findings that d'Aulnoy and the other *conteuses* "reframed one of the most contentious cultural debates of the period—the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Modern—so as to position themselves as more modern than even Charles Perrault" (54). The *francisation* in the French colonies of the local Indigenous peoples as *sauvages* who were deemed "culturally and economically inferior to Europeans" (64) could possibly become French citizens but they were considered inferior in race and culture.

Chapter 3 addresses Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales* that were first published in 1812 and saw five edited versions through 1857. Previous scholars have shown that the

Grimm Brothers' endeavor of collecting fairy tales, songs, and German words and expressions were meant to support the creation of a national consciousness. Lau points to the tale "The Jew in the Thornbush," among others, and to Wilhelm's "increasingly antisemitic editing" (97) of the collected fairy tales. Lau's contribution is her robust analysis of the ideological correspondence between antisemitism and anti-Black racism in German colonial aspirations because German Orientalist imaginaries worked in close relation with German antisemitism when authors called for the deportation of German Jews to "fantasized sugar islands" (103) where they would be far removed from the idealized White, homogenous Christian German nation. In this chapter, Lau returns to Suzanne Zantop's pathbreaking study *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (1997) which outlines the connections between the German imaginaries and the desire to conquer and exploit more colonies. Lau explains how, for example, the philosopher Christoph Meiner's text *A Naturally Conceived Hierarchy of Peoples* (1790) contributed to the creation of a hierarchy of races and the racialization of Jews. Meiners includes "Blacks, children, women, servants, criminals, and Jews" (118) in the group that should serve the supposedly superior, White, German men as masters. In Chapter 4, Lau analyzes the "Colored Fairy Books" that were published by Andrew and Nora Lang in Great Britain between 1889 and 1913 and include twelve differently colored books with 437 tales from around the world. The editors and collectors added their own imperial perspectives to the tales they collected. The poet, folklorist, and literary critic Andrew saw himself as the "superintendant" (132) of his wife's editorial and translation work. She does not appear on the title pages of the books, but she worked as author and translator. Both Langs edited the tales together and many women translated the tales without being credited for doing so. Lau examines Andrew Lang's fascination with "naked savage women" when he explains the social evolution as a development where savages, children, and peasants were on the bottom of the evolutionary ladder. The racist logic behind this hierarchy was used throughout European scientific communities as well as by the business and political elites to argue for the rightful subordination of peoples from other continents. Like Andrew, Nora also uses explicitly racist descriptions when she describes slaves as imported goods. She profited financially from plantations her family owned in Barbados, and she describes children from India and Africa with exoticizing details as uneducated, naked, and dirty beings who used no soap and who had no purpose other than to serve the culturally advanced British rulers.

In the conclusion entitled "Spectral Politics and Return to Wonder," Lau addresses the contemporary adaptations of fairy tales where she includes collections of Indigenous, Creole, Hawaiian, and postcolonial fairy-tale adaptations to show and celebrate the non-White traditions that aim to restore ideas about race to the universal and to decolonize the European fairy-tale canon and world fairy-tale studies. Lau's analysis of contemporary stories by Bolu Babalola's *Love in Color* (2020); Helen Oyeyemi's fairy-tale novels *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), and *Gingerbread* (2019); and Sarinda Dhaliwal's art installation *the green fairy storybook* (2009); are some examples of how the author explores more recent texts that unravel the unmarked "Whiteness as superior" norm that is so very present in the European fairy-tale tradition. *Specters of the Marvelous* is a must-read for undergraduate and graduate students, folklorists, and fairy-tale and literature scholars as it contextualizes the European fairy-tale tradition in a new light. It brings various texts into conversation with one another, opening up interesting connections between European colonial history and the colonial imaginary as it has continued in the tales that generations of grandparents, parents, and teachers have read to children. To bring about change, readers must delve deeply into the historical context of the tales to exhume the ghost of Whiteness that still haunts European fairy tales to this day.

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