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# *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma. A Review*

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## **Introduction**

Academic discourse on gothic fiction's exploration of transgressive sexualities is by no means a recent trend in Queer, Literary, and Cultural Studies circles. For instance, Fred Botting's *The Gothic* (2001), George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* (2006), Andrew Smith and William Hughes' *Queering the Gothic* (2011), and Ardel Haefele-Thomas *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity* (2012) are just several of many scholarly works dedicated to queer representation or transgressive sexualities in literature and popular culture. A recent addition is Laura Westengard's *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma* (2019). While Westengard covers similar theoretical ground as the aforementioned works, she demonstrates how insidious trauma is expressed through queer theory, lesbian pulp fiction, poetry and performance art. This review examines the text's attempt to analyze "gothic queer culture" in popular culture and academic discourse.

By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, Westengard examines how cultural texts that address "transgressive" sexualities and genders in the context of insidious trauma are manifested in gothic queer culture, and how these texts, in turn, narrativize trauma in four unique chapters. Chapter One begins as a reading of gothicism in queer theory, which she argues is a "form of cultural production responding to the insidious trauma of queer marginalization."<sup>1</sup> Reading much like an overview of 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic fiction and a literature review of texts from a broad field of disciplines related to gothic and/or queer theory, Chapter One begins by introducing oft cited theorists in Cultural Studies and psychoanalytic literary criticism such as Freud, Derrida, and Foucault. The focus then shifts to works from queer theorists such as Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Jasib Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010), and Karen Tongson's *Relocations* (2011). The core concepts discussed in this chapter are (queer) monstrosity, queer necropolitics, hauntology, and gothic negativity. Although the point of this chapter is to illustrate how her notion of "gothicism" and insidious trauma manifests itself within theoretical texts, sometimes Westengard's arguments appear unconvincing in the sense that she attempts to gothicize theory for the sake of maintaining her argument. While this chapter might be insightful for readers unfamiliar with gothic literature, expanding the discussions on the

aforementioned concepts with some additional theorists who have published on the subject would make her arguments more convincing. For instance, briefly discussing Michelle Massé's *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (1992) or even Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) would contribute to some of the arguments in this chapter.

Chapter Two proceeds with a discussion on lesbian pulp fiction from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s and the "Containment Crypt." Among other texts, through close readings of *Beebo Brinker* (1962) and *I am a Woman* (1959), Westengard attempts to illustrate how the deployment of gothic tropes in lesbian pulp fiction functioned to control and contain queerness. Additionally, she notes that some writers reappropriated gothicism to "express the very trauma created by it."<sup>2</sup> By examining pulp fiction covers, titles and content, and providing visuals and excerpts, this chapter persuasively demonstrates that in spite of pulp fiction's emphasis on the threatening aspects of homosexuality or "monstrous" sexual urges, such texts functioned as "survival literature." The basis of this argument is Westengard's suggestion that they became means of visibility for lesbians who may have felt isolated in a context of heightened conservatism during the early stages of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Both intriguing and insightful, if this book had been refocused to expand solely on this chapter, it would positively contribute to the body of literature on queer pulp.

To follow, Chapter Three focuses on precisely what it is titled: monstrosity, melancholia, cannibalism and AIDS. In spite of the sheer amount of cultural productions concerned with such themes, Westengard's discussion mainly features Gil Cuadros' *City of God* (1994) and productions by performance artist Ron Athey. Because the chapter tries to cover a lot of thematic and theoretical ground, as a result, at times it seems rushed and simplified. A single chapter on theory concerning monstrosity and AIDS, which focuses on a single medium might allow for closer and more thorough readings of the texts.

While Chapter Three featured performance artist Ron Athey, Chapter Four is entirely dedicated to performance artists M. Lamar, Cassils, and Zackary Drucker. The crux of the argument in this chapter is that the aforementioned artists deploy gothic sadomasochism to "create shared sensation in the performance space that forces the recognition of [...] insidious trauma."<sup>4</sup> Having observed and participated in the performances herself, Westengard's insight is beyond theoretical—it is observational and arguably a form of ethnographic research. Her observations and arguments reinforce the ideas that sadomasochism can be political, create awareness, and can be empowering and cathartic for the artists and audience members alike. While immensely interesting and insightful, this chapter could be improved if the arguments were expanded or if more examples of different artists' performances or works were briefly mentioned to justify the claims being made.

The final chapter considers the future of gothicism and queer representation in popular culture with the discussion mainly centred on neoliberal assimilationist vampires in *True Blood* and *Twilight*. The conclusion thereafter seems rather abrupt as Westengard briefly summarizes what the book has covered and does not seem to suggest possible research avenues in the future.

*Gothic Queer Culture* offers fresh insight into manifestations of insidious trauma in a diverse range of queer gothic cultural texts. However, whether the intention of the analyzed and exemplar texts were to reflect or express insidious trauma is certainly debatable. Since the book attempts to cover a lot of ground, the arguments made about insidious trauma in some of the chapters seem speculative, rushed and incomplete. That said, there is still a sense of flow between chapters with monstrosity being the central theme. The chapters themselves are well researched and written but could have been improved with the extension of certain arguments. Ideally, readers would gain a lot more from a series of edited books based on some of the chapters. In any case, for scholars in Queer or Gothic Studies, *Gothic Queer Culture* is certainly worth adding to the catalogue.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Laura Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 198.