

PLANETARY GOTHIC: AN INVITATION

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to this collection, I outlined a series of difficulties that arise from the critical approach to gothic fiction that equates the ‘global’ with ‘globalisation’. In particular, I highlighted how the version of the world on which globalgothic has so far been predicated – one that sees old geopolitical hierarchies dissolved into dematerialised ‘flows’ (Byron 2013, 3) – appears increasingly implausible at our present moment, when uneven distributions of climate- and pandemic-related vulnerability are vividly exposing the racialised, gendered and geographical inequalities that have endured despite late-twentieth-century proclamations of a new world order. In fact, if globalgothic is understood as gothic that engages a novel transnational landscape of frictionless mobility and cultural exchange, then it may be the case, I suggested, that the term applies largely to fiction from certain deindustrialised (Northern) regions – places where the shape of society did indeed transform with the relocation of manufacturing to postcolonial nations across the Global South.

As it falls short, in this way, of the South’s geohistorical experience, the globalisation theory of globalgothic may also obstruct critical routes into gothic’s engagement with currently unfolding climate and cognate crises – a focus of gothic fiction to the existence of which many contributions in this volume attest. This impasse is visible in the register of culture, tradition and identity to which much globalgothic criticism has limited itself so far, and arises as a result of the presentism that underpins the identification of the late twentieth century as a new world order. Such a proposition only makes sense, as I argued with recourse to Andreas Malm (2018), through the erasure of a historical continuity, which consists in the persistence of those forms of material capitalist production supposedly superseded by the emergence of an ostensibly free-floating or spectralised late-twentieth-century market. The effacement of this history is simultaneously the effacement of global heating and the conditions that produce it, since these are inseparable precisely from the processes of extraction through which capital has always operated, into the present.

For a theory of gothic production that accounts, on the one hand, for contemporary gothic’s real investment in questions and anxieties surrounding climate breakdown, and which is, on the other, truly global in scope, it is thus necessary to move beyond turn-of-the-millennium accounts of globalisation. In this coda, I reflect on two recent conceptions of ‘the planetary’ that make room for such a critical shift. Though – as I will show – ‘Planetary Gothic’ may describe a certain set of fictional aesthetics and preoccupations, the term is also intended in a broader and more open sense, to name a range of approaches to gothic fictions, which contextualise these amid the trans-regional relationships of power and production that organise both human societies

and more-than-human nature on a global scale. To the world-ecological/world-literary analysis of globalgothic outlined in the introduction to this volume, this coda will thus add a selection of complementary (but by no means exhaustive) propositions regarding Planetary Gothic. One aim here is to name, and thus give further coherence to, a renewed materialist impulse in gothic studies, which understands gothic production as a key vocabulary for, and sometimes also a commentator on, located experiences of variegated but global socio-ecological shifts and crises. Another objective, however, is to invite participation in an emergent conversation: one that responds to the question of how gothic imaginaries register, collude with or interrogate the material and ideological vectors that unevenly contour the planet – on which I will say more shortly – in our apocalyptic present.

Global and Planetary: The Earth-System Unconscious

In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021) – perhaps the most influential recent engagement with the planetary within the humanities – Dipesh Chakrabarty draws a distinction: ‘the concept of *globe* in the word *globalisation* [i]s not the same’, he writes, ‘as the concept of the *globe* in the expression *global warming*’ (18, emphasis in original). The difference between these two categories lies, for Chakrabarty, in the position within them of the human. While the first ‘globe’ ‘is a humanocentric construction’, the second ‘decentres’ humanity (19), and belongs to the domain of the planet. This latter, in Chakrabarty’s view, is synonymous with the Earth System, a term that designates how ‘planetary processes . . . involving the actions of both the living and the non-living are . . . interlocked in complicated, complex, and precarious ways’ (77). The discipline of Earth Systems Science (ESS), on which Chakrabarty draws to elucidate his argument, examines these interrelationships by attending to biological and geological transformations over hundreds of millions of years, while also locating Earth in comparative relation to exoplanets beyond our solar system – ‘contrary to what we might think’, Chakrabarty writes, ‘the science of global warming is not . . . specific to this planet’ (75). Operating on scales that exceed those occupied by *Homo sapiens*, ESS thus recounts a history at the crux of which is ‘complex, multicellular life in general’ and not life as it pertains to our species alone (83). It is for this reason that Chakrabarty understands the planetary as non-anthropocentric – as a category that, in his words, ‘decentres’ the human.

By contrast, the human remains squarely central to the history of globalisation as Chakrabarty conceives of it. In his view, this unfolds a situation in which ‘[h]umans are now spread all over the globe’, and in which ‘there is nowhere else to go’, given that, in addition to the land, ‘we control the skies and the water’ (73). The process through which this totalising dispersal is achieved is inseparable, Chakrabarty writes, from ‘the history of European expansion, trade, [and] the mapping and navigation of the seas’ (71), and so also from the intertwining histories of colonialism and capitalism. Recounting all of this, the narrative of globalisation is thus one in which ‘humans historically connected into a human sense of the globe’ (71), and in which dimensions of the Earth System feature as important only to the extent that they relate to the demands of such expanding human societies. Hence, Chakrabarty concludes, ‘the globe of globalisation embodies . . . [an] anthropocentric and anthropological practice of representation’ (75). As such, it is conceptually incommensurable with the non-anthropocentric scales of the planetary, though – as Chakrabarty notes – it is planetary processes, the linked

elements of the Earth System, that nonetheless undergird and 'enabl[e] conditions for both human existence and flourishing' (85).

Here we come to the central point: while they name distinct historical temporalities and scopes, the planet and the globe are not unconnected. Not only is the planet the globe's condition of possibility, but the global – as what Chakrabarty calls 'capitalist globalization' (3) – is also intervening in planetary processes, which 'until now have operated mostly independently of human activities' (4). Events connected to current shifts across the Earth System – changing weather patterns and sea levels, desertification, species loss and a host of others – thus constitute what Chakrabarty names 'intimations of the planetary', through which a non-anthropocentric history intrudes into the too-narrow anthropocentric frame. There is an important resonance here with Amitav Ghosh's literary assessment of 'climate change and the unthinkable' – the subtitle of his *Great Derangement* (2016). For Ghosh, unfolding climatic transformations also resist interpretation through traditions of knowledge rooted in a humanist paradigm, though for him this is specifically because humanism – a product of Western Enlightenment – rests on a binary distinction between humans and the rest of nature. The effects of contemporary global heating thus confront this epistemic position with something like the return of what it has repressed: the social – or, for Chakrabarty, global – origin of these apparently 'natural' events may provoke the wider realisation that human activity has always been sustained by its unacknowledged entanglement with what Ghosh refers to as 'nonhuman forces' (2016, 31).

As I have already discussed in my contribution this volume, Ghosh's argument lays one foundation for a conception of the gothic as a key mode for narrating climate breakdown and related socio-ecological crises: as a literary form birthed in 'the underside of enlightenment' – as Fred Botting puts it (1996, 1) – gothic has arguably always provided space to examine that for which the humanist paradigm cannot account. Recast in Chakrabarty's terms, the point opens room for a theorisation of 'Planetary Gothic' as gothic fiction in which the anthropocentric process of globalisation is brought into contact with the vast spatial and temporal magnitude of the Earth System on which it has relied, and which it simultaneously represses and – in the present moment – also provokes. Such a gothic would thus stage a socio-ecological situation in which – as Chakrabarty puts it – '[t]he planetary now bears down on our everyday consciousness' and the 'age of the global as such is ending' (2021, 85).

Jaco Bouwer's ecohorror film *Gaia* (2021) is here worth mentioning again for the clarity with which it elaborates this scenario in a gothic register. As we will recall, *Gaia* excavates a monstrous and ancient mycelium network – a planetary being, in Chakrabarty's sense of the term – which has been lying dormant and unacknowledged beneath the human world since before humans evolved, but which during the film unleashes itself in an act of retribution for the ecocidal effects of globalised industrialisation. The strategy through which this vengeance unfolds is a transformation of the human species into fungal incubators for the mycelium entity, a narrative trajectory which vividly suggests the transience of *Homo sapiens* in the context of a grander geohistory. We are called to consider, in other words, that the Earth System will transform and endure, despite the demise of a globalised human population – a point that Chakrabarty makes himself: 'Many traditions of thought . . . may have considered the earth-human relation special; with regard to the planet we are no more special than any other forms of life', and thus like such other forms before us, we may disappear (2021, 90).

It is not unimportant that *Gaia* can be read as a film that problematically subordinates issues of race, class and gender to concerns relating to the destruction of extra-human nature – an argument I have made elsewhere in this collection. That this text dramatises a Planetary Gothic mode, retrieving something like an Earth-System unconscious from beneath the surface of human society, might thus give pause for thought over the terms in which Chakrabarty's argument operates. In particular, it could be asked whether the level of the species at which the planetary demands that we address climate and cognate crises might work against Chakrabarty's acknowledgement of the accountability of capitalism – acting through colonialism and patriarchy – in producing these deleterious and unevenly experienced circumstances. It is noteworthy, for example, that Chakrabarty makes a turn towards the discourse of overpopulation to explicate the Earth-System shifts with which his argument is concerned: he indicts '[p]olitical thought since the seventeenth century' for its apparent 'indifferen[ce] to human numbers', and concomitant reliance on the assumption that 'the globe was always resourced enough . . . no matter how demanding humans became on the earth' (2021, 90–1). Such comments come quite close to a Malthusian analysis (and here it seems important to point out that Malthus was himself an eighteenth-century political economist), in which climate-change culpability is distributed evenly across the proliferating species. This, as Vishwas Satgar notes, is an inevitably racialising manoeuvre, in that it effectively 'blames the most populous countries . . . including Africa, while failing to appreciate the disproportionate impacts on particularly the black working-class and . . . women' (2018, 49).

In examining Planetary Gothic as a set of fictional concerns with the Earth-System unconscious, we would thus do well to proceed with critical faculties attuned to the ecological histories and dynamics of racialised and gendered power. For an example of a text that itself approaches the planetary with such issues in mind – and which thus demonstrates the generative possibilities of a Planetary Gothic fiction – we might turn to Lee Haven Jones's Welsh-language folk horror *The Feast* (2021). Here, oil exploration on a newly well-off family's estate in the Welsh mountains awakens an ancient goddess from her resting place beneath the hills, and – as in *Gaia* – provokes her vengeance on the accountable parties. Unlike in Bouwer's text, however, it is not the human species writ large who are subject to this wrath; instead, the film traces out a complex intersection of gender and class, in which extractivism is aligned with extravagant wealth, grotesque forms of misogynistic violence and the gruesome consumption of (animal) bodies. It is notably through Cadi (Annes Elwy) – the hired help at the titular feast – that the autochthonous spirit of the hills operates. The scenario reflects the gendered and classed distribution of socio-ecological vulnerability (Cadi first has to die to serve as the goddess's vessel), while symbolically redressing this inequity as she takes revenge for the sexual and environmental violences enumerated across the film. *The Feast* concludes with the goddess returning to her primordial bed in the earth, a moment that – again as in *Gaia* – summons the non-anthropocentric scale of Earth-System time, but does so by foregrounding the demise of an ecocidal and patriarchal system of capital accumulation, rather than the cosmic temporariness of the human species. As such, the film mobilises Chakrabarty's 'intimations of the planetary' in a way that studiously avoids the Malthusian fallacy, calling implicitly for forms of sociality that are not predicated on the suppression or subordination of the more-than-human world, while also positioning this as the condition of possibility for all social forms.

The Planetary Mine

Chakrabarty's account of the planetary and the global as distinct but connected historical categories thus provides a framework for identifying and analysing Planetary Gothic fiction, in which gothic forms excavate the Earth-System unconscious that subtends anthropocentric discourses of globalisation. As I noted in the introduction to this coda, however, Planetary Gothic should also be understood as a critical approach, naming related modes of locating and examining gothic forms in the context of transregional power relations that bear diversely on human societies, the biosphere and nature. Here, the planetary is best conceived as existing in the contact zone between Chakrabarty's two notions of the globe, and entails a perspective on capitalism as thoroughly entangled with the effects and processes of the Earth System. Though its approach is different from Chakrabarty's, Martín Arboleda's *Planetary Mine* (2020) – to which I will turn shortly – helps to illuminate this interpenetration, and does so by returning us to that conception of late-twentieth-century globalisation as novel geography of flows.

As we have seen with Jason Moore and Giovanni Arrighi in the introduction to this volume, the history of capitalism has been punctuated by periods of heightened speculation and market expansion that closely resemble the final decades of the last millennium. Though in each case such moments may have appeared to usher in a new form of capitalism, they have in fact unanimously heralded a deepening and widening of the material (imperial) processes of exploitation and extraction through which capitalism has always functioned (Arrighi and Moore 2001, 56–7) – processes that operate, as we have repeatedly seen in this volume, via colonial conceptions of race and patriarchal conceptions of gender. Discourses of globalisation that prioritise hypermobility and hybridity, spectral finance and the circulation of (cultural) commodities can thus be understood as at best addressing only one dimension of the late-twentieth-century global situation. Reiterating the sense in which present social and environmental crises are exposing the limitations of established critical lexica, Arboleda elaborates on this situation as follows:

The very idea of the 'global' . . . is being gradually superseded by that of the 'planetary', in which the earth reemerges as an unfamiliar place riddled with eerie, destructive and menacing forces. As opposed to the 'spaces of flows' and 'liquid modernities' that populated earlier visions of globalisation, the notion of the planetary designates a convoluted terrain where fences, walls, and militarised borders coexist with sprawling supply chains and complex infrastructures of connectivity. This realm is traversed by . . . tendencies towards functional integration in the world economy and towards radical ethnoracial and sociospatial fragmentation. (Arboleda 2020, chap. 1)

Running through and sustaining this complex landscape is the 'planetary mine' that gives Arboleda's book its title. This is not 'a discrete sociotechnical object' (chap. 1), but rather an emerging geography of deterritorialised extraction, which incorporates increasingly diverse forms and spaces of economic activity. Thinking with the planetary mine makes visible, for example, the mineral composition of computing and storage infrastructures that underpin global communication and finance, or the reliance – in urban planning and transport sectors – on technology engineered for the mineshaft. It similarly reveals the resonances between mineral speculation practices and the strategies

of urban displacement imposed by corporate real estate on low-income communities, or the replication and dissemination, in recent waves of global labour casualisation, of employment conditions long endured by mine workers, especially (though not exclusively) in the Global South (see Arboleda 2020, chaps. 1 and 8).

All of this helps to clarify the acknowledgement of persistent classed and racialised hierarchies and borders in which Arboleda's shift from the global to the planetary consists. Not only does the physical locus of the mine – suffused in ecocide, in histories of class, gender and colonial oppression – ground and enable the streams of money, goods, people and information that characterise globalisation's picture of the world; the conditions of existence within these flows are themselves increasingly modelled on extractivist tactics. The planetary emerges from this situation as a globally extensive network of relationships, which on different levels and scales binds together ecosystems, the geosphere and multiple facets of social life, in configurations inflected by ongoing histories of power. Such a view accounts for globalisation's fluid and dematerialised landscape, but also sees beyond it to the uneven geography of biophysical extraction and human exploitation – a territory contoured over five centuries of capitalism by colonialism and heteropatriarchy – from which this landscape is inseparable, and by which it has always been sustained. It is in this context that the multiple, linked and complementary critical approaches that I suggest we collect under the sign of 'Planetary Gothic' locate the fictions they address.

Planetary Gothic: An Approach

Like earlier conceptions of globalgothic, a planetary perspective on gothic fiction takes as its premise that what links different regions of the world together is a system of capitalist relations (Byron 2013; Botting and Edwards 2013); it diverges from globalgothic, however, in its understanding of such relations, which – viewed with the planetary in mind – always unfold within the sustaining context of the Earth System, and thus organise both human societies and the rest of nature. As they are alive to the more-than-human in this way, planetary approaches also foreground the histories and intersectional discourses of power that shape which lives and environments are treated as exploitable, or as expendable in the face of unevenly distributed socio-ecological collapse. The account I gave, in this volume's introduction, of globalgothic beyond globalisation can be understood as falling within the planetary's critical frame. Building on literary accounts of the world-ecology (Niblett 2012; Oloff 2012; Deckard et al. 2015), my suggestion there was that the 'global' dimensions of gothic might be revealed, by situating a given text at the nexus of the transregional and socio-ecological histories contouring its site of production, or by attending to impulses within gothic narratives themselves to map such histories and relations. The following three theses join with and expand these proposals, each demonstrating a perspective on gothic fiction that addresses and provides insight into a certain dimension of the planetary as – in Arboleda's formulation – 'an unfamiliar place riddled with eerie, destructive and menacing forces' (chap. 1).

Planetary Gothic Is Regional Gothic

The phrasing may appear contradictory, but as we have seen, the established globalisation theory of globalgothic production runs into problems because it generalises the

perspective that is available from certain, deindustrialised/financialised regions. If we are to read gothic texts in relation to global capitalism, then this shows that we need to be sensitive to how global capitalism operates and is differently experienced across different regions of the world, at different periods in history. A planetary approach would thus not seek primarily to examine how the global is metaphorised in gothic forms; it would instead first ask how gothic fiction apprehends the violent local effects of transregional capitalist relationships,¹ and only then – if necessary – telescope the analysis outwards to gothic as a more encompassing global allegory.

This would be the difference, for example, between reading the figure of the contemporary zombie as a general metaphor for unbridled capitalism – an approach taken, for instance, by Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry in their influential ‘Zombie Manifesto’ (2008) – and distinguishing the listless or cannibalistic Romero-style horde from, say, the undead workers that populate the contemporary African and African diasporic folklore to which I drew attention earlier in this collection. Positioned in its regional context, the former might reflect, as Roger Luckhurst notes of Romero’s own work, ‘the shift from Fordist production to low-wage, de-skilled service industries’ in the deindustrialising United States (2015, 151). The latter, by contrast, might register the threatening intensification of forms of labour and environmental precarity instantiated under colonial rule – an analysis I have made in this volume and elsewhere (Duncan 2022c). In both cases, then, the zombie responds to and mediates global capitalist relations, but does so as these are specifically experienced in different regions.

Planetary Gothic Is Capitalocene Gothic

As we have seen above, a planetary approach emphasises the uneven distribution of social and environmental precarity, foregrounding regions across the Global South in particular as especially vulnerable to the biophysical effects of the climate emergency. Though the term ‘Anthropocene’ has gained critical dominion over the last decade or so, it cannot adequately describe this inequality. The notion of a geological epoch driven by the ‘anthropos’, or humanity generally, in fact risks placing culpability on those humans – racialised, gendered, impoverished – who are the victims of unfolding socio-ecological collapse, as Moore has argued (2019, 50). To grasp the climate emergency through real socio-ecological inequality thus requires that we attend to how certain regions and communities have been rendered disproportionately precarious through centuries of extraction and exploitation; in short, it demands that we understand capitalism, operating through colonialism and patriarchy, as the driving force currently reshaping the Earth System.

I have already discussed at length in this collection how the Anthropocene analysis appears in gothic fictions chiefly as a monstrous dissolution of the human/nature binary – a posthuman synthesis frequently prioritised at the expense of attention to racialised and gendered power relations from which ecological destruction is inseparable. Capitalocene Gothic is, by contrast, sensitive to these intersecting inequities, and – as in *The Feast* above – locates culpability in the system of capital, rather than with an abstract conception of humanity. An apposite example of this strategy is offered by the Singaporean writer Ng Yi-Sheng’s short story ‘Sin’, which features in his speculative collection *Lion City* (2018). ‘Sin’ tells how Singapore is invaded, during an instance of the infamous Southeast Asian transboundary haze, by peaceable monsters, who

have fled their home in nearby hell on the grounds that its climate is now entirely inhospitable. The Singapore state refuses to take in the migrants, with the result that when they depart, the city is permanently shrouded in the deep and unbreathable smog. In this way, the story skewers Singapore's unrelenting position on migrants from nearby nations, all of them especially at risk from the changing climate. As its title suggests, however, 'Sin' also highlights Singapore's own part in producing these conditions, subliminally evoking issues that range from the sand mining which effectively raises the sea level in neighbouring countries, to the burning of indigenous forests for palm oil plantations, and – further – to the migrant labour system, which brings workers from elsewhere to the island nation on low-wage, precarious contracts. The story's hell-dwellers, and the smog with which they curse Singapore, thus indict a set of exploitative and extractive relationships which link Southeast Asian socio-ecologies unequally together in the face of unfolding climatic shifts. Such relationships – as Ng's collection overall makes clear – are inseparable from interlocking histories of colonialism and patriarchy in the region (see Duncan 2021).

Planetary Gothic Is Decolonial Gothic

The planetary demands a decolonial perspective, because it reveals that the globalised, financialised market of the late twentieth century does not represent a new world order that supersedes formal colonialism, but instead reactivates and intensifies the socio-ecological relationships that have operated through colonialism and patriarchy across capital's history. Viewed through a planetary lens, in other words, the world is not postcolonial or neo-colonial – both terms that rest on a posited break with the past – but rather remains structured by a colonial power that is ongoing. Contemporary fiction from formerly colonised regions and communities frequently engages with this active history – with what the decolonial philosopher Anibal Quijano distinguishes from colonialism via the term 'coloniality' (2000, 533) – in gothic tropes and devices that mediate conditions of disproportionate social and environmental precarity, while also summoning the endurance of colonial relationships as the wider frame in which such inequity and violence exists.

Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019) is a film that demonstrates such a strategy, as we have already seen in this collection. This text deploys revenant figures to link atmospheric toxification and (gendered) exploitation in contemporary Dakar to the longer history of enslavement that shapes West Africa's relationship with the so-called developed world. A number of additional examples of decolonial gothic are offered in the volume: Sheri-Marie Harrison's illuminating reading of Helen Oyeyemi's fiction demonstrates how this addresses and unsettles unresolved histories of trauma that mutate out of the period of colonial occupation and into the present. Similarly, Gregory Luke Chwala's account of Michelle Cliff's gothic points to the persistent colonial relations that inhere in Caribbean social spaces and environments, while also tracing out how the author uses gothic forms to generate decolonial queer ecologies that imagine beyond such active systems of violence. As I have suggested elsewhere (2022a),² fictions such as these markedly exceed the haunting vocabularies of the postcolonial gothic, as much as they move clearly beyond the preoccupation with porous national and cultural borders that has characterised the established globalgothic framework. Instead, they grapple with material situations shaped by violent intersections of race,

gender, nature and capitalism, and in this sense position themselves in the planetary context described above.

Regional, Capitalocene and decolonial approaches to gothic fiction each demonstrate, but do not exhaust, the possibilities of a planetary framework for gothic criticism, which expands, nuances and grounds the framework of globalgothic analyses. Even as it can be understood as a concern in gothic fiction with elaborating the Earth-System unconscious, Planetary Gothic is also a perspective and an emergent conversation which invites further reflection, discussion and critical experimentation.

Notes

1. The world-literary framework laid out by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) provides the tools for reading (gothic) forms in the context of transregional capitalism's regional effects. For a longer discussion of globalgothic and world-literature, see the introduction to this volume.
2. For further examples and analyses of decolonial gothic, see the 2022 special issue of *Gothic Studies* entitled 'Decolonising Gothic'.

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