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EcoGothic, Ecohorror and Apocalyptic Entanglement in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Tales of the Black Freighter*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ecoGothic resonances of *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a dark pirate tale embedded within *Watchmen*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' 1986-87 postmodern DC graphic novel. By providing a grim prism for themes such as nuclear paranoia, the monstrous transformation of the self, and the horrifying possibilities of scientific solutions to social ills, *Black Freighter* provides a vocabulary of horror that echoes the grim post-modern alternate 1980s of its host narrative. The Gothic gives a voice to the subsumed existential dread exuded by the escalating nuclear tension and apocalyptic imagination of *Watchmen*, and the environmental entanglement and degradation of the body at sea serves as an ecocritical lens through which to view a corresponding societal degeneration in the face of a moribund social and political ecology. It is the technique of metatextual commentary, separating and intertwining, that brings the ecoGothic themes of *Watchmen* to light.

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' fatalistic *Tales of the Black Freighter* depicts a shipwreck survivor's voyage across the sea on an improvised life-raft made from bloated corpses and driftwood. As he floats, the mariner is beset by the gruesome spectres of an unwholesome seascape on all sides and is tainted psychologically and physically by the experience. The story is set in a period reminiscent of the Golden Age of Piracy, steeped in the tropes and idioms of the Gothic. *Tales of the Black Freighter's* fictional comic universe places the theme of piracy, rather than superheroes, at the forefront. The fictional pirate genre has been content to provide escapism and harmless derring do to its readership, yet this story is different. In a metatextual wink to *Watchmen* itself, the dark fiction of the mariner complicates and disrupts the comic industry that it represents. Its readership experiences a complex of macabre tropes that mirror

the socio-political horror story they inhabit. The mariner is haunted by sea and self, while a world tearing itself apart reads on, desperate to forget.

Horror surfaces through the environment via a series of unwanted ecological entanglements that distort and disturb. The (un)natural is a core element of the text, articulated through the protagonist's struggles with the sea and his excruciating undertaking of a desperate race to save his family from pirates. This sea is traversed by the unnamed shipwreck survivor's precarious journey, a voyage that involves numerous obstacles that are of the natural world, but with a gruesome twist. It is resonant with core ecoGothic themes: affective ambivalence towards the natural world, a conviction that nature can estrange as much as remediate, and a disjunct between utopian idealism and dystopian results (Smith and Hughes, 2013: p. 2). The protagonist of the text finds himself changed by the world into a Gothic monstrosity, with a 'huge, deformed' hand and a scream that sounds like the 'black language of gulls' (X, 12, 7). To the disturbed 'hero' Rorschach, the New York of *Watchmen* matches the dark cry as it 'screams like an abattoir full of retarded children' (I, 14, 3). Ecological torment given human voice.

Continuing the critical conversations initiated in Matthew Green's *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* (2013) and the edited collection *Ecogothic* (2013), this essay expands on the interplay on monstrous environment and monstrous human nature, reflected through the peculiar device of the embedded narrative. Set primarily at sea and narrated in the first person, *Tales of the Black Freighter* (hereafter *Black Freighter*) offers an interesting depiction of the sea as a site of terror and horror not unlike the settings castles in eighteenth-century Gothic texts. When embedded into *Watchmen*—the seminal DC 1986-87 graphic novel—the classic tropes of the Gothic adumbrate and modify modern (and postmodern) tropes. *Black Freighter* is a meta-text, contained within the broader narrative of Moore and Gibbons' acclaimed graphic novel *Watchmen*. As a metatextual narrative, the depiction of the natural and its associated horrors in *Black Freighter* serve as a form of escapism for the characters in the fictional world imagined by Moore and Gibbons in *Watchmen*. In a world dominated by rapid and unassimilated technological advancement and populated by superheroes, *Black Freighter* offers the inhabitants of *Watchmen*'s universe an emphasis on how the natural world, despite human mastery over technology, retains much of its currency as a source of terror and horror.

This essay begins by situating *Black Freighter* in its context as a Gothic metatext within *Watchmen*, and a reading the dark pirate comic as a self-contained, ecoGothic narrative. The second section of this essay considers the implications of *Black Freighter's* themes in a broader context as part of Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*. We suggest that *Black Freighter* can be read as both an ecoGothic text, as well as a metatext that exposes the implications of a fictional world teetering on the brink of self-annihilation and lacking the language to express its subsumed paranoia. In a political ecology that bears an increasingly stark resemblance to the nightmare 1980s imagined by Moore and Gibbons, reassessing this unsettling and suffocating mire of dark emotions is more important than ever.

Tales of the Black Freighter in Context

Black Freighter is a comic-within-a-comic that is read by the characters in *Watchmen*. The narrative is laid out in text boxes that are drawn to resemble sections of parchment, ostensibly to present the protagonist's narrative account as a set of diary entries. These parchment-like fragments of dialogue signify the various moments in *Watchmen* where the core narrative is interrupted or juxtaposed by the narrative of *Black Freighter*, a persistent and intrusive presence. Some of these moments are followed up with visual panels that convey the thrust of *Black Freighter's* plot. For example, following a section where a main character makes the remark, 'hell and damnation', the narrative switches to the narrator of *Black Freighter* exclaiming that 'Hades is wet' (V, 20, 1). Elsewhere, the moment where a fatalistic twist is revealed coincides with a key part of *Watchmen's* narrative, a section where *Watchmen's* central 'villain' Ozymandias explains his motivations (XI, 8, 7).

The narrative appears laid upon the surface of the *Watchmen* plot arc, emerging from the pages of a comic read by a young man, Bernie, lounging on a street curb next to a newspaper stall. The middle-aged newspaper seller, also named Bernie, is a loud and opinionated mouthpiece of the political events unfolding around him. The two Bernies do not interact except to snipe at each other, the former frequently complaining that he is trying to read, and that the latter is disturbing him. And yet it is no coincidence that these very different men have the same name, just as the comic within the comic and its host are improbably the same, yet different in form. They exist side-by-side on a New York street corner: one escaping into the

world of pirate comics and the other loudly proclaiming a running spiel about his world. And yet, as this essay argues, they are both entangled in the same dark web of tropes and themes.

The depictions of violence and gore in *Black Freighter*, along with its twist ending, is framed like a typical EC Comics publication from the 1950s (Hoberek, 2014: p.76). Indeed, *Black Freighter*'s narrative parallels *Watchmen* in the same way that EC Comics' anthologised stories paralleled the rise of DC superheroes such as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman during the Golden Age of Comics in the late 1940s. It is tongue-in-cheek franchises such as *Pirates* and *X-Ships* that dominate the comics market (I, 4, 3). These connections are a deliberate and cynical critique. A character comments that the reason for pirate comics such as *Black Freighter*'s success is because superhero comics have diminished in popularity in a world where superheroes exist in real life, and often disappoint (III, 25, 1-3). This is a world with no catharsis, and the Gothic seeks to provide a coping mechanism. Young Bernie has good reason to avoid looking up from his engrossing comic at the mess unfolding around him.

Black Freighter's post-modern, metatextual narrative came about by accident, and yet became intrinsic to the broader arc in which it participates. Interviewed by Barry Kavanagh of *Blather* in 2000, Moore said of *Watchmen* that he tried to make it 'like this kind of jewel with hundreds [...] of facets and [...] each of the facets is commenting on all of the other facets'. The story takes on the challenge of the ecoGothic within its own narrative, and 'examines the construction of the Gothic body—unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid—through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity' (Del Principe, 2014: p.1). The characters of this apocalyptic drama are constantly probing their own ethics and identities, their agency, and the meaning of their actions. They are ecologically entangled with the Morton-esque 'hyper-object' (Morton, 2013: p.28) of nuclear war, and it corrupts them just as the mariner of *Black Freighter* despairs and is corrupted by the harsh and dehumanising seascape. Finding one's individual and collective sense of environmental identity becomes a matter of survival.

The fragmented style in which *Black Freighter* is presented through *Watchmen* has stylistic similarities with 'first wave' eighteenth-century Gothic novels such as M.G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) or Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). The text's 'backwards-looking' gaze, a call back to the Early Modern (late fifteenth century to the early eighteenth)

period's Golden Age of Piracy, acts as a nostalgic fragment not dissimilar to the Gothic's eighteenth century 'first wave'. The fragments that make up *Black Freighter* are like the various poetic fragments inserted into Radcliffe's *Mysteries* or Lewis's *Monk*. The key difference is that unlike the 'self-contained' poems in Lewis and Radcliffe's novels, the narrative fragments that make up *Black Freighter* flow from one fragment to another, making up a complete metatext that spans the course of *Watchmen*. Geoff Klock (2002) suggests that *Black Freighter* operates as a symbol of the horror comic tradition within a superhero comic, an inclusion that is suggestive of an anxiety towards the nature of comic book history and tradition (p. 68). In the context of Gothic literary history, the nostalgia of *Black Freighter* in the modern-day setting of *Watchmen* can therefore be read as analogous with the first wave Gothic novels' nostalgia for poetry and poetic forms (such as the sonnet and the ballad) that pre-date the eighteenth century.

The Gothic and the genre of comics have much in common, as pointed out by Julia Round (2014) in *Comics and Graphic Novels* (p. 112), and *Black Freighter* is no exception. Round proposes several points in her consideration of a 'gothic model' of reading comics that allows for the interrogation of meaning through formal elements of a text. She proposes an application of the concept of 'haunting' that is characterised by numerous intratextual levels of a text's embedded levels. Indeed, the various text boxes that make up the narrative of the comic can be read as fragments that 'haunt' Moore and Gibbons' core text. This technique serves to reinforce the metatext's role as highlighting the natural world as a seascape of fear. Another point raised by Round (2014) is the use of excess in comics and graphic novels as an aesthetic function that echoes the strategies of the Gothic (p. 75). Depictions of the natural such as images of human bodies and images of animals, are sections of *Black Freighter* that are illustrated rather than presented as text boxes. These illustrated elements of Moore and Gibbons' metatext not only focus on, but exaggerate and highlight, to excess, the grotesque and disturbing facets, of the natural world.

***Black Freighter* as Gothic Eco/Metatext**

In this section, we seek to not only to explore both the function of the ecohorror and ecoGothic within this fictitious narrative, but also to understand its function as an embedded narrative within a larger whole. Taken together, the narratives of the two texts try to fulfil the function of ecohorror, defined by Joseph J. Foy (2010) as an attempt to 'raise mass consciousness' about

the threats of environmental incaution (p. 167). Through the cynical lens of postmodernism, they imply that there is something laughable and impossible about this task. As the character of the Comedian in *Watchmen* exclaims, what is the point of being the smartest man on Earth if one is simply the smartest man on the cinder? This turn of phrase haunts Ozymandias across the years, creating the seed of his master plan. The joke meant to belittle human agency becomes the ultimate fruit of a god and hero complex combined (XI, 19, 4-6).

The natural world, with its many horrors, is brought into focus at the very start of *Black Freighter*. From typical depictions of castles in eighteenth century Gothic to, specifically, representations of the natural world in ecoGothic texts, landscapes are a crucial facet of the Gothic mode. Angela Wright (2007), for example, reads the role of landscape and the setting of a castle in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as different aspects of the text that are 'conjoined' (p. 38). *Black Freighter* emphasises natural threats rather than artificial ones, such that in place of the oppressive medieval castle that typifies eighteenth century Gothic, instead, seascapes of the natural world in Moore and Gibbons' text are rendered as terrifying and ontologically unsettling settings. The text is a form of nautical Gothic (Alder, 2017) that populates the deep of the ocean with the lightless uncertainty of mental state, space, time, morality and identity that it provokes.

The nautical mode nuances the wider *Watchmen* narrative by suggesting that the Earth, too, is adrift in a degenerating world in which finding one's bearings is eternally problematic. A 1980s form of what Steve Mentz (2015) has termed 'shipwreck modernity', the link between 21st-century ecological collapse narrated by the vocabulary of the blue humanities. The haunted ship-at-sea becomes humanity at sea, haunted by glimpses of its inadequacies in the face of crisis. As the character of Bernie the newspaper seller puts it, echoing the apprehension and despair of the mariner, 'You never know what's bearing down on you [...] I mean, all we see is what's on the surface [...] I bet there's all kinda stuff we never notice [...] until it's too late' (V, 17, 6-9). As he comments on the uncertainty of life and darkly echoes future nuclear calamity and collapse, the mariner notices that he too is becalmed, with something sinister—in this case, sharks—lurking beneath the waves.

Yang and Healey (2016) argue that landscapes embody the Gothic's ability to challenge tradition and liberate anxieties. Landscapes, in their formulation, contribute to the creation of ambiances of uncertainty, delusion, fluidity, isolation and instability, ambiances that are all

present in *Black Freighter* (p. 5). To the protagonist of *Black Freighter*, the natural world is likened to Hell, with a host of horrific sights and sounds. As the first narrative section begins, Moore and Gibbons' use of the phrase 'beach-head' to describe the setting of the first sequence lend an organic, almost natural feel to the setting where the narrative takes place (III, 2, 1). Following from this, the narrator describes a hellish landscape littered with dead bodies and the body parts of dead men. This first phrase primes a reader to what happens next, as the narrator's initial reference to a head is followed up by him witnessing birds picking out the 'thoughts and memories' of his dead crewmate (III, 2, 2). Moore and Gibbons accentuate the effect of being devoured by the natural world by describing the birds' actions using an abstract metaphor. Their use of this abstract metaphor highlights the threatening and unnerving implications of being at the mercy of nature.

Faced with a situation made untenable by nature, the protagonist contrives of a response that is deemed horrific yet necessary. He tries to rely on the natural world for escape from his predicament by making a life raft out of wood. He then realises that the island that he is marooned on lacks the trees to supply him with enough wood to make his craft float. He resorts to a gristlier substrate, relying on the lashed-together and bloating corpses of his crewmates to make his raft float. The disturbing effect of the protagonist's utilitarian approach towards the bodies of his deceased fellows can be best summed up by Aldana Reyes's (2015) description of the Gothic body:

'Gothic bodies produce fear through their interstitiality: they are scary because they either refuse human taxonomies or destabilise received notions of what constitutes a 'normal' or socially intelligible body.' (p.5)

In contemplating the horrific use of bodies to create a life raft, the protagonist justifies his actions by stating that his choice is made necessary by the 'nature' of his situation (V, 8, 9). Moore and Gibbons emphasise the word 'nature' in bold, a fatalistic acknowledgment of the extent to which the protagonist's actions are driven by being isolated from society and having to cope with the horrors of the natural world.

Disturbing imagery is used in the scene where the protagonist creates his grotesque life-raft. This moment is also important as it signifies the start of the protagonist's downward spiral from victim to his eventual role as the text's tragic villain. Moore and Gibbons draw attention

to the protagonist's actions by devoting an entire page of the graphic novel to this sequence. The Gothic bodies of the protagonist's dead crew form a focal point of the protagonist's change from victim to villain. The first frame on page 9 of Chapter V depicts the protagonist exhuming his crew 'from underground, sand trickling from their sockets' (V, 9, 1), a grotesque description that symbolises how nature has taken over and conquered the bodies of the protagonist's dead fellows. In place of blood, the bodies of his crew bleed sand. The act of exhuming the dead for a utilitarian purpose is also framed in an unnerving manner, as the protagonist becomes occasionally 'entranced' by the physical defects and markings on his dead crewmates' corpses (V, 9, 2). The protagonist's final touches to his raft are also described using an ambiguous phrase, as he cuts down/off some 'young palms' to build the deck of his raft (V, 9, 3). It is implied that 'palms' refers to pieces of wood, but in this particular context, its meaning is left ambiguous.

It follows from this that the threats that are foisted onto the protagonist are natural ones. In a particularly gripping scene that takes place after he has set sail, the protagonist realises that using the bodies of his dead crewmates to keep his raft buoyant has attracted a hungry herd of sharks to his life raft. As in the scene where the protagonist builds his raft, this episode also accompanies a full page of *Watchmen*, a framing and narrative choice by Moore and Gibbons that reflects the intensity and immediacy of the encounter. Fending the sharks off, the protagonist's conflict culminates in a struggle with what appears to be the herd's alpha, a monstrous shark with 'pale and mottled' yellow skin, one of the biggest sharks he has ever encountered (V, 3, 20). Blinding the shark, the protagonist then proceeds to use its dead body in place of the bodies of his crewmates.

The protagonist's use of the shark's dead body symbolises the *effect* that nature has had on him. Moore and Gibbons' depiction of the sea can be read as a haunted house of sorts, replete with numerous terrors that serve as obstacles to the protagonist's voyage, obstacles that change him irrevocably. However, the protagonist's very act of taking to the sea earlier on in the narrative, 'borne on the naked backs of murdered men', is arguably the turning point in the text (V, 6, 9). Having earlier commented on the seagulls feasting on his dead crewmates, the protagonist, from this point forth, becomes a predator himself. The final frame of Chapter V, page 9 reads as a 'close-up shot' of the protagonist, his mouth dripping with blood from a live seagull he has just eaten. Focusing on his face, the red colour scheme in this frame emphasises a change in his character, in this case for the worse.

The final frame of Chapter V, page 9 is important because it signposts to the reader the effects of nature on *Black Freighter*'s hapless protagonist. Left on his own and immersed in a Gothic seascape, the protagonist himself becomes increasingly co-opted into the heterotopia that is the sea. Fred Botting (2012) proposes that landscapes in Gothic texts can be read as heterotopias, mirrors of the world that reflect and disturb depictions of reality (p. 19). The sea in *Black Freighter* is a literal mirror to the protagonist that reveals to readers of the text, and to the protagonist himself, the extent to which he has been changed by being at the mercy of nature:

‘Light-headed, I gazed into the inverted world beneath where drowned gulls circled. A madman with blood-caked lips stared back at me. His eyes, his nose, his cheeks seemed individually familiar, but mercifully, I could not piece them together. Not into a face I knew.’ (V, 12, 8-9)

While Moore and Gibbons emphasise in this passage the physiological deterioration of the protagonist, in a broader thematic perspective, the sea also foreshadows the protagonist's downward spiral, and more importantly, his eventual transformation into a tragic villain. Nature, in this instance, distorts the relationship between the protagonist's 'civilised' past and 'barbaric' present state (Botting, 2012: p. 20). On one hand, readers are primed to sympathise with the protagonist whilst on the other hand, witness his gradual decline and tragic fall. The intersection of materiality and psychology generates a very distinct form of Gothic-tinged horror. Stephen A. Rust (2014) explains this eloquently in the context of the postmodern ecohorror film:

‘Human bodies’ affective responses to the material environment and environmental discourse inform our perceptions of the conditions under which we alter the environment and transform our bodies through industrial and consumerist practices. The discursive trope of bodies illustrates the affective capabilities of horror films to invite critical spectatorship on the part of viewers, capabilities that are generated by the combination of psychology and materiality as special effects and sounds operate textually to penetrate the body of the viewer and disrupt cognition.’ (p.552).

Rust's comments, while framed in the context of the horror film, is nevertheless salient in the context of reading about the mariner's physical degeneration in *Black Freighter*. The desperate mariner struggles to fend off the monstrous life of the ocean and descends into a J.G. Ballard-esque archaopsychic regression and physical degeneration, perhaps best characterised by the phrase 'my raft grew increasingly grotesque, reflecting my own gradual transformation' (V, 21, 8). Indeed, Moore and Gibbons draw on the affective capabilities of the grotesque by inviting readers to identify with the mariner's condition by using a frame that positions the mariner's face squarely in the middle. This framing creates a dual effect: the mariner is both staring into the frame as he is staring out of it, at readers of the text, highlighting the effect of his physiological deterioration to a reader at an affective level.

The mariner's moments of realisation are paralleled in the narrative of *Watchmen*. Both texts end with a grim dawning of self-deception. For the protagonist of *Black Freighter*, the initial vision of his wasted and hideous physical appearance foreshadows his final realisation that occurs later in the text. He murders an innocent man and assaults his family, convinced of a delusional fantasy of a pirate invasion. The mariner understands that he is damned, and swims to the looming inevitable bulk of the demonic and hellish Black Freighter to join his fellow lost souls. Similarly, the protagonists of *Watchmen* are ensnared by the realisation of the cynical pragmatism of the scheme to coerce world peace enacted by the character of Ozymandias. The moment of dreadful self-knowledge for the hero-turned-villain mirrors that of the mariner as he sits in meditation, taking in the mass murder that he has wrought in the name of life, declaring that 'I've struggled across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity' (XII, 27, 2). He too is convinced that his delusion is real as he mutilates both the population and psyche of his world.

Intertextuality empowers the interplay of the two narratives as they subvert expectations. In one notable juxtaposition (VII, 25, 1-6) the existential trauma of nuclear crisis is made particularly apparent. The *Black Freighter* text 'our damnation: it obsessed the sodden dead, dominating their bubbling dialogues' appears as the marooned man imagines the bloated corpses of his crewmates talking to each other below the waves as the fish gnaw at them. This is contrasted with the hysterical babble of a gang of street punks known as the Top Knots. The scene is intercut with scenes from *Black Freighter* where the mariner contemplates; 'they spoke of a heaven, where once we all lived and died for our sins to this pandemonium we call the world', as the Top Knots' squabbling continues, their actions are juxtaposed with the mariner's

contemplation; 'truly, life is hell and death's rough hand our only deliverance'. Subsequently, the Top Knots invade the home of Hollis Mason, a retired costumed hero, and brutally murder him. The Top Knots' actions read as a twisted version of the unsanctioned adventures of superheroes that echoes in the *Black Freighter* text, where the mariner-turned-murderer returns to his home, 'a spectre of revenge, riding the flow tide home' (VII, 26, 6). Both *Watchmen* and *Black Freighter* are grim trojan horses that have infiltrated their framing genres, promising adventure but bringing despair.

The Ecohorror and Ecophobia of Nuclear Paranoia

The parallel between *Black Freighter's* protagonist and the character of Ozymandias is but one of many entanglements with *Watchmen*. These connections are used to illustrate the text's broader message of ecophobia and the dark entanglements of global panic. *Black Freighter* lurks as a menacing intradiegetic whisper in the troubled minds of *Watchmen's* central characters, an explicitly didactic Gothic nature designed by comic book writers to entertain and thrill, and the world for which it is created is a grim political ecology desperately in need of a voice. The text is a mess of confused emotions and ambiguities: only the world of comics can critique it.

The USA of *Watchmen's* 1985 is lost and adrift, five minutes from nuclear midnight. A long-serving and hawkish Richard Nixon, sans Watergate, still leads the nation and right wing 'red menace' ideology is rampant. The powers of Dr. Manhattan enabled a victory in Vietnam, denying the American imagination the self-reflection of defeat. There is no US-Soviet détente. The status quo is fast deteriorating on the global stage and all concerned seem paralysed by complacency and cynicism. Dr. Manhattan is the only guarantee of stasis and the world assumes (naively) that he is a constant. The mariner's fear of the destruction of his hometown by the *Freighter's* marauding crew parallels the ecophobia of nuclear paranoia that is prevalent in *Watchmen*. Michael Egan (2018, p.21) proposes that '...the human spirit resists the prospect of catastrophe to the bitter end', but that 'though horrors are impossible to conceive of, that doesn't prevent their occurrence'. It is within the Gothic that we find the most well-articulated suspicion of hope and disorientation within complacency, of utopian and dystopian dreaming in the face of nuclear war.

The paranoia that infuses this 1980s USA is characterised by hundreds of small acts of defiance against despair; it is a story of men and women broken by truth, but also of the potential horrors of both wide-eyed optimism for the future and hard-eyed pragmatism. It is a world in profound denial, clinging to the myth of a saviour in the form of the character of Dr. Manhattan, the only individual in *Watchmen* who demonstrates what might be deemed as ‘superhuman’ abilities. Dr. Manhattan’s godlike abilities make him the lynchpin of the text, as he is the one character who can ensure peace between the USA and Russia. At a pivotal plot point, he discards the Earth for Mars, leaving behind a vacuum that leads to chaos and instability. Reading the text in conjunction with *Black Freighter* provides the perspective necessary for the reader to recognise the cruelty of hope, but also the resilience of human nature in the face of horror. It environs the emotions of the narrative, leaving humanity trapped in a haunted house populated by memories and regrets.

Both the mariner and the characters of *Watchmen* struggle to make meaning, but it is the mariner that understands the ecological horror of his situation, bitterly self-aware of his plight: physical and psychological degeneration, the horrors that combine and intermingle to derange him, the lurking threat of the hellish Black Freighter, and his gradual drift away from reality and morality. The genre of pirate novel provides the language to bemoan his situation, a vocabulary of the Gothic. He embraces his doom, while fighting against it; he is disgusted by his environment and enveloped by it. The dark arc of the *Black Freighter* narrative serves as a companion to the wider arc of *Watchmen*: the experience of ennui, horror and psychological trauma in the face of an impending catastrophe.

Like the mariner, humanity in *Watchmen* cannot escape its self-created island of the mind without cannibalising that which it loves, perverting itself in the process. Everyone in the world of *Watchmen* treads water in a dark Gothic manifestation of what Steve Mentz (2012) has termed ‘swimmer poetics’, an imagined way of being ‘for our storm-filled world [that] can generate unsustainable but engaging narratives’ (p. 590). The ecoGothic frames the realisation that nobody can build anything that lasts in the face of annihilation (be it through death at sea or nuclear fire) except an ad hoc mode of grim survival in which the boundaries shift and blur. Dark aesthetics and imagery are uniquely appropriate for a human race barely treading water in a vast and horrid ocean of time, unmoored from agency and adrift in an all-consuming moral panic.

The bonds between the two narratives allow them to interweave, grimly augmenting each other. Both stories take care to establish the weight of precedent, of circumstance, a sense of hopelessness and lack of agency. Both stories stew in morbidity, self-loathing, introspection, complacency and guilt, but only one narrative is aware of its ecoGothic entanglements. *Black Freighter* seeks to give voice to the dark latent emotions of *Watchmen*: the people of Earth cannot give voice to their terror in the face of the twin forces of nuclear annihilation and Dr. Manhattan's power, with all the uncertainty and mortal dread that this entails. As a deterrent to the Soviets' nuclear arsenal, Dr. Manhattan is characterised very much as a destructive, apocalyptic force himself. Schneider (2013) highlights the register of bleakness that permeates both texts:

‘Traditionally, superhero comics are very much dominated by clear-cut action sequences, allowing the protagonists to use their powers to perceive, act and react, while their actions have direct consequences, altering and advancing the plot. In *Watchmen*, however, the heroes are not in a position of control; they must subject themselves to the rule of time, mercilessly leading them and the rest of humanity towards the apocalypse. In the end, the comic evinces a prototypically Gothic bleakness, expressed thematically as well as formally.’
(p. 94)

Like superhero comics in our world, the pirate franchises of the *Watchmen* world seek to capture the zeitgeist of their intellectual culture. What could be a more fitting metaphor for the human condition as imagined in *Watchmen* than a brutally bleak Gothic nightmare of boundless ocean, monstrous life, human impotence, moral degeneration and the horror of failure? Just as a more optimistic Western world imagined itself through the roseate lens of the golden age of comics and the latent worship of power and prowess found a voice in the superhero, so too does the psychological horror of *Black Freighter* meet the needs of its audience, a dark lens for their failings, but also a form of escape. In a fitting parallel: *Weird Fiction* magazine authors such as H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith were the voice of a distinct 1930s Depression-era cynicism, creating cosmic horrors that ruthlessly interrogated the scientific narrative of humanity while simultaneously entertaining with an aggressive masculine pulp adventure. The pirate comics of the *Watchmen* 1980s give voice to an equally bitter complex of emotions: this a world that has been shown the hope and optimism of heroism

and the golden promise of the American dream, only for the dream to come true and become a nightmare, as the character of the Comedian puts it. A world of heroes taken to its natural conclusion is an environment of abiding mistrust and ecophobia. Fear of a horrifying Gothic nature of predators, corpses, rot, madness and decay is made synonymous with the wallowing terror of an impending nuclear end.

How, then, is this psychologically troubled pre-apocalyptic world on the brink a form of ecoGothic? The answer lies within our notion of ecology, and the affective registers of such a web of interconnections (see Weik von Mossner, 2017; Bladow and Ladino, 2018). As Hillard (2009) points out succinctly, the role of Gothic nature is to shine an unflattering light on the source of our fears and contradictions, to create a sense of place for our paranoia, causing us to ask questions such as ‘Why do we fear what we fear? What role do such fears play in the day to day choices we make in our social, political, and personal lives? What consequences does ecophobia have for the way we treat the environments we live in?’ (p. 694).

Hillard’s observations become extremely apt at the start of *Watchmen* Chapter XII, when the doomsday clock that has been ticking along during the narrative reaches midnight. We are presented with several pages of unfolding carnage: piles of bloodied corpses, scenes of a monstrous creature sprawled across the ruins of civilisation, its mutilated tentacles penetrating the buildings of New York. Everyone is violently murdered, destroyed by the creature created by Ozymandias to fool the world into believing that an alien invasion is underway. The monstrous nature of nuclear annihilation has given way to an even more Gothic horror, a Cthulhu-esque creature from the stars. Despite all of this, it is the human motivations behind this act that are the true horror.

The regression of identity and corruption through psychological isolation and survival appears in both the story of Ozymandias, who severs his ties from society in order to enact an amoral master plan, and the marooned mariner, who survives in the face of a savage and unforgiving nature, in exchange for both his sanity and his humanity. The differences in depiction of Ozymandias and the protagonist of *Black Freighter* are stark – one man meditates on his actions from a distance, while the other has caused his damnation in a direct manner, literally with his own hands. Despite these differences, both Ozymandias and the doomed mariner are similar in that they have effectively isolated themselves from society. Brad Ricca (2013) contrasts the ‘end of the progressive hopes that initially inspired the protagonist’s

actions' (pp. 186-87), replacing the coterie—membership of the community of costumed heroes for Ozymandias, membership of civilisation for the mariner—with the opposite condition, a reflective Gothic solipsism marked by the replacement of affective bonds with melancholy.

By monstrously intertwining the body, the material world, the membranes between cultural forces and the logics of environmental behaviour, the postmodern frame of *Watchmen*, and within it *Black Freighter*, focuses a disturbing and unflattering lens on the ideas and mores that have led to this warped and fearful 1985. The tendrils of the ecoGothic have wormed their way into the thought-world of the characters, explicitly narrated in the mariner's subversion by his own ecological hellscape, but implicitly roiling beneath the surface in *Watchmen*. The affective palette generated by this process builds a sense of crawling socio-cultural dread at the callous and paranoid ennui that grips the novel's characters. It generates endless questions: How did the world become so broken? Are we simply another reflection of the same theme? What would we do to save humanity? Who is the monster? *Watchmen* answers these questions but punishes the reader with a destabilising barrage of grim relativism for every truth they extract from its pages.

The Gothic ambiguities of the text are best encapsulated by the psychological world of Ozymandias. The tragic villain of the piece is a Victor Frankenstein-like character who understands the monstrosity of his creation, stating boldly that 'I engineered a monster, cloned its brain from a human psychic, sent it to New York and killed half of the city' (XII, 9, 2). He deliberately engineers a Lovecraftian wave of psychic horror, claiming that 'no one will doubt this Earth has met a force so dreadful it must be repelled, all former enmities aside' (XII, 10, 5). The macabre images implanted into the brains of the sensitive are a staged production, a collage of science fiction imagery and dreadful media soundscapes. It is the biggest joke of them all, a theme that reverberates across *Watchmen*.

At the beginning of the stories, both the marooned mariner and the world of the comic are not perfect, and in terrible peril. However, they still have hope. By the end they are devoid of hope and deformed beyond recognition. The mariner has assaulted his own family, crazed and delusional from isolation and privation; humanity has become coerced into peace by a lie, millions dead so that billions can live. An alien foe has been invented to sow a terror in the hearts of humanity worse than its hatred of itself. As the hero Nite Owl puts it with horror,

‘how [...] how can humans make decisions like this?’ (XII, 20, 6). It is not clear in context whether this means ‘how can humans make decisions in this context’ or ‘how can humans make a decision such as this’ and perhaps the answer is deliberately ambiguous, as is its moral message. It is this bleak psychological horrorscape that *Black Freighter* mirrors perfectly, giving voice to a deep and abiding wellspring of dread and cognitive dissonance. Estok’s discussion of reading ecophobia is apt:

‘Reading ecophobia means identifying the affective ethics a text produces, means having the willingness to listen to, to think about, and to see the values that are written into and that work through the representations of nature we imagine, theorize, and produce.’ (Estok, 2010: p.76; see also Estok, 2018)

If *Black Freighter* and, by extension, *Watchmen* is ecohorror and ecoGothic based on the themes and registers outlined above, then what are its affective ethics, and how do Gothic emotions and literary aesthetics promote them? It teaches us that a relentless focus on an imminent disaster creates a culture of paranoid precaution, be it the massacre of one’s family by pirates or the end of the world in nuclear fire.

In true Gothic style, fear of human frailties such mortality, sickness, death, ignorance leads to a technocratic solution: Ozymandias engineers world peace at the cost of free will. Only through the corresponding resonances of *Black Freighter* can we truly appreciate that this is every bit as monstrous an end as the mariner murdering the citizens of his hometown and terrorising his family, made hideous and deranged by absorption of a Gothic seascape. Survival is not salvation, but further damnation. The narrative teaches us that fear of death can lead to actions that are worse than death. Vogelaar et al. (2018) understand that the prospect of societal collapse can result in toxic and self-destructive emotional communities:

‘By anticipating an end, collapse orients us to the future in ways that may be problematic for the present: to think that there is no future risk embracing either hedonism or apathy; on the other hand, to focus too much on the future risks eliding or not acting in the present.’ (p. 2)

Only the one-man nuclear deterrent of Dr. Manhattan, belief in or fear of a new American super-being, has held off the psychological degeneration until *Watchmen*'s present. His actions have held off the inevitable: after all, as the Comedian put it, losing the Vietnam war would have driven America crazy as a country. The gift of real, failed, heroes to this world is the realisation that there is nobody to guard the guards, that Ozymandias is unaccountable, powerful, and utterly convinced of his moral right to avert apocalypse. He, like the mariner, has paid the cost for his sense of moral guardianship over a community. It is here, in the harsh critique of world peace and a Nietzschean *übermensch* able to bring it about, that the Gothic dwells most strongly. This sentiment is echoed by the last scene of *Black Freighter*, an image of a hand grasping from the water, taking the rope that leads to a life of eternal hell aboard the ship of the damned. The words: 'The world I'd tried to save was lost beyond recall. I was a horror: amongst horrors must I dwell' (XI, 23, 1).

Conclusion

The valorised figure of the superhero exists and is compromised by its encounter with *Watchmen*, extended to its natural conclusion of imperfection, disillusionment and irrelevance in the face of destruction. Something is needed to distract the people of this world from their fate: to thrill, to entertain, to horrify. It is the Gothic and, in the case of *Black Freighter*, the ecoGothic, that provides that escape for the figures of *Watchmen*'s parallel 1985. They, like the mariner whose travails they follow, are marooned in a terrible fashion, cut off from each other and enveloped in a suffocating climate of fear. The heroes, alienated and dysfunctional, are the most isolated of all. Because the medium of comic books is presented as the dominant metaphor for the suppressed existential horror of the society in which it is produced—just as superhero comics mirror and critique our own anxieties—Moore and Gibbons are making the Gothic themes of the microtext the language of the macrotext. Thus, the horror of *Black Freighter*'s ecological entanglements can say what the characters of *Watchmen* cannot, just as our cli-fi speaks for us in our own suffocating Anthropocene.

In the case of the ecoGothic, this means that a Gothic nature is exuded by a narrative world in which there is a macabre sense of wrongness and alienation, even when the source of that alienation is not a monster or monstrous in the traditional sense. A camp science fiction monster is concocted by Ozymandias through gruesome genetic experimentation to provide a real horror for the world to fixate upon, yet the real horrors are social in origin. This

environment cannot be fully understood unless translated into Gothic by a commentary upon it, just as ecocritics interpret the Gothic functions of texts and thus propagate new manifestations. Gothic is not defined by tropes alone, nor by emotions, but by compromised ideals. It dwells in the lacuna between ideal and hideous reality, between the world dreamt of and the nightmare of its realisation. It is not the 'evil' of *Watchmen* that makes it Gothic, but the sheer weight of corrupting influences at distorting work on the supposed protagonists. The scenario makes its own monstrosities.

The Gothic thrives when a narrator doubts or fails to explain and is deluded by their environment and their putative connection to other actors in it. The world is initially misunderstood, but a hint of its reality emerges, glimpse by nauseating glimpse. The *Watchmen* vein of Gothic is encapsulated by the image of the Comedian, a man blithely convinced that he knows how the world works and that others are fools, weeping at the foot of his former enemy Moloch's bed, baring his soul to a stranger because he has nobody else left to talk to. The Comedian is destroyed by the horror of realising that the Gothic is not funny, traumatised by the realisation that his place in the world is not what he imagined. He has stepped outside of the narrative in true post-modern style and seen that the machinations behind the screen are more hideous than anything he had imagined.

The two narratives recombine as the chapters of *Watchmen* count to twelve and the end comes. As Bernie the comic-reading street kid finishes his issue of *Black Freighter*, the world descends into conflict and madness around him. Only the arrival of Ozymandias's mutant destroyer can end the torment, wiping out half the population and the reader with them. The two Bernies die in an embrace as the old man attempts to shield the young man from the end; the narratives that they represent merge back together in the face of death. Their outlines become one, a grim nuclear shadow backed by blinding white light. They are consumed, and then there is nothing (XI, 28, 7-13). Later, we see their corpses on the street, bloodied and smoking but still intertwined (XII, 6, 1).

It is the technique of metatextual commentary, separating and intertwining and then merging in death, that brings the ecoGothic themes of *Watchmen* to light. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons understood the dark potential of their narrative but reasoned that an explicit articulation of these principles through a pseudo-text would be both biting postmodern and philosophically illuminating. By shedding an unwelcome and unforgiving light on internal

schisms and suppressed emotions, they reveal the unwholesome contours of our own self-delusions. In a late 2010s where the suffocating ennui of a fraught political climate has created an environment of suppressed paranoia and the threat of nuclear proliferation and Anthropocene climate change rear their heads and our heroes fail us, we are well-equipped to understand *Tales of the Black Freighter*. Sometimes the only way to represent horror is to transpose it.

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