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van Amelsvoort, Jesse

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Anxious about a Changing World: Twenty-First Century Low Countries Gothic Novels

Jesse van Amelsvoort

Culture, Language and Technology, University of Groningen, Campus Fryslân, Leeuwarden, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

As the representation of Western modernity's dark undercurrent, the Gothic novel has since its inception in the 1760s developed and transformed alongside that modernity. This paper looks at two contemporary Gothic novels from the Low Countries, Herman Franke's *Wolfstonen* (2003) and Saskia de Coster's *Wat alleen wij horen* (2015), which are occupied with contemporary globalisation and immigration to the Netherlands and Belgium. Both novels cast the apartment buildings that are central to their plots as Gothic spaces fraught with images of modern, globalised society, as well as widespread anxiety over societal cohesion in ethnically and culturally diverse cities. An interdisciplinary reading constituted by gothic and postcolonial reading practices brings to the fore new elements of the Dutch and Flemish cultural imaginary. It reveals the continuous renewal of the gothic itself, but also into the changes brought to the Low Countries as a result of globalisation and immigration. These have their effect on the construction of community, a process that is articulated in both the form and the content of the novels' narratives. Ultimately, I argue, the gothic is put to work in these novels as a way of dealing with the anxieties about and uncertainties of a postcolonial world.

KEYWORDS

Gothic novel; contemporary literature; Herman Franke; Saskia De Coster; space; modernity

Introduction

The Gothic novel emerged in a time of profound societal, cultural and intellectual change. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, widely considered to be the first Gothic novel, was published in 1764, which retroactively can be characterized as the height of Enlightenment. With *Otranto*, British literature found a way to thematize and engage with the anxieties produced as the result of rationalisation, modernisation and industrialisation. In its second printing, following a quickly sold-out first print, the book received the subtitle *A Gothic Story*, a descriptor as odd as it was innovative. In the middle of the Enlightenment – the age of science, reason and progress –, Walpole harkened back to the magic and occultism of the late Middle Ages to typify his narrative. Inspired by the architecture of the time, he rebelled against the privileging of reason and order over feelings and chaos. The novel, filled with knights, Catholic

CONTACT Jesse van Amelsvoort  j.d.van.amelsvoort@rug.nl  Campus Fryslân, University of Groningen, Sophialaan 1, 9711 AE, Leeuwarden, Netherlands

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clergymen and inexplicable events, introduced what would quickly become ‘classics’ of the Gothic repertoire.

Even a cursory glance at the literary history of the last 250 years reveals how the Gothic has endured since Walpole’s novel – and, indeed, expanded. Since the 1760s, the mode has developed and transformed into modernity’s fellow traveller (to borrow Jerrold Hogle’s term¹), always spotting those who cannot come along and who are at risk of being ignored or left behind. It comes as no surprise, then, that modern Low Countries literature can count a number of Gothic novels among its ranks. Rosemarie Buikema and Lies Wesseling have done impressive work in the past decade in identifying a corpus of Gothic literature written mostly by women writers.² Via the Gothic, they observe, these authors explored complex and often neglected or ignored histories. Buikema and Wesseling’s work has mostly focused on the twentieth century, beginning with Louis Couperus’ *De stille kracht* (1900) and ending with Renate Dorrestein and Vonne van der Meer’s writing during the 1990s. They end their study *Het heilige huis* (2006) with an altogether brief analysis of Herman Franke’s novel *Wolfstonen*, which was published just after the turn of the millennium, in 2003.³

Franke’s novel warrants more extensive, critical attention, not necessarily because it is formally innovative or because it sheds new light on the presence of the Gothic in Dutch literature, but rather because the novel’s engagement with integration, problematized some years earlier by politicians such as Frits Bolkestein and Pim Fortuyn and publicist Paul Scheffer,⁴ and a socially sustainable society shows well the possibilities of the Gothic to deal with twenty-first century societal tensions. In addition, it demonstrates how literature engages with political discussions held elsewhere in the national public sphere. A similar assessment can be made of Saskia de Coster’s *Wat alleen wij horen*,⁵ which deals with a comparable thematic terrain and explicitly references Franke’s novel. In this paper, I take up a comparative analysis of these two works. I will argue that both novels are instructive of the societal anxiety surrounding contemporary debates on multiculturalism and integration in the Low Countries. In other words, both put the Gothic to work to represent anxieties about a world changing as the result of post-Second World War migration to Western Europe. Thus, Franke and de Coster’s aesthetic intervention into a fraught socio-political debate draws on the Gothic to make its point.⁶

Reading What the Gothic Does

The Gothic, Agnes Andeweg asserts, ‘has proven to be an extremely mobile concept.’⁷ As the historical Gothic novel at the time of, or shortly after, *The Castle of Otranto* is quite different from its contemporary siblings, it is important to differentiate between the origins of Gothic writing mid-eighteenth century and the developments after that period. Put differently, as the Gothic always stages a conflict between history and the present, between the old and the new – between, we might say, the ‘Gothic,’ an at its inception already old-fashioned aesthetic style, and the ‘novel,’ an innovative literary form –, we must be attentive to the Gothic’s own history, too. This is not to say there are no similarities between the Gothic then and the Gothic now; rather, while the form of the Gothic has changed over the decades, what I would call its spirit has remained the same. That is, I read the Gothic novel as

a form of cultural critique which continuously adapts and responds to new societal and cultural realities.

The history of the Gothic is one of apparent enormous success. Walpole's fantastic tale enthused many writers to start publishing their own take on his mixture of romance, horror and adventure story. Until the 1820s, the British Isles were metaphorically flooded with Gothic novels, including such well-known works as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Famous Victorian novels such as *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and *Dracula* (1897) have also been productively read through the lens of the Gothic and, as a consequence, become some of the most well-known Gothic novels. Robert Mighall's suggestion to also include some of Charles Dickens' writings in the Gothic canon further proves how widespread the Gothic was during this era.⁸ In this history, the Gothic is a rather autonomous genre or mode of writing, to which certain works belong and from which others borrow to incite responses from their readers. In its early stages, then, we can say that the Gothic was an independent strand within British Romantic writing that only later would engage in cross-overs with other genres.

However, scholars have started to question this comfortable origin story. Anne Williams was among the first to write outside the confines of scholarly tradition, claiming that

[t]he Gothicists' creation myth serves, among other things, to establish the uniqueness of Gothic as a mode of fiction *sui generis*. In so doing, it imposes a kind of order on the chaos of the Gothic, but also, like other such "stories," serves vested critical interests.⁹

One vested critical interest Williams takes issue with concerns the protection of Romantic poetry: such highly regarded poetry was not to be confused with the simple Gothic romances of the period, thus obscuring important connections. Williams' work shows well how the Gothic was not necessarily highly regarded and instead carried little literary status. Romantic poetry was, and to a significant extent perhaps still is, considered among the best of British literature; any connection with popular, low status fiction was, therefore, to be ignored or denied. In *Art of Darkness*, Williams argues against these 'ghostly hermeneutic fictions' (AD, 10), looking instead at the manifestation of the Gothic throughout the literary landscape. Additionally, Williams also makes an important methodological point, which has consequences for Gothic criticism and interpretation: 'As long as we think of genre,' she writes, 'in terms of "drawing the line," of distinguishing between things *inherently* Gothic from things that are not, we will be trapped' (AD, 15). This is to say that Williams recognises that some writings might be said to be 'more' Gothic than others. Rather than considering whether a novel 'is' or 'is not' Gothic, thus instituting a binary logic, we might differentiate between degrees of Gothicism. Moreover, as the Gothic is 'pervasively organised around anxieties about boundaries' (AD, 16), there is a certain irony to critics occupying themselves with border-patrolling. The Gothic concerns itself with finding life in the dead, the unknown in the familiar, the wrong in the right: in such a world of continuous change and transformation, why insist on demarcation?

What is needed, then, is a concept that has enough analytical clarity and precision to be able to make sense of Gothic writing, without suffocating it. To that end, Williams

speaks of a 'poetic tradition' (*AD*, 1), while Fred Botting states that 'Gothic signifies a writing of excess.'¹⁰ Neither of these I would deem satisfactory, however, as both limit the usage of the term: Botting's use of the phrase 'writing,' for example, although appropriate in the context of this paper, constricts the Gothic to the literary form, which hinders a possible understanding of the Gothic in other art forms. I find Buikema and Wesseling's term 'cultural mode' more fruitful.¹¹ This term is more productive because it shifts the focus of analysis: as Andeweg says in her monograph on Dutch Gothic, in which she uses the term 'cultural strategy,'¹² we have to inquire 'not so much the question of what the Gothic *is* in contemporary literature, but what it *does*.'¹³ More than anything, this shift from a status to an activity is a critical reorientation. It is the beginning of a reading strategy, in which the critic adopts the perspective of the Gothic as an analytical tool. What this strategy emphasises is not the question of generic definition – what makes some literature Gothic –, but what this lens of interpretation brings us – what it shows us about a literary text. Such an approach is not interested in questions of boundaries and categories, as it understands that authors can draw on the Gothic to make it do certain work – as is the case of the novels studied in this paper, where it works to represent and give literary shape to societal anxieties surrounding multiculturalism.

Understanding the Gothic as an activity, rather than a status does not mean that it can go undefined. Indeed, it should not. As already suggested, as a cultural mode, it might have changed its appearance substantially over the past 250 years, but there are always recurring elements, motifs and themes. The mode's obsession with borders, boundaries and transgressions has been mentioned already, as has its preoccupation with histories, especially those forgotten in the present. A brief glance at the titles mentioned above shows us a broad array of monstrous or fear-inducing characters: from zombies and vampires to the undead, the returned-from-the-dead and the madwoman in the attic. Rather than being mere monsters, these figures are personalised transgressions, infused with fears for and anxieties about various 'Others'; as such; these types had wide resonance in then-contemporary culture. As a 'madwoman' in *Jane Eyre's* attic, Bertha Mason and her journey from the Caribbean into the heart of England, as well as her ultimate act of burning down Thornfield Hall, speaks to subconscious fears of invasion, contagion and danger of the colonial subject.¹⁴ Similarly, Lewis's horrifically evil titular monk stands for the threats emanating from supposedly backwards religion in the Enlightenment period.

In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic* (2014), Jerrold Hogle characterises these anxieties as the 'unresolved undercurrent of modernity.' The Gothic, he claims, is the thorn in modernity's side, which is expressed through its often conflicted and two-sided political nature:

The regressive *and* progressive nature of the Gothic has been *and remains* necessary to deal with the social unconscious of modern humanity in all its extreme contradictions spawned by its looking backward and forward so much of the time, even today. (...) the Gothic is endemic to the modern.¹⁵

The Gothic novel's constitutive oxymoron, its 'old new,' is central to the mode. I find Hogle's characterisation useful, as it shows how the Gothic is at one and the same time able to move forward along with society, concerned with whatever is topical at the time

of writing (be it imperial conquest, scientific progress, family make-up, or something else altogether), while always harking back to the past by virtue of its form and memory. It is not surprising that phrases such as ‘the return of the repressed’ and ‘sins of the father,’ linking historical relations with societal, moral and cultural taboos, are often linked to the Gothic. To write in the Gothic mode is to address the complexities and contrasts of modern desire and anti-desire. In this sense, Gothic heroes and monsters are always representations of larger groups, ideas or fears: Frankenstein’s monster stands for the potentially horrific and immoral consequences of modern science.¹⁶

Steven Bruhm identifies ‘the dynamics of family, the limits of rationality and passion, the definition of statehood and citizenship [and] the cultural effects of technology’ as central Gothic concerns, and contends that these apply to both classical and contemporary Gothic.¹⁷ This, then, is the Gothic, both old and new: modernity’s fellow traveller, always eager to point to those who cannot come along, who cannot participate in contemporary society and consequently run the risk of falling behind or being left out. It provides no clear answers or simple solutions to the questions it raises. Rather than showing a way out of the mess of contemporary society, the Gothic story is content with pointing at the cracks. As such, a Gothic novel is never one or the other, never this or that: it prefers both together, at the same time. This moral or political opacity, if you wish, is heightened by its ‘writing of excess,’ to recall Botting’s statement: the Gothic does not particularly care for stylistic realism – whether written or visual.

The Postcolonial Gothic: Unhomely Moments

In the previous section, we have seen that the Gothic is a mode that gives shape to societal anxieties and fears that stem from the forward-moving processes of modernisation and progress. It is a fundamentally ambiguous cultural mode, concerned with those who cannot partake in modernity and its projects, although it refrains from one-sidedly condemning either progress or conservative objections. In this section, I propose the ‘postcolonial Gothic’ mode as a way to understand *Wolfstonen* and *Wat alleen wij horen*.

The postcolonial Gothic comes in two guises: first, it concerns the reinterpretation of classic Gothic fictions through postcolonial criticism, showing their involvement in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries’ colonialism (this could be called the study of the Gothic’s ‘seminal early Orientalist texts’¹⁸); and second, the study of the adoption of Gothic themes and motifs in contemporary postcolonial writing. As such, it is both the making-colonial of established Gothic texts *and* the making-Gothic of established postcolonial texts. Thus, since the discipline’s inception in the early 2000s, it has added layers to then-contemporary Gothic criticism, uncovering the extent to which anxieties surrounding the expansion of empire pervaded the cultural imagination, as well as to postcolonial writing, detailing the intensity and force of colonialism’s residues.

In this paper, I understand the postcolonial Gothic in this second way. What kind of intellectual basis exists for such a conjuncture between postcolonialism and the Gothic? What is the added benefit of combing these two terms as one analytic? Andrew Smith and William Hughes suggest that ‘an historical examination of the

Gothic and accounts of postcolonialism indicate the presence of a shared interest in challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality.¹⁹ The Gothic's focus on feelings and the irrational contest the Enlightenment stress on rationality and cold analysis; these contestations are further strengthened by the mode's ambiguous nature, which questions at the same time that it can also confirm what is under scrutiny. In this uncertain space between the metaphors of the question mark and the exclamation point, the Gothic thrives.

Postcolonialism, meanwhile, takes issue with the particular kind of rational being the Enlightenment philosophers constructed and consequently presented as the universal emblem and subject of modernity. In a nutshell, this is the postcolonial project *par excellence*: contesting how Europe and its societies have come to be understood as universal and modern, that is, as the only way contemporary societies all over the world should be designed. Postcolonialism, then, works against this specific way of knowledge-production and prioritisation. Smith and Hughes put it as follows:

Postcolonialism helps to isolate images of Self and Other in such a way that they identify how a particular brand of colonial politics works towards constructing difference, whilst at the same time indicating the presence of the inherently unstable version of the subject on which such a politics rests. In other words, postcolonialism explains the Gothic's instabilities by other means.²⁰

In a different article, Smith and Hughes emphasise how postcolonialism and the Gothic work together on the same intellectual project. They write that

[t]here is a sense, though, in which the Gothic is, and has always been, post-colonial, and this is where, in the Gothic text, disruption accelerates into change, where the colonial encounter – or the encounter which may be read or interpreted through the colonial filter – proves a catalyst to corrupt, to confuse or to redefine the boundaries of power, knowledge and ownership.²¹

Taken together, we can understand postcolonialism and the Gothic as both engaging in a critique of the Western liberal, enlightened and secular subject and the accompanying conceptions of sameness and difference.

Additionally, Smith and Hughes note, Empire, which refers here to the pervasiveness of colonialism and imperialism in all aspects of life, 'in Gothic writings, is frequently conducted at a personal level,' where 'the invasive urge' manifests itself, in addition to its efforts to colonise public and political space.²² Thus, whereas a part of postcolonial theory focuses on the mutual constitution of larger, societal structures, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, imperialism, in the postcolonial Gothic Empire appears in smaller-scale units. That way, it resembles Homi Bhabha's recasting of Freud's 'uncanny' as the 'unhomely,' that moment when the world intrudes on and manifests itself in the home.²³ Ultimately, the unhomely moment invokes questions of legitimacy: these relate, as one commentator puts it, to 'one's right to occupy one place and not another, the origins of one's claims on property and the lives of others, one's capacity to possess something or to be dispossessed of something.'²⁴ In sum, the Gothic can be used in postcolonial contexts to forcefully problematise hegemonic Western modes of thinking, knowing and doing. A postcolonial Gothic reading can be understood as intersectional, in the sense that it does not prioritise one element over the other, but tries to make sense of both the Gothic mood and the postcolonial thematic by thinking them together.

Postcolonial *Fremdkörper*: *Wolfstonen*

In Buikema and Wesseling's brief statement, Herman Franke's fourth novel *Wolfstonen* attempts to translate 'with the help of conventions of the Gothic tale the postcolonial twenty-first century Dutch multicultural drama into a classic class struggle.'²⁵ In this section, I will expand on this statement and argue that through the Gothic the voices of various socio-economic groups that are otherwise not always heard in postcolonial Europe's 'multicultural dramas' are represented and heard. *Wolfstonen* stages the struggle over the power of definition in contemporary societies as a conflict between the residents of a newly built apartment building and their working-class neighbours.

At the centre of *Wolfstonen* is a large apartment building, built to fill a gap in a row of run-down nineteenth-century houses in a multicultural, working-class neighbourhood. The building is designed by an architect fond of postmodern, playful features: rooms have rounded corners and the centrally placed bedrooms contain raised 'love seats.' The building's common space is also adorned with oddities: for example, the central staircase is transparent and located in a hall made of glass. From the start, the neighbours do not like this 'monument of postmodern playfulness'²⁶: '[t]he building had cold-bloodedly wrenched itself between the old houses, remorselessly different in building style and choice of materials' (W 7).²⁷ The new building is out of place in the neighbourhood – and more so psychological than physical.

The building is meant as a 'social injection' (W 11)²⁸ into the dilapidated neighbourhood. The more expensive apartments, the city council had hoped, would attract residents with more means than those already living in the area. As Buikema and Wesseling state, with an understandable irony, such an assumption was at the time exemplary of integration thinking. And so, a group of eight well-educated, well-to-do members of the (upper) middle-class moves to the building: Ista, a psychologist and lecturer, who reluctantly takes it upon himself to be the housemaster, and Angolie, a translator from French, live together on the ground floor. Across the hall lives an old couple, the Forstenalts, pensioners who are frequently confronted with Mr Forstenalt's war memories. Above these two couples live four singles: the violinist Elto, who wants to capture in music the purest possible emotion; Mernin, a journalist; Paulice, who descends into madness after breast surgery; and Vartor, an architect and PhD student, writing a history of failed inventions. *Wolfstonen* follows the lives of these people, as they become more and more disturbed by the sounds reverberating through their houses.

Recently, Gloria Wekker has criticised the Dutch self-representation of a good and tolerant people, and an associated attitude of not thoroughly interrogating racial discrimination, under the banner of white innocence.²⁹ Debates on what is sometimes called 'Dutch tolerance' have in recent years centred on the heavily racialised figure of Black Pete, but have a much longer history. In the early 2000s, in the wake of the murders on politician Pim Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo van Gogh and the subsequent increase of electoral support for far-right political parties, the Dutch self-image as an exceptionally open and tolerant country was intensively discussed. *Wolfstonen* can be placed in the context of discussions on Paul Scheffer's 'multicultural drama,' that is, the perceived failure of mostly Moroccan and Turkish guest workers and their children to integrate into Dutch society.

Ista has barely met all his neighbours when, upon returning home, Angolie says that she will ‘go crazy if that pounding doesn’t stop’ (W 24).³⁰ On both sides of the building, neighbours have started practising for a boxing match that is organised to further integration in the neighbourhood: on one side, a group of migrants practises, and next to Ista and Angolie’s apartment a man called Nander leads the autochthonous men. To address the issue, Ista goes to his neighbour, whom he has imagined as something of a brute. When he faces his neighbour, he is thrown off balance:

Heavily breathing, [Nander] piercingly looked at Ista. Ista was hit most forcefully by the tender, silver necklace, from which hang a small golden cross. On his chest, which radiated aggression and invincibility, that symbol of human suffering looked absurd, as if a Star of David was pinned on a Nazi uniform. (W 52)³¹

It is worth reflecting on this passage for some length. This is one of the first of *Wolfstonen*’s many misunderstandings: moments when characters try to act upon their preconceived notions of the world and find that these do not describe reality, as well as a moment of transgression. The order that Ista established for himself falls apart: such a frail necklace on that aggressive man! These moments, with the possibility of exchanging ideas and encountering each other anew, bear convivial potential.³² Yet this is not the case, as time and again characters retreat back to familiar territory and away from the encounter with the other. When, at the end of a laborious conversation on jobs and mortgages, the parameters of which seem to be set by Nander, Ista asks if he could practise against another wall, they quickly fall silent. Nander seems upset that Ista wishes to leave almost immediately afterwards, although, uttering the clichéd words ‘vrijheid, blijheid’ (W 58), he gives in. The question that remains is whose freedom this is: only Ista’s, or also Nander’s?

This is one example of the multiple transgressions *Wolfstonen*’s narrative directs at its characters. Even though Ista’s intervention was successful only for a short while – Nander and his team quickly resume practising against the wall –, the deeper implications of the conversation are initially obscured by the novel’s narrative structure. Although the narrator focalises through the residents of the apartment building and through the nymph-like children Milla and Jacho, nowhere does the perspective switch to any or some of the supposedly problematic neighbours – characters like Nander who, having lost their illusions about decades-long political talk of equality, grow angry at the way they are treated. Their voices remain silent, a narrative trick that emphasises the way in which the apartment building residents frequently respond to their neighbours’ actions without knowing their motivations and reasons for acting the way they do. Rather than listening or engaging in a dialogue, they interpret other characters’ actions through their own mental schemes – that is, they effectively think up themselves what others around them are saying. This practice might resonate particularly in this time of filter bubbles, yet the absence of other voices – of those who do not belong to the same group or social class – in the novel is menacing and unsettling.

However, crucially, these voices do not remain silent as the novel progresses. The various sounds that impinge on the residents’ lives may be untraceable, but within the framework of the Gothic they are far from inexplicable. To understand this, we have to take a look at the last pages of the novel, when the source of the noise pollution becomes clear in a most Gothic fashion. When a brass band starts playing loud music to

accompany the neighbours' riotously protesting against the residents and the 'beehive,' as the residential structure has come to be called, everybody inside can hear it – even violinist Elto, who has turned his bedroom into a soundproof studio. The 'acoustic madhouse' (W 490)³³ reverberates with all earlier sonic intrusions that have haunted the house and the novel, as well as the residents' anger and unsuccessful efforts to cancel out the noise. *Wolfstonen*'s closing scenes make explicit what has until then been implicit: the sounds are symbolic representations of the outside world, transgressions of inside and outside, manifestations of the world in the home. The residents' efforts to insulate themselves and retreat from the noise, meanwhile, constituted nothing more than their moves in an unwinnable cat-and-mouse-game. The world cannot be shut out, the problems of the day cannot be ignored.

In *Wolfstonen*, noise is not just noise, but in fact the symbolic translation and enlargement of social relations. The ways in which the residents try to block the sounds throughout the novel 'function as icons for the way in which the cultured elite attempt to safeguard their own privileged niche in society by closing their eyes to the sordid reality of the outside world.'³⁴ Yet as *Wolfstonen* demonstrates, that sordid, multicultural reality does not stay quiet; in fact, its' screams become louder and louder as time progresses, and efforts to do away with it grow more pronounced.

This is one element of the Dutch 'multicultural drama': lawmakers, politicians and civil society are time and again confronted with the legacy and consequences of absent or failing integration policies decades before. Yet the way they act upon and attempt to remedy these faulty policies seldom leads to positive outcomes; rather than providing solutions, ill-conceived boxing matches and building projects such as those we encounter in *Wolfstonen* end up providing more problems. The tensed attempts to ameliorate the multicultural drama contribute to a downward spiral, out of which no escape is possible. In the end, the novel's central space, the modernist apartment building, has gone up in flames, its inhabitants either dead or gone.

Change and Connection in *Wat Alleen Wij Horen*

Saskia de Coster's novel *Wat alleen wij horen* contains a number of intertextual references to *Wolfstonen*. It is again a novel that is set in an apartment building, this time called the Atlas building, in which a diverse group of residents is hindered by sounds seemingly coming from everywhere. Its city is said to be built on 'solid little European customs,' which 'has always opened the door to growth and progress, but now bursts at the seams due to the influx of new people who don't share her history' (WH 7).³⁵ This provides the novel with an explicitly postcolonial framework of (mass) migration, in which questions of conviviality, living together and cultural hybridity gain prominence. In my reading, the novel is concerned with the distinction between the individual and the collective, the particular and the common.

The 90-year-old Atlas building does not conform to contemporary energy norms anymore, and will, therefore, be demolished. The building is home to over 120 people, and the novel follows their initial fight against the corporation simply known as 'the Firm' and their later resignation to their fate. This time, the forces besieging the residents are not their working-class neighbours (as it is in *Wolfstonen*); rather, it is

the outside world of neoliberal economy and modernity. The rationale for their evacuation, after all, is purely economic and bent on maximising profit.

The news brings out various reactions among the building's residents, which stem from different answers to the question what they can do faced with decisions that seem set in stone. What, in such a situation, is their agency? In the title-less first chapter (all subsequent chapters bear the name of one, or more, of the characters), the narrator sees the city as an 'everlasting story of change and desire' (WH 8).³⁶ This change, a constant influx of new ideas and people, is a potent force to keep the city moving forward, but on an individual level, the consistent change can also be threatening and disquieting, certainly if its effects are uprooting and forced movement. The question that the residents find themselves faced with, is if they can formulate a common response on behalf of all residents in which they let the Firm know they do not agree with them being forced to find a new place to live.

The novel primarily follows the situation of Melanie, an editor at the national public radio, and her son Claus, George and his wife Abigail, Anton, the janitor of the building, and his sister Erin, a writer. At the end of each of the novel's part, a chapter called 'De anderen,' 'The Others,' a contemporary chorus from ancient Greek tragedies, gives a voice to some of the other residents. Among these are a Moroccan family, a Polish handyman, a young Asian female dancer and a Greek music teacher. Hailing from various countries and continents, they are the most explicit signs of the city's attraction as a migratory destination. *Wat alleen wij horen* zooms in on important moments in the residents' lives: the young dancer quitting her job after almost being hit by a falling lamp, or the handyman hearing he will not be of service anymore, for example. All these little stories revolve around and thematise change and movement, often the change that will also come to the Atlas building.

A returning element in the novel is the parakeet, sometimes a single bird, sometimes a larger flock. Although the birds come and go at their own convenience, every character imagines having a special relationship with them. Thus, these parakeets are one form of connection between the various stories that *Wat alleen wij horen* weaves together. They make their appearance in various chapters, connecting them while also suggesting that change is itself a connecting tissue or a red thread in the city. However, the novel's final scene, in which a single parakeet flies out of the building as it collapses, suggests instead that the birds have a special relationship with the building: 'He has seen and heard it all, nothing gets lost' (WH 316).³⁷ In what is perhaps an allusion to Gerard van het Reve's seminal post-war novel *De avonden*, we get a message of both eternal change and preservation. As birds who are capable of moving across or even without boundaries, the parakeets are metaphors of the kind of migration that has shaped the novel's fictional city throughout the centuries.

This notion of constant change is expressed most forcefully towards the end of the novel: 'The whole world moves and migrates. People flood each other's beaches and occupy places that were declared uninhabitable ages ago. They want to build nests there where the birds once started' (WH 233).³⁸ Here, *Wat alleen wij horen* proposes that everybody is affected by changes in society that result from, among other things, migration – and it does so arguably via a reference to a seminal early Dutch text, 'Hebban olla vogala'. Linguistically, this text is already a sign of change; however, the allusion to this old literary work in a contemporary novel reinforces the notion that the

world is in a constant flux. In the long run, change is inevitable. The passage quoted also refers to Europe as a postcolonial place that encompasses all of (Western) Europe and is characterised by change and the (perceived) difficulty of making connections.³⁹ As Achille Mbembe eloquently argues, this difficulty stems from a neoliberal logic that recasts colonial governance strategies in the present and threatens to commodify citizens and play them out against each other.⁴⁰ In a world where people flood each other's beaches, the task becomes exploring ways of constituting what Paul Gilroy has termed 'conviviality': living together without racism, discrimination and exclusion.

Most of the sounds in *Wat alleen wij horen* have a clear and traceable origin, as they are produced by the residents themselves or by the city around them. However, some are the titular sounds only the residents can hear. The most disturbing of the novel's sounds are not produced by the characters or by economic activity; rather, they have untraceable origins. I suggest the novel's title refers to these sounds, as they are only heard by the residents. Melanie is the first to notice an 'annoying, distant bleep' (WH 70).⁴¹ Later, various residents profess to suffer from 'strange ear rustlings' (WH 90).⁴² George looks at the building's and the city's light bulbs as the source of the bleeps or rustlings, thinking that 'together [they] make for one large dissonant concert. Without a conductor, with only soloists' (WH 159).⁴³ This metaphor is an interesting one, as it recalls the residents' continuing (and failing) efforts to formulate a joint response to the request to leave: here, too, nobody manages to unite the people and make them reach a conclusion. Instead, everybody plays for him- or herself and atomistically tries to optimise their own situation. Thus, this artistic metaphor points to a missing sense of community among the residents and, more broadly speaking, the city. Simultaneously, in the unhomely moment created by the sound, the outside world breaks in on the home, reminding the Atlas building's residents of a society that has come to prefer money and efficiency over personal relations of attachment.

As can be expected from a novel borrowing many of its elements from the Gothic, the sounds slowly nestle in the residents' lives. Melanie feels that they have become part of her body, 'echo[ing] through her and harm[ing] her body from the inside she feels how it hollows her out' (WH 191).⁴⁴ The narrator recognises the progressive embedding of the sound in the characters' lives by ironically noting it 'has made a career for itself' (WH 192).⁴⁵ Their persistence is rationalised via explanations that turn wilder and wilder: from ghosts of former residents resisting the building's destruction to a symbolic representation of the city's smog and overpopulation and the bursting of the city's fundamentals, all of these refer to common Gothic tropes and explications.

Interestingly, in its representation of the effects of the continuous sonic intrusions, the novel starts to increasingly refer to *Wolfstonen*: when one of 'the Others' states that even in a sound-proof room one will hear all kinds of things, we recall Elto's efforts to isolate himself. In the same vein, as the sounds progressively become more commanding of life in the (in the meantime almost emptied) Atlas building, Anton hears the 'echoes of the building,' and Melanie thinks that the building 'embraces' its emptiness, 'swallows all sounds and casts [them] back hundred-fold' (WH 251, 270).⁴⁶ As the residents leave, the sounds take over, controlling ever larger parts of the lives of those who still live in the building. Those who value interpersonal relations the most are faced with ever more powerfully resounding noise. Though there is no direct link with a colonial past, the (societal) forces that oppose the residents in *Wat alleen wij horen*

make use of similar practices that colonial European forces used to motivate and execute their violent overseas expansions. In that constellation, postcolonial Europe emerges as a space that in the past exploited and dominated their colonies, but in the present has also initiated the process within European metropolises, the former centres of imperial power.

The Atlas building residents fail to form a unified front against the organisation known as ‘the Firm,’ and one by one they start to leave. The first cracks in the residents’ unity already occurred earlier. When Melanie says to a fellow resident they need to form a unified front, she replies saying ‘I’ll see what I can do, but I am ...’ (WH, 70).⁴⁷ Sensing where she is heading, Melanie contends that everybody is busy, and goes on to argue that things will be even busier when they have to move. This exchange hints at a problematic relationship between the collective and the individual, in which the former is constantly undermined by the latter. To Melanie’s dismay, some residents prefer to occupy themselves with leaking taps and broken lights, instead of focussing on the scandal that they will all be homeless within a few months. Here, we can see a fusion and frustration of private and communal concerns: short-term, individual goals triumph over long-term, communal goals. The same process can be observed in Melanie’s own behaviour, who, despite being the driving force behind the opposition to the Firm, ultimately also moves to the new building that is being built across the street – with, as promised, quite a discount. She takes pride in having slowed down the process and the Firm’s ‘implacable profit seeking.’ ‘Our battle was not in vain,’ she concludes (WH, 292).⁴⁸ The outcome of the battle, however, seems to lie somewhere else. In the novel, it remains unclear whether or not and to what extent the Firm suffered financial losses as a result of the residents’ opposition; yet what is certain, is that Melanie and some of the other residents who waited the longest with moving are the ones who are able to benefit from the Firm’s gesture. Those who made the best of a bad bargain come out on the losing end. Thus, in *Wat alleen wij horen*, there is the constant suggestion that the only result of communal battles can be individual gains. Relations of attachment, in this particular case to the private and communal space of the Atlas building, are of no value in the Firm’s neoliberal logic. Rather than renovating the building, it has chosen for the cheaper option: to demolish it and replace the building with a new one – a copy, most likely.

After all, the building built on the other side of the road, opposite to the Atlas building, is described as of ‘the same type’ (WH, 287).⁴⁹ For the residents, everything changes, but not the preferences of big money: those remain the same. Finding himself in a different city, George, on a flight probably caused by dementia, finds his surroundings ‘strangely familiar’ (WH, 307)⁵⁰ and the two cities interchangeable. This is, of course, the Gothic trope of the *unheimlich*, reproduced on a larger scale: not the *Heim*, home, resembles itself, but a whole city is made strangely familiar, or familiarly strange. In that move, ‘nonplaces’ which offer no ‘identity, relations and history’⁵¹ block the production of ties based on affection; thus stripped of particularities, they become interchangeable clones. *Wat alleen wij horen*, then, stages the difficult relationships between the individual and his or her community in a world whose rules are dictated by anonymous and unaccountable corporations. Communities face pressure to move along in processes which are outside their control and which do not take earlier formed, personal connections into consideration. Yet the novel also suggests that in an

uncertain world these connections are in fact necessary: they guarantee an embeddedness and being-at-ease for people. The Gothic, here, sides with the voiceless who find a value in their home that cannot be expressed in terms of money. Yet they, too, will eventually move and change their lives.

Conclusion

Looking at *Wolfstonen* and *Wat alleen wij horen* through the lens of the Gothic shows how Dutch-language literature has situated itself in early twenty-first century discussions on migration and integration. Both novels pay attention to those who cannot participate in, or are left out of, the project of modernity and progress; specifically, they thematise the consequences of changing demographics on modern Western metropolis. The presence of (former) immigrants and multiculturalism is explored through the Gothic space of the apartment building in which the main characters live. Sonic intrusions serve in both novels as reminders of an outside world: *Wolfstonen* presents the élite, those who are theoretically most likely to support multiculturalism and immigration, as the people who seek shelter from the world and err in their judgement, while *Wat alleen wij horen* focuses on the people and the stories that resist and are consequently crushed in the search for efficiency and monetary savings. Notions of home and belonging are contrasted with appeals to flexibility: to accept daily (re) negotiations of space and life style in *Wolfstonen*, and to move along without spatial attachments in *Wat alleen wij horen*. Change happens, without an eye for who can come along and who cannot.

Both novels end on a pessimistic note. The destruction of *Wolfstonen*'s central building is a violent end for the tone-deaf élite and forecloses the discussion on migration and integration as it had been taking place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, while the destruction of *Wat alleen wij horen*'s Atlas building signals the continued dominance of money and economic thinking. Post-Second World War migration to Western Europe has profoundly shaped host societies and political discourse in the past decades. *Wolfstonen* and *Wat alleen wij horen* show how Dutch-language literature engages with these developments, and to express societal anxieties around demographic and cultural change they resort to the Gothic.

Notes

1. Hogle, "Introduction," 10.
2. Buikema and Wesseling, *Het heilige huis*; Buikema and Wesseling, "Contesting Consensus Culture," 123–41; Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon*; Andeweg, "How the Gothic Reared Its Head in Dutch Literature." and Andeweg, "Time and Again," 68–84. See also Buikema, *Revoltes in de cultuurkritiek*, 65–82.
3. Franke, *Wolfstonen*. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *W*.
4. Scheffer, "Het multiculturele drama."
5. de Coster, *Wat alleen wij horen*. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *WH*.
6. Interestingly, the Portuguese writer António Lobo Antunes also recently published a novel set in an apartment building that makes use of Gothic tropes and techniques to investigate Portugal's colonial and dictatorial past: Antunes, *Caminha Como uma Casa em Chamas*.
7. Andeweg, "How the Gothic Reared Its Head in Dutch Literature," 129.

8. Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*.
9. Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 10. Original emphasis. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *AD*.
10. Botting, *Gothic*, 1.
11. Buikema and Wesseling, *Het heilige huis*, 12. Original Dutch: “culturele modus.” All subsequent translations from the Dutch are mine.
12. Andeweg, *Griezelig gewoon*, 19. Original Dutch: “culturele strategie.”
13. *Ibid.*, 11. Original Dutch: “[Het gaat mij] . . . niet zozeer om de vraag wat het gotieke is in hedendaagse literatuur, maar wat het dóét.”
14. See, for instance, Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” 243–61; Lerner, “Bertha and the Critics,” 273–300.
15. Hogle, “Introduction,” 7. Original emphasis.
16. Mellor, “Frankenstein, Racial Science, and the Yellow Peril,” 1–28.
17. Bruhm, “The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It,” 259.
18. Hughes and Smith, “Introduction,” 2.
19. Smith and Hughes, *Empire and the Gothic*, 1.
20. *Ibid.*, 4.
21. Hughes and Smith, “Introduction,” 1.
22. *Ibid.*, 2.
23. Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” 141–53.
24. Gelder, “The Postcolonial Gothic,” 196.
25. Buikema and Wesseling, *Het heilige huis*, 104. Original Dutch: “met behulp van de conventies van de gotieke vertelling het postkoloniale eenentwintigste-eeuwse Nederlandse multiculturele drama in een klassieke klassenstrijd.”
26. Buikema and Wesseling, “Contesting Consensus Culture”, 135.
27. Original Dutch: “Het gebouw had zich brutaalweg tussen de oude huizen gewrongen, meedogenloos afwijkend in bouwstijl en materiaalkeuze.”
28. Original Dutch: “sociale injectie”.
29. Wekker, *White Innocence*.
30. Original Dutch: “Als dat gebons niet ophoudt, word ik gek.”
31. Franke, *Wolfstonen*. Original Dutch: “Zwaar ademend keek hij Ista aan. Maar het sterkst trof Ista het iele, zilverkleurige halskettinkje waaraan een gouden kruisje hing. Op zijn borstkas die een en al aanvalslust en onoverwinnelijkheid uitstraalde, kreeg het symbool van menselijk lijden iets ongerijmds, alsof er een jodenster op een nazi-uniform gespeld was.”
32. Gilroy, *After Empire*.
33. Franke, *Wolfstonen*. Original Dutch: “akoestisch gekkenhuis”.
34. Buikema and Wesseling, “Contesting Consensus Culture”, 136.
35. Original Dutch: “op solide Europese gewoontjes gebouwd,” “heeft altijd de deur opengezet voor groei en vooruitgang, maar nu barst ze uit haar voegen door de toevloed aan nieuwe mensen die haar geschiedenis niet delen.”
36. Original Dutch: “een eeuwigdurend verhaal van verandering en verlangen.”
37. Original Dutch: “Hij heeft alles gehoord en gezien, niets gaat verloren.”
38. Original Dutch: “De hele wereld is in beweging en migreert. Mensen overspoelen elkaars stranden en bezetten plaatsen die eeuwen geleden onbewoonbaar waren verklaard. Ze willen nesten bouwen waar de vogels ooit begonnen zijn.”
39. Ponzanesi and Colpani, *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe*.
40. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*.
41. Original Dutch: “vervelende, verre pieptoon”.
42. Original Dutch: “rare oorsuizingen”.
43. Original Dutch: “[zij] zorgen samen voor één groot dissonant concert. Zonder dirigent, met enkel solisten.”
44. Original Dutch: “het galmt door haar heen en tast haar lichaam vanbinnen aan, ze voelt hoe het haar uitholt”.

45. Original Dutch: “heeft carrière gemaakt”.
46. Original Dutch: “echo’s van het gebouw” and “omarmt,” “alle geluiden inslikt en honderdvoudig terugkaatst”.
47. Original Dutch: “Ik zal zien wat ik kan doen maar ik heb ...”
48. Original Dutch: “onverbiddelijke winstbejag,” “Onze strijd is zeker niet voor niets geweest.”
49. Original Dutch: “hetzelfde type”.
50. Original Dutch: “merkwaardig vertrouwd”.
51. Ponzanesi, “The Non-Places of Migrant Cinema in Europe,” 689.

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Notes on contributor

Jesse van Amelsvoort is a PhD candidate at the University of Groningen/Campus Fryslân.

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