

Review of Paulina Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*

Posted by [Xavier Aldana Reyes](#) on February 06, 2012 in [Blog](#), [Reviews](#) tagged with [Paulina Palmer](#), [Queer Uncanny](#)

Paulina Palmer's *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012)

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Paulina Palmer's *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (University of Wales Press, 2012) was, quite simply, necessary. Since a recent upsurge of interest in determining the cross-pollination of Queer Theory and the Gothic culminated in George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* (2004) and a specialised issue of *Gothic Studies* (2005), various articles have been concerned with either tracing an alternative queer Gothic canon or providing queer readings of texts previously considered of exclusive heteronormative interest (Ellis Hanson 2007).¹ Queerness in such studies has often been described in terms reminiscent of Freud's writings on the uncanny, connecting ideas such as the heimlich/unheimlich dyadic with the position queer desire normally occupies in the heterosexual world order. For example, William Hughes and Andrew Smith in their collection *Queering the Gothic* (2009), to which Palmer also contributed a chapter, explain that 'to be queer is to be different, yet it is also to be unavoidably associated with the non-queer, the normative which, though it implicitly represses through the mechanisms of conformist culture, may yet serve as the catalyst to liberation' (p. 3). This liminal and unstable zone which queer identities inhabit, as well the disruptive potential of their non-conformist practices, is the starting point for Palmer's book. Whereas her previous work on lesbian Gothic (1999) aimed to map the skeleton of a chiefly neglected canon, Palmer dedicates her most recent critical intervention to exploring the theoretical relevance of the uncanny as a pervading motif in contemporary literature.

The Queer Uncanny is, as such, not necessarily a study on Queer Gothic, although its pages necessarily refer to texts that could be contained by that label. Instead, it

addresses the cultural import of an incredibly varied number of novels that have used the Gothic, and more specifically uncanny motifs, as a tool for 'represent[ing] facets of queer sexuality and experience and society's response to them' (p. 3). Particularly noteworthy are Palmer's selection of texts, which avoids the predominant Eurocentric bias associated with queer writing, and the plethora of theoretical approaches she employs. *The Queer Uncanny* thus covers anything from Jeanette Winterson and Alan Hollinghurst's literary experiments to more comic works by Paul Magrs and Ellen Galford, and less well-known African American or Caribbean writers like Randall Kenan or Shani Mootoo. Similarly, the book considers both obviously Gothic texts like Patrick McGrath's *Dr Haggard's Disease* (1993), but also works like Winterson's *The PowerBook* (2001), which exploits certain motifs that have been traditionally connected with that genre. *The Queer Uncanny* also straddles between the close reading of plots in order to expose the queer latency in texts more generally susceptible to a heterosexual reading, like James Purdy's *Mourners Below* (1981), and the ways in which theory can elucidate key passages in them. With respect to the latter, Palmer's application of Derrida's concept of the 'phantom text' in her analysis of Christopher Brahm's *Father of Frankenstein* (1995) and Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) makes for a notably lucid discussion of their intertextuality.

The Queer Uncanny is structured around four main chapters that chart 'the infiltration of motifs and images with uncanny resonance into queer theory' (p. 13). With that project in mind, chapter one is devoted to the notion of secrecy and the coming to light of what should have been kept hidden, one of Freud's main formulations of the *unheimlich*. The prevalence of silenced 'deviant' sexualities that have somehow surfaced is given due consideration. By focusing on how coming out and AIDS narratives utilize the disclosure motif and their detrimental consequences, Palmer paves the way for her second chapter, which tracks spectral fictions. Another uncanny token, the figure of the ghost has proved an incredibly productive form of representation for queerness: it both suggests marginality, invisibility and border-crossing (life and death). Following the work of Judith Butler and Diana Fuss, Palmer provides one of the most satisfying sections in her reading of *Mourner's Below* and Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) and the aforementioned discussion on the notion of 'phantom text'. Doubling, and its relevance to transsexual narratives like Stella Duffy's *Beneath the Blonde* (1997), is also considered, providing an interesting counter-part to the lack of absence of the spectral subject. Chapter three, entitled 'Place and Space', does not completely abandon the phantasmatic theme in its initial look at the legacy of the haunted house, which in narratives like Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* (1996) is the home of queer ghosts. Palmer's discussion of uncanny geographies takes her to consider the notion of the metropolis, which has been relevant to Victorian studies of the Gothic. Arguing that the big city acts as a liberating yet monitored space, she progresses to consider the importance of rituals as anchored to a time and place. If the need for such ceremonies has manifested in LGBT groups through marches and pride days, Palmer's consideration of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and H. Nigel Thomas' *Spirits in the Dark* (1987) investigates how rituals can have their darker, more personal side. The last chapter centres on the discourse of monstrosity often been used to stigmatise the queer. Palmer concentrates her reading on contemporary writers who have challenged the social logic that accepts only certain identities as human by reappropriating monstrosity from a comic perspective.

As should be obvious from Palmer's textual and critical choices, if previous studies have focused on uncovering 'the queer in Gothic' (Hughes and Smith 2009: 4), *The Queer Uncanny* is more preoccupied with delineating the Gothic in queer, that is, the specific narrative strategies used by contemporary queer texts to explore difference. Palmer's argument is clear: the uncanny has provided fertile ground for writers attempting to negotiate the intricacies of the queer experience. For that reason, *The Queer Uncanny* is not only an interesting intervention in Gothic scholarship, but also to queer literary criticism. Proving that queer writing is very much in currency, Palmer manages to impress the urgency of such writing and the need to recast its relation to the uncanny as not tangential but endemic to queer existence. She proposes in her conclusion that, whilst concerned with similar ideas, lesbian and male gay writing generally avoid combined portrayals of queer desire, and that, as a result of queer influence, the two might merge and interrelate. Palmer's closing question, 'what role will the uncanny, and perceptions and sensations relating to it, play in the "slantwise" fictions [lesbian and gay male] fictions produce?' (p. 187) might be answered by looking back at the book itself. Perhaps the uncanny will act as this desirable hybridising agent.

1. Note that I am not implying that queer readings of, or approaches to, the Gothic are exclusively a child of the noughties. As Hanson has noted, 1980s texts like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* already dedicated two chapters to the study of homosociality in Gothic novels.

University of Catalonia, 2011) and the AHRC-funded project 'Bodies of Work' (online component, 2010). An article on surgical horror and 'The Skin I Live in' is currently under consideration by 'The Bulletin of Hispanic Studies' (University of Liverpool). Xavier is the Academic Coordinator of the International Summer Programme at Lancaster University (for the 'British Culture and Literature 1800-2000' course).