

Review Essay

Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions

By Paulina Palmer

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Paulina Palmer's *Lesbian Gothic* is a survey of a genre of writing that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. While the Gothic has metamorphosed into many forms since its origins in the latter half of the eighteenth-century, lesbian Gothic is a twentieth-century phenomenon. In terms of contexts, therefore, lesbian Gothic is aligned with the rise of lesbian collectives and movements, new discourses on sexuality and AIDS, and queer theory.

Palmer maps the changing configurations of the Gothic, including the ghost story, the Gothic thriller, the tale of terror, and some varieties of the grotesque tale. Lesbian Gothic transforms, as Palmer's own narrative seems to suggest, each of these genres. Recent theories of identity – most notably poststructuralist feminist, best represented by the work of Judith Butler – have provided Palmer with ready critical approaches to handle the extremely amorphous, highly intertextual genre of the lesbian gothic.

Lesbian Gothic finds its major themes in the Female Gothic and feminist fiction: women's problematic relationship with her own body, female sexuality and its 'transgressions', and female bonding. Further, stereotypes of woman-as-victim, woman-as-haunted or women-as-hero from the Female Gothic, figure in modified forms in lesbian Gothic. However, this is not to suggest that, like soap operas on television, lesbian Gothic has a mind-numbing uniformity about its texts. As Palmer is quick to caution us, writers in this genre use different strategies to deal with lesbian Gothic themes of abjection, melancholia, victimization and female sexuality. Feminist realist writers such as Nancy Toder challenge homophobia through a direct confrontation of the image as they 'normalize' the lesbian. Others appropriate poststructuralist strategies of parody and carnival to reveal the constructed nature of homophobic images, while presenting the excesses within lesbian sexuality as potentially empowering. Lesbian Gothic revises conventional narrative patterns and character stereotypes, and thus reinvents the role of the witch, the vampire and the spectre.

Opening her literary reading with the various configurations of the image of the witch, supernatural visitations and the established misogynist image of the spinster, Palmer argues that the fiction of Djuna Barnes (*Nightwood*) and Sylvia Townsend Warner (*Lolly Willowes*) foreground the transgressive aspect of witchcraft. Noting that Mary Daly's image of the witch as a lesbian feminist icon has been heavily influential on lesbian gothic, Palmer sees writers such as La Tourette and Sarah Maitland (who jointly produced *Weddings and Funerals*) as utilizing the term 'witch' as a synonym

for the lesbian feminist and as a metaphor for the attributes of female strength and rebelliousness. Emma Tennant (*The Bad Sister*) and Barbara Hanrahan (*The Albatross Muff*), however, present a not-avowedly heroic image of the witch (which is how Daly treats her). They explore, rather, the curious link between the witch and the hysteric. The witch is one who is marginal, a menacing figure who, because of her other worldly connections has both generative and annihilative powers. These writers explore the monstrous lesbian witch itself as what one may term a 'heterosexual effect'. Oppressive structures of patriarchal family/society construct specific visions of motherhood, female roles and procreative sex. Lesbian Gothic tales subvert these images and roles and hence constitute a transgressive genre. The witch is a figure patriarchal culture cannot accept. However, instead of countering the patriarchal-heterosexist (or, to simply make up a concept-metaphor for the intimate – pun intended – link between these two: patriheterosexist) demonization of the witch with images of the witch-as-hero, writers such as Jeanine Allard seek to present the witch's creative abilities. The family – the space where oppressive patriheterosexism has its greatest effect – is replaced by the communal network of females/lesbians (Adrienne Rich's famous 'lesbian continuum'). Fay Weldon in her cult text *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* presents another version of the witch: the masquerade. Masquerade, as Palmer demonstrates in Weldon, Jeannette Winterson and others, suggests that traditional stereotypes can be subversively parodied for lesbian ends to reveal the processes of identity-construction that such stereotypes mask as 'natural'. The powerful crone, the fearsome sorceress, the masquerading woman are ways of presenting the witch's potential for lesbianism and feminism.

Spectres are integral to Gothic fiction and film. In lesbian Gothic ghosts and haunting are used in conjunction with lesbian and gay bereavement (especially in the work Sarah Schulman and Emma Donoghue). Spectral visitation in the lesbian Gothic of the 1990s foregrounds the carnal-physical. Frequently, as Molleen Zanger's *Gardenias Where There are None* or Paula Martinac's *Out of Time* present, spectral 'connections' become the source, context or inspiration for the discovery and thematization of a woman's quest for her lesbian past/family/community. Spectral doubles – also integral to Gothic and ghost tales – in Jeannette Winterson's *The Passion* are used to suggest both, carnivalesque festivity with transgressive sexual pleasure, and the abjection of death and dereliction. Parental conflict and family becomes sources of alternative (spectral) effects that have traumatic results on lesbian subjects.

Vampirism – the stuff, along with cannibalism, of all great nightmarish scenarios, and some sordidly (un)funny puns on 'biting', 'cutting', and eating – possesses, as Nina Auerbach's brilliant study (cited in Palmer with no bibliographic reference!), homoerotic connotations. Transgressive sexuality is essential to the lesbian vampire's representation in lesbian Gothic. However, as Palmer is careful to point out, one of the reasons for the popularity of the vampire and the *lesbian* vampire in the 1990s is the sexual aspect of these 'figures.' S&M partnerships and erotic fantasy abound in lesbian narrative, and reinvent the idea that these are simply 'perversions'. A new erotic and sexual economy in lesbian Gothic thus suggests a whole new look at the body. When Jody Scott reclaims the vampire myth in her *I, Vampire* she also revisits this connection of sexuality, lesbianism and horror. Pat Califia, Jewelle Gomez and Katherine Forrest all portray the lesbian vampire as transgressive in terms of lesbian sexual pleasure. Rejecting the 'natural' connection between heterosexuality, sexual

pleasure and the family, these writers argue that the family does not necessarily depend on the 'Law of the Father'. The transgressive and alternative 'genealogy of body fluids' (p. 104) in such literature suggests an alternative to patriarchal family formation. The lesbian vampire and vampire community, in these writers, emphasize the constructed nature of roles and structures (Father, Mother, Children, and Family). This, obviously, has political implications. Palmer suggests that the politics of blood here is not necessarily associated with death and violence. When associated with menstruation and childbirth (as it is in lesbian and lesbian Gothic texts), it stands for vitality, creativity, life and, most importantly in political terms, community.

The Gothic thriller – best exemplified in screen adaptations of Anne Rice's fiction – is the subject of Palmer's final (and sadly, weakest) chapter. Palmer emphasises in this chapter is on the role of secrets, the flaneur, and sexuality in lesbian Gothic thrillers. The flaneur is the lesbian Gothic's version of the spy or the voyeur. Lesbian sexuality itself is the secret in such thrillers. Oral sex, S&M relationships (and pleasures), and the theme of terror become modified in lesbian Gothic. Indeed the terror of violence and bodily bonding or pain is transformed into sources of pleasure and the cornerstone of relationships other than the victim-perpetrator in the work of Mary Wings (*Divine Victim*) and Jewelle Gomez (*The Gilda Stories*). It is worth speculating – and here I am drawing on the work of Carol Clover (2000) – as to why the survivor of terror in such thrillers – the one who encounters the ruins of human bodies, the real killer, and the rescue-team – is more often than not a woman. What real or potential politics is at work in this representation? There appears to be an intrinsic link, worth exploring, between women, bodies, horror and the economy of eroticism and violence. Palmer might have pursued this theme into lesbian Gothic thrillers and the vampire film with convoys of male/female vampires in pursuit of female victims.

Palmer's strength is her close reading technique that excavates themes and issues from literary works. This archaeological (in the non-Foucauldian sense) approach enables her to illustrate her arguments with great, and convincing, efficacy. It also means that the reader 'sees' situations as embodying a politics that may otherwise be lost in a genre as extremely theatrical, dramatic, self-conscious and atmosphere-driven as the Gothic (a problem that all self-conscious narrative modes, including the magic realist one, are haunted by). Thus Palmer's discussion of the witch or the cultural politics of blood are rooted in textual readings that look at character, atmosphere, narrative and, in some cases, diction and tone. What is also attractive about *Lesbian Gothic* is that the theory is unobtrusive, and Palmer chooses to do away with all her theories in the opening sections of every chapter before getting down to the real business of careful literary analysis.

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The last 30 years has seen a flowering of lesbian writing, much of which has reworked the popular genres of romance, thriller, science-fiction, and especially the Gothic. It is on this rich period that Palmer focuses and *Lesbian Gothic* is not only the first substantial study of this newly minted genre but also provides the first critical discussion of some of these texts. Her earlier book, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (1989), is still one of the best studies of contemporary women's fiction and *Lesbian Gothic* builds on its strengths. In both books Palmer has the courage to go beyond the fast-solidifying contemporary canon in order to analyse the neglected fiction of the early stages of the feminist/lesbian movement in the 1970s and early 1980s.

She locates the development of the lesbian Gothic within a specific historical context, the development of feminist and lesbian/queer theory since the 1970s which has had a fruitfully symbiotic relationship with women's fiction. The Gothic image of spectral visitation, as Palmer notes, has been used by theorists such as Judith Butler and Diana Fuss to figure lesbianism/homosexuality as 'the repressed' at the centre of phallogocentric culture. Fuss describes the heterosexual and homosexual economies as 'each haunted by the other' with 'the other' representing 'the very occurrence of ghostly visitation' (cited in Palmer, 13). The influence of lesbian sexual radicals and the queer movement prompted writers to experiment with Gothic imagery and structures and created a market with an informed readership for their fiction.

In *Lesbian Gothic* the traditionally monstrous figures of the witch, the vampire and the spectral visitor are reclaimed and acquire subjectivity and agency. Palmer's study focuses on four central themes: the witch as an image of rebellious femininity, spectral visitation as an image of the return of the repressed, the vampire as an image of transgressive sexuality, and the Gothic thriller. Through these she maps a historic shift from an initial challenging of the traditionally misogynistic elements of the Gothic in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the more radical post modern interrogations of the genre itself in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Celebrations of the figures of the witch or the crone by feminist theorists such as Mary Daly inspired the use of the witch as a signifier of female resistance in the fiction of the 1970s and 1980s. Michele Roberts' *The Visitation* (1983), for instance, uses the term 'witch' as a synonym for 'feminist', while Ellen Galford's more post-modern *The Fires of Bride* (1986) is a richly comic parody of the Gothic, ridiculing both patriarchy and the excesses of the feminist movement. From the late-1980s writers turned to the image of the spectral visitor, signifier of the uncanny, using it to

treat the topic of repressed transgressive sexuality. Rebecca Brown's *The Haunted House* (1987) uses the haunted house to explore the formation of lesbian identity in relation to memory, the family and childhood, while Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995) and Sarah Schulman's *Rat Bohemia* (1966) both use the motif of haunting to explore bereavement, the latter using Gothic images of horror to explore the urban effects of AIDS in New York.

AIDS is one reason often cited for the resurgence of interest in the vampire in popular fiction and film in the late 1980s and 1990s, where the vampire was increasingly positioned as narrator/protagonist rather than monstrous. Other writers such as Pat Califia, Jewelle Gomez and Katherine V. Forrest use the lesbian vampire as a signifier of the explicit sexual difference of the lesbian, and to mark out a fantasy space of transgressive eroticism. This motif seems to have had particular resonance in America, from where Palmer cites two collections of lesbian vampire stories: *Daughters of Darkness: Lesbian Vampire Stories* and *Dark Angels: Lesbian Vampire Stories*, both edited by Pam Keeseey, (Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1993 and 1995). This signals one of the few shortcomings of Palmer's study: the fact that it doesn't really distinguish between British and American fiction. There is more to say about the issue of nationality and the specific forms taken by lesbian Gothic in each country.

Mary Wings made her name with her lesbian appropriations of the hard-boiled Chandleresque thriller but her *Divine Victim* (1992) explicitly parodies *Rebecca*, combining du Maurier's British Gothic with the American thriller. As Palmer shows, the lesbian Gothic thriller, of which *Divine Victim* is perhaps the text *par excellence*, exploits the tension between the thriller's quest for justice and the Gothic fantasy realm of terror, between the order-enforcing sleuth and the vulnerable Gothic heroine. The 'secret' at the heart of both Gothic and thriller becomes in the lesbian Gothic thriller the 'secret' of lesbianism itself, repeatedly returning like Rebecca's body from its watery grave.

The emergence of lesbian Gothic over the past 25 years bears witness to the plasticity of the Gothic itself, its ability to mutate, shifting shape to reflect a new historical moment and articulate another set of anxieties and themes. Paulina Palmer's widely-researched, theoretically-informed and well-written study establishes a new area for investigation which holds the promise of further transformations in the future.