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Tanya Gonzalez
Kansas State University, tgonzale@ksu.edu

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Abstract

Review of Paulina Palmer's *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative 1970-2012*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. viii + 204 pp.

Keywords

queer, gothic, narrative, Palmer

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The relationship between the gothic and queer theory has been fruitful over the past twenty years. Scholars of queer theory have made use of gothic metaphors of monstrosity and excess to work through important claims. Likewise, gothic literary criticism has applied queer theory to make explicit the transgressive desire and sexuality present in the earliest gothic texts. Paulina Palmer has participated in these scholarly conversations since the early 1990s with her book *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1993). Her recent work, *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative 1970-2012*, adeptly historicizes these connections between queer theory and gothic literary criticism, while drawing attention to the ways in which more contemporary texts manipulate gothic motifs and themes to work through important social and cultural issues associated with the LGBTQ experience.

Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative 1970-2012 is organized thematically into four main chapters: “Ghosts and Haunted Houses,” “Uncanny Others: Vampires and Doubles,” “Tracking the Monster,” and “Regional Gothic: Uncanny Cities and Rural Areas.” Each chapter presents key conventions of the gothic literary canon and how these are manipulated by contemporary authors interested in exploring sexuality. Palmer begins the chapters by explaining the conventional uses and interpretations of a gothic motif and then moves on to show how contemporary authors use them to explore queer sexuality and comment on the LGBTQ experience. The chapter focusing on vampires and doubles is a particularly strong example of how well this organizational structure can work. In this way, the text offers a nice overview of gothic modes for those not familiar with the literary genre. Likewise, Palmer points out that key concepts in queer theory are illustrated in the various authors’ uses of gothic conventions. Scholars such as Judith Butler, Elizabeth Freeman, George Haggerty, Judith Halberstam, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick figure prominently in Palmer’s text, which is fitting given that these theorists often work in the intersections of queer and gothic studies.

The narrative texts explored in this book range from historical novels to futuristic stories. Likewise, the texts analyzed fall on a spectrum of queer topics, from same-sex desire to storylines centered on trans or intersex characters. Some of the works included in this study are from well-known contemporary gothic authors like Peter Ackroyd, Sarah Waters, and Jeanette Winterson. As Palmer suggests, other authors like Steve Berman, Meg Kingston, and Kathleen Winter, “may be less well known” (6). That said, some of the latter authors’ texts offer the most interesting stories in *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative 1970-2012*. For instance, Kathleen Winter’s *Annabel* (2010) centers on an intersex character and offers some of the clearest examples of why queer theory is so important to the study of gothic literature. While Palmer highlights the key precepts of queer studies

throughout her work, the ambiguous and fluid nature of “queer” as an organizing principle is highlighted by the way this study includes a variety of terms of sexual identity and textual examples of queerness. In fact, Palmer’s study concludes with a series of questions, one of which highlights the complexities of labels like Queer Gothic: “Will writers continue to interrelate identity categories, such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, with reference to the queer view of identity as provisional and contingent and an emphasis on sexual mobility and the performative dimension of gender?” (179). Even though Palmer addresses the nuances and explains that she is using the term queer in a variety of ways, the tension between the identity labels listed above is illustrated throughout *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative 1970-2012*.

In part because this study really addresses a variety of identity experiences—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and intersex—the choice and treatment of texts provides less of a guide to working through a queer subset of the gothic than to drawing connections between classic and contemporary gothic texts and their treatment of sexualities historically considered queer. Palmer includes a wide range of contemporary narrative examples and carefully situates them within gothic literary history, while paying close attention to the social, cultural, and scholarly shifts associated with the term “queer.” Gothic and queer literatures deal in fluidity and ambiguity; bringing them together is a challenging task. That said, *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative 1970-2012* is an excellent resource for those interested in the intersections between queer studies and gothic literary criticism.

Tanya González
Kansas State University