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## Chapter 2: Zombies, Gender and World-Ecology: Gothic Narrative in the Work of Ana Lydia Vega and Mayra Montero

Kerstin Oloff

The individual, the community, the land, are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood – Édouard Glissant (1989, 105-6)

It is widely accepted that Gothic fears construct ‘a monster out of the traits which ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality and capital want to disavow’ (Halberstam, 1995, 102). Indeed, much has been written on the Gothic’s inherent relation to racist-patriarchal capitalism, but the role of ‘ecophobia’ within the Gothic has only more recently become a focus of sustained critical attention.<sup>1</sup> Historical capitalism has developed through a series of metabolic rifts that have as their ideological complement the nature-society dichotomy (a dichotomy which is also gendered and racialized). Put simply, these ‘rifts’ refer to the increasing alienation of the majority of the population from the means of reproduction – most fundamentally, the land and the body. The zombie is ideal for starting to think through Gothic representations of these rifts (Oloff, 2012). Zombies have become globally recognizable figures because they speak powerfully to the anxieties produced by the commodification of labour: humans are reduced to being bodily vessels for the production of specifically capitalist value (socially necessary labour time). Yet commodification is also fundamentally an ecological process, something that becomes clear if we consider the zombie’s Haitian origins. The zombie has its roots in a paradigmatic moment in the emergence of capitalism: the Caribbean experience of the sugar

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<sup>1</sup> Ecophobia is defined by Estok as ‘an irrational fear (sometimes, of course, leading to contempt or hatred) of the agency (real or imagined) of nature’ (2013, 74).

frontier's violent restructuring of nature-society relations.<sup>2</sup> If we follow Jason W. Moore's injunction to understand capitalism *as* world-ecology (2010), the classic zombies toiling on the plantation fields can be read as a cultural response to capitalism's development through the ruthless exploitation, degradation and commodification of nature *through* enslaved labour.

There exist a number of variations on the zombie figure, the most important of which for this chapter is the vacant-eyed, light-skinned, female zombie. This female zombie – the victim of patriarchal society and a clear instantiation of the monstrous-feminine<sup>3</sup> – functioned as a staple within the US imperial imagination, where she encapsulated racist fears of contagion (as in the Halperins' *White Zombie* [1932] or Tourneur's *I walked with a Zombie* [1943]). She also appears within twentieth century Haitian literature, articulating and examining racial, class and gendered anxieties.<sup>4</sup> If, from an eco-critical perspective, it is relatively easy to discern the ecological dimension of representations of the zombie labouring on the plantation, the trope of the vacant-eyed female zombie has been less open to such a reading. For the mediation of the female's relation to her surroundings through patriarchal

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<sup>2</sup> 'Frontier' is understood as 'the forward movement of the (capitalist) system' into uncommodified land (Moore 2000: 412). The plantations rapidly reshaped environments; disrupted local ecosystems through the radical simplification of nature; produced almost exclusively for the global market and, in turn, required capital inputs from financiers abroad; brutally installed global divisions of labour that were racialized and gendered; and from the start, led to the rapid exhaustion and degradation of extra-human and human resources. The geography of sugar production was therefore historically restless and, like capitalism more generally, tended towards outward expansion after each 'bust' (Moore 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Paravisini-Gebert (1997) and Braham (2012). Creed defines the monstrous-feminine as follows: 'As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase "monstrous-feminine" emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity' (1993: 3).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Jacques-Stephen Alexis's 'Chronique d'un faux-amour' in *Romancero aux étoiles* (Gallimard 1960), in which a young light-skinned Haitian woman is zombified and confined to a French nunnery. Here Alexis examines the intertwining of a de-humanizing racialization (through, for instance, animalistic descriptions) and female objectification.

structures tends to background questions of ecology. Under capitalism, a social-economic system ‘necessarily committed to racism and sexism’ (Federici, 2004, 17), women’s (unpaid or under-paid) labour and their reproductive functions are subjugated to the structures of patriarchy. Sex, like race, functions as a specification of class relations, ‘serving to cheapen the cost of labour and to hide the exploitation of women and colonial subjects’ (Federici, 2004, 17). The violence of this process is registered in the female zombie – fought over by male suitors, silenced, and reduced to her bodily existence. If we read zombies as figures that speak to the nature-society relations through which capitalism unfolds, then the vacant-eyed female zombie enables us to think through the role of patriarchal exploitation within this. In its various incarnations, one might therefore say that the figure of the zombie sits at the fault lines of racial, class, gender and environmental violence.

Building on the premise that zombies are figures that register the logic of capitalism-as-world-ecology, I will turn to two contemporary writers – Puerto Rican Ana Lydia Vega and Cuban-Puerto Rican Mayra Montero – who have engaged with the Gothic from a perspective that is both overtly feminist and consciously ecological. ‘El baúl de Miss Florence: fragmentos para un novelón romántico’ (1991) [‘Miss Florence’s Trunk’, 1994] by Ana Lydia Vega and *Tú, la oscuridad* (1995) [*You, Darkness*, 1997] by Mayra Montero are texts that critically and consciously probe the fault-lines of capitalist modernity, addressing issues of ecology, race and gender within a world context.<sup>5</sup> In both texts, the zombie is merged with, or considered alongside, another classic Gothic figure: the madwoman. I will argue that it is through their engagement with the European Gothic and early US zombie films that they confront their readers with the Gothic’s gendered and racialized *ecological unconscious*. Their texts encourage us to think patriarchy and racism alongside deforestation; zombies alongside the classic ‘English governess’; and ultimately, to reinsert these only seemingly unlinked characters and phenomena within their global world-ecological context.

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<sup>5</sup> I will quote from the English translations listed in the bibliography.

In direct conflict with postmodernist aesthetics, their texts encourage us to think these relations against the background of the world-ecological totality, while mirroring, in their fragmented, postmodernist structure and technique, the increasing reification of modern life. Considering both their texts alongside each other has important implications for thinking through the contemporary global environmental crisis: while Vega addresses capitalism's drive towards unsustainable plunder and the exhaustion of resources within a nineteenth-century Puerto Rican context, Montero takes us to the present day with her emphasis on concerns about frog extinctions and Haiti's socio-environmental disaster.

### **In the Magic Circle of the Gardens: Gothic Narratives and the Ecological Unconscious**

In 'El baúl de Miss Florence', Vega engages with two key Gothic texts: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), one of the most canonical Victorian Gothic novels, and Jacques Tourneur's *I walked with a Zombie* (1943), which transposes Brontë's novel onto a Caribbean island as imagined from an imperial US perspective. Importantly, Vega's novella is structured around a boom-and-bust narrative arc that is determined by the rise and fall of *La Enriqueta*, a plantation near Arroyo.<sup>6</sup> Opening in the US in 1885 when the governess Florence Jane receives the news of the death of her former mistress Miss Susan (the daughter of Samuel Morse and wife of the Danish merchant Edward Lind), part I of the novella focuses on the

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<sup>6</sup> The boom-and-bust arc is based on the historical rise and fall of the hacienda *La Enriqueta* (1827-85; see Overman (2000)) and evocative of Puerto Rico's nineteenth-century sugar boom, which was sustained by the Ponce-Patillas coastal belt, encompassing 162.5 square miles of alluvial plain (Figuroa 2005, 20). It rapidly transformed Puerto Rico (which up until then had been a frontier society), displacing coastal peasants, reshaping its landscapes far beyond the actual plantations, and fuelling the demographic explosion. Particularly ecologically devastating were the 'intensified occupation of the highlands and the wholesale cutting of timber for construction, which exacted a heavy toll on water-retaining vegetation' (Scarano 1984, 47). Environmental degradation was felt quickly, as 'average annual rainfall declined and severe droughts became more common' (Figuroa 2005, 21), and is still visible today.

years Florence spent in Puerto Rico (1856-59), using the narrative device of journal entries read in the narrative present. Part II focuses on her return to Arroyo in 1885, where she finds that slavery has been abolished, the hacienda is in ruins, and her former employers are dead. Through this structure, Vega highlights the fundamental role of the inherently volatile international sugar industry in shaping local and global environments and social dynamics.<sup>7</sup> Revolts and rebellions against the social order (which increased after the collapse of the 1820-40 sugar boom [Baralt, 2007, 62]), soil degradation, deforestation and ensuing water scarcity and climate change all contributed to undermining the profitability of the Puerto Rican sugar industry. As we shall see, Vega's attention to this historical context helps render explicit what the two precursor texts could only register through horror and the monstrous, raising questions pertaining to the imperial Gothic's ecological unconscious.

In a well-known passage from *Jane Eyre*, when Jane first arrives at Thornfield Hall, she looks out of the attic window:

'I surveyed the grounds laid out like a map: the bright and velvet lawn [. . .]; the field [. . .]; the wood, dun and sere [. . .]; the church at the gates, the road, the tranquil hills, all reposing in the autumn day's sun; the horizon bounded by a propitious sky [. . .] I longed for a power of vision that might surpass that limit' (122).

The scene encapsulates Jane's desire to escape different forms of patriarchal enclosures (Henson, 2011, 38). Yet, while she can see Rochester's seemingly idyllic feudal lands (contrasted here implicitly with the bustle of the towns), she cannot see the colonial Jamaican

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<sup>7</sup> In an interview, Vega states: 'In the southern region of the island, 3/4 of the landowners – the people with money – were foreigners. [. . .] There were North Americans too. This world fascinated me, especially the town of Arroyo, an international emporium of great wealth based on the exploitation of sugar.' (Hernández and López Springfield, 2004, 821).

origins of part of his wealth, which, in displaced form, haunt the house through the ‘preternatural’ laugh of Bertha Mason (123), ‘a defeated ‘colonia[l]’ othered in [her] questionable racial provenance, swarthy and un-English’ (Paravisini, 2002, 249). In contrast, when Ana Lydia Vega’s ‘Jane’ looks out of the window of the hacienda *La Enriqueta* in southern Puerto Rico, she sees ‘this empire of sugarcane stretching as far as they eye can see toward the dark-blue Caribbean’ (169). Vega’s story turns precisely on the limitations of the viewpoint of the governess – a figure that came to encapsulate ideals of imperial domesticity, which were themselves bound up with a ‘civilizing’ mission and the production of an ‘elite whiteness’ (Tolentino, 2011, 324).

As a white privileged servant of the Lind family, Florence’s social status in Puerto Rico is ambiguous; after her own father’s death, she is both an economically dispossessed female and an active civilizing agent enabling ‘Euro-american elites to produce a hierarchy of whiteness that could strengthen and expand their claim to white racial identity’ (Tolentino, 2011, 323, 325). The story situates Florence amidst a series of female doubles (including Miss Susan, Selenia, and Bella), defining them ‘as part of a racialized gender hierarchy’ (Tolentino, 2011, 322). Florence is a fully developed character (who likes to read novels by Charlotte Brontë), but she also functions according to the logic of the Gothic romance and in so doing exposes its mechanisms. Unlike in *Jane Eyre*, her expectations of romantic resolution (with the lascivious slave-owner Edward Lind) are hinted at but thwarted by his death; in a similar manner, the novella evokes and debunks the myth of ‘la gran familia puertorriqueña’ that was ‘revered in the works of the *treintistas* (members of the Generation of 1930)’ as well as ‘the glorified hacienda that served as its primary metaphor’ (Moreno, 2012, 95). It is also noteworthy that Vega erases the potential racial differences between Jane (Florence) and Bertha (Miss Susan),<sup>8</sup> both of which recall gothic representations of women as ‘mad’ and ‘zombified.’ Their will power has turned into bagasse, the crushed left-overs of sugar cane

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<sup>8</sup> On ‘race’ in the story, see Alcocer (2005).

production, metaphorically subordinating their decision-making powers to both the sugar industry and the logic of gothic romance. The Gothic secret thus no longer focuses on the madwoman in the attic and her provenance, but rather on the fact that their 'golden cage' is built on the 'the bones of so many of God's creatures' (186; 217); it is the moment of fetishistic disavowal that turns into the gothic secret.

Within this narrative universe, an alternative perspective is advanced, as Miss Florence's unreliable viewpoint is exposed. In a key scene, René Fouchard, the French doctor who is an alternative love interest for Florence, does not woo her as a more traditional storyline would have dictated, but instead leads her into the slave quarters of the hacienda, a place very much outside of what she refers to as the 'the magic circle of the gardens' (200). As Tolentino observes (2011, 38), Fouchard seeks to use this as an educational moment to expose the inhumanity of the system that produces sugar for her coffee; Florence, on the other hand, experiences this as a moment of terror that needs to be erased from memory:

a long cortège of ragged men and women, their bare feet, covered with mud, stumbling in the clumsiness of exhaustion, began to file slowly toward us. My heart beat violently in my breast. I raised my gaze to my companion's face, my eyes pleading for an answer to this spectacle.

'Look at them. Look well, Florence,' he said, bringing his lips down to my ear so close I could feel his breath. 'These are the men and women who give sweetness to our coffee.'

My eyes clang fatally to those emaciated torsos, those scarred backs, those grim and hostile countenances that looked like faces from some dark cavern in the bowels of hell. Eager to erase the painful ugliness of that scene, which the failing light invested with a spectral glow, I quickened my steps along the trail back to the house.



René followed, but we spoke not a single word to each other until we were once again inside the magic circle of the gardens. (199-200)

While her position as governess is certainly one of marginality, she also here participates in the ideological erasure of the inequalities on which the system is based – inequalities that are written on to unnamed bodies. Florence translates all the markers of destitution and discontent into gothic terror, as the enslaved who bear marks of their mistreatment are represented in such a way that they recall both the traditional zombie figure as well as the shuffling hordes popularized in US cinema by George Romero. The gothic mode acknowledges the displaced fears of rebellions, the possibility of which is noted by Florence, who is aware of the Haitian Revolution and smaller failed insubordinations in the vicinity. As Tolentino points out, in this scene, Fouchard seeks to instruct Florence ‘in the link between slave labour and civilized domesticity’ (2011, 328), exposing the way in which the figure of the governess was inscribed in discourses of colonial domesticity and racial segregation. Florence, on the other hand, seeks to disguise power relations between herself and her employers and to erase slave labour from her ‘magic circle’ of consciousness altogether.

The scene further functions as a comment on the repression of the ecological exhaustion through which capitalism develops. ‘The magic circle of the gardens’ is where the human and ecological degradation of the *bateyes* and the surrounding canefields is forgotten. In Victorian fiction, the garden was usually defined as a ‘woman’s space, a safe boundary between the domestic and the wider world’ (Henson, 2011, 7), an ideological association explored and exposed by Vega. Florence’s racialized femininity, as well as her English domesticity – stereotypically defined through the tea-drinking habits she brings to La Enriqueta (Tolentino, 2011, 324) – are bound up with the gardens that encapsulate the ostentatious excess of the hacienda. Within this space, what matters is her relationship with a transnational slave-holding elite, which she, as white British subject and ‘sexual and gender

missionar[y]' of Empire, seeks to civilize (Tolentino, 2011, 321; 326). The civilizing mission translates into Florence's educational efforts and, more generally, into her attempts to contain any threat to racial and class boundaries, a threat embodied in the text by her double Selenia, described by Mr Lind as belonging to a 'hybrid race [...] born without soul' (192). In a similar manner, Charlie, who has grown up in Puerto Rico, knows much about the local flora and fauna, and refuses to abide by racial segregation, appears to Florence a 'little wild beast' (170), who needs to be domesticated. The reference to 'magic' in the 'magic circle of the gardens', then, names the fetishistic moment of the erasure of the gardens' relation to the 'non-domestic', 'un-civilized' space of the cane fields. That relation is, as we have seen, inextricably racialized and gendered.

Throughout the novella, Vega paints a very unevenly developed landscape, as the differences between cane fields, the gardens of *La Enriqueta*, and the environment that surrounds the plantation are very pronounced. Vega's descriptions illustrate that 'nature' needs to be understood as a social relation. The 'dry monotony of the landscape' outside of the plantations contrasts with the out-of-place, 'artistically designed gardens' (168) peopled by Greek and Roman statues as well as caged animals (snakes, monkeys and parrots) and flowers that recreate stereotypical images of 'pristine' exotic nature. Most remarkable is the contrast between the aridity of this surrounding scenery (that makes Florence yearn for the English countryside) and the large artificial pools of the gardens that defy the 'tireless sun' (168). These pools mark the height of the plantation's splendour; as we know from historical accounts, they would be empty after the plantation's bust (Overman, 2000, 127). To put the lavishness of landscaping into context, by the mid-nineteenth century, the impact of the plantation economy on the local eco-system was felt in the decline of rainfall and the greater frequency of droughts (Figueroa, 2005, 22; 70). The original, sparse lowland forests had been rapidly destroyed through cane cultivation while the 'intensified occupation of the highlands and the wholesale cutting of timber for construction [. . .] exacted a heavy toll on water-

retaining vegetation' (Scarano, 1984, 47). That the availability of water and irrigation was also a concern for the real Edward Lind is attested to by his disagreement with his neighbour Santiago Ryes over access to a nearby brook in 1857 (Overman, 2000, 108). In Vega's novella, when the hacienda is approaching ruin and Lind is heavily indebted, the conditions for making fast profits are exhausted, as both water and labour after emancipation are scarce. The contradictions that led to the bust are encapsulated in the image of the hacienda, standing 'like a soulless body amid the green of the trees' (241), metaphorically exposing the zombification at the plantation's core.

Further, through Susan and Florence, who turn into figures of mad femininity, Vega draws out the ecology of the monstrous-feminine. While their transformation had preceded the bust and was conditioned by their subordinated role within patriarchal structures, their zombification only fully emerges after the tragedy of Charlie's suicide, which encapsulates the plantation system's social contradictions and was followed soon thereafter by the death of his father. Miss Susan in the early 1880s, and later Florence in 1886, both keep returning to the cane fields as the site that evokes environmental degradation and racial segregation. Miss Susan finally turns into a version of Bertha, forever haunted by the fields:

'She locked herself up all day, calling him and talking to the walls. At night, we'd see her walking through the gardens, looking for him behind the trees, crying and moaning like a soul in purgatory. Mr Lind would send me out to get her, so she wouldn't get a mind to do somethin' crazy. Sometimes, we'd be walking through the canefields as the sun was coming up' (254).

Vega's madwomen haunting the cane fields are strongly reminiscent of the plantation-owner's zombified wife Jessica in Tourneur's film. In its most iconic scene, the Canadian nurse Betsy – Tourneur's 'Jane' – leads Jessica across a field of sugarcane where they happen

upon the zombie sentinel Carrefour. Interspersed with shots of the sentinel, of animal and human skulls that primitivistically paint an environment alien to the women, the camera tracks ‘swiftly the women’s movement from light to shadow’ (Paravisini, 1997, 44), offering shots of them through the cane from different angles, thus transforming the cane stalks into important component elements of an overall threatening atmosphere. While the film offers a critique of the white plantation elite (as the white matriarch herself is ultimately to blame for Jessica’s zombification) and is subtler in its treatment of zombies than the films that preceded it, nevertheless it mobilizes a primitivist-racist and ecophobic imperial imaginary. As Bishop puts it, ‘the true horror [. . .] lies in the prospect of a Westerner becoming dominated, subjugated, symbolically raped, and effectively “colonized” by pagan representatives’ (2010, 66). Returning to Vega’s text, Florence, unlike her precursors Jane and Tourneur’s Betsy, does not serve as the more ‘rational’ counterpart to Miss Susan, but turns into a ‘virginal lay-sister’ of the cane fields (253).

In what ways does Vega’s novella, then, invite us to reflect on these precursor texts? Her narrative enables us to understand patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism as environment-making processes, encouraging a rethinking of the causes for, and implications of, Jessica’s ‘thingification’ (Bishop, 2010, 88). Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first wife and the madwoman in the attic, is exposed as the site that registers the repression not only of racial and gendered exploitation and discourse, but also of the ecological violence on which Rochester’s wealth is based and that allows for the articulation of Jane’s Victorian domesticity. Bertha, like the zombie, blurs the boundaries between the ‘human’ and the ‘animal’: ‘What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours’ (327). Through her, the realm of the ‘natural’ and the corporeal, with which women have conventionally been associated, becomes a site of monstrosity and ‘horror’ (148). While Jane is identified throughout with the English landscape, ‘the West Indian landscape (with which Bertha is associated) is given its full

infernal meaning, inextricably linked to the unexpurgated sexual female, “gross, impure, depraved”, driven mad by her own excesses’ (Henson, 2011, 49). Jane’s domesticity – bound up as it is with discourses of gender, ‘nature’ and race – is not only contrasted with, but structurally depends on, Bertha, her ‘wild nature’ and the invisible cane fields. It is this dependence that Vega renders visible, as she reveals the ecology of the monstrous-feminine.

In other words, Vega evokes the gothic mode since it makes manifest the *ecological unconscious* in disruptive fashion. The ‘ecological unconscious’ leans on Jameson’s well-known formulation of the political unconscious, which, in turn, rests on a ‘conception of the social totality, and, concomitantly, the ability, somehow, to represent the unrepresentable: the totality and its relation to lived experience’ (Lesjak, 2006, 39). Jameson posited three horizons for the political unconscious: the ‘narrowly political’ (a perspective that allows for a reading of the text as a ‘symbolic act’ that resolves contemporary political contradictions); the social order (in which the text is seen as an ‘ideologeme, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes’); and the ‘ultimate horizon of human history’, in which distinct modes of production and correlative sign systems coexist and crisscross within the present (Jameson, 1981, 76). In this third, and largest, horizon, the text is read in terms of ‘the ideology of literary form itself in its unconscious transitions between modes of production’ (Medovoi, 2013, 87). To arrive at a Jamesonian ecocriticism, Ivakhiv suggests that the ‘contemporary world system can hardly be thought today without reference to the larger – and until recently unthinkable – totality of the ecological system which both *sustains and interpenetrates* with the political-economic system’ (my italics; 2008, 99). However, if we accept that capitalism *is* an ecological regime, then one would have to go beyond conceiving of two distinct (albeit interpenetrating) systems, and instead view all three horizons as *already* consisting of ‘messy bundles of human and extra-human relations’ (Moore, 2011a, 42). This entails repositioning the ‘ecological’ and the political-economic as mutually constitutive. There is thus an important

distinction to be made: in Ivakhiv's argument, 'global nature' haunts as the 'unmappable and uncanny Other' (101), but this 'Othering' is itself a product of the metabolic rifts through which capitalism develops and thus part of the reification that obstructs our view of the relations between human and extra-human natures, between, for instance, the governess and the cane fields. To the 'structural, experiential and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual"' that Jameson describes (1981, 20), we might thus add the 'structural, experiential and conceptual gap' between extra-human nature and the self, the roots of which lie in the metabolic rifts that are constitutive of capitalist modernity. The 'reification and privatization of contemporary life' that, as Jameson puts it, maim our existence and 'paralyz[e] our thinking' (20) also affect the way in which we are able to conceptualise nature-society relations. Nature has become the 'uncanny Other' that haunts and disrupts just as Ivakhiv suggests, but only because of the modern imaginative inability to cognitively map the unfolding of modern capitalist society through transformations in nature-society relations. To return to the gothic tradition of mad women, feminized nature is externalized as wild Bertha and internalized as tamed and thingified Jessica, domesticated in the hacienda.

### **Out of their Minds: Madwomen, Zombies and Species Extinction**

In *You, Darkness*, an 'avowedly environmentalist' novel that addresses frog extinctions and is set mainly in Haiti (Paravisini, 2005, 192), Mayra Montero evokes zombies and madwomen in a context of political, social and environmental violence that is global in nature, but felt with particular virulence in peripheral locations. While her zombies can be placed within a tradition of writing from and about Haiti, her novel does not promote a view of 'Haitian exceptionalism, or the view that Haiti was bizarrely unique' (Dash, 1988, 141). Rather it places Haiti within an international history of the gothic, as well as within world-history more

broadly. The novel challenges the reader to reintegrate Haiti into a monstrous world-order, in which witches, zombies and madwomen point to disavowed processes of subjugation and commodification and invite us to understand patriarchy and racialization alongside deforestation and climate change. Most interesting in this context, then, is the role of zombies, madwomen and witches within the novel's overall structure and their relation to the narrative of frog extinctions.

The narrative present of the novel is dominated by US herpetologist Victor Grigg's search for the last of the *grenouille du sang* [blood frog] – also referred to in the text by its taxonomic referent, *Eleutherodactylus sanguineus*. Zombies, madwomen and witches feature in the text as part of Haitian guide Thierry Adrien's retelling of his family saga, which unfolds over four decades and may seem to have little to do with Victor's quest narrative. This seeming disjunction is reflected in the structure of the novel, which intersperses its twenty chapters, narrated alternately by Victor and Thierry, with nine fragments that document frog extinctions around the globe. These culminate in a tenth and final fragment that brings together the novel's different strands, as the two childless protagonists die alongside the last male specimen of the *grenouille du sang* in a shipwreck. Since the late 1980s (especially after the 1989 First World Congress of Herpetology), frog extinctions have received increasing public attention. While they are not a new phenomenon, they reached cataclysmic proportions by the late twentieth century, when 'the extinction rate of amphibians increased at least 200 times above the rate of the last 350 million years' (Collins, 2009, 105). These extinctions have a significant impact on entire eco-systems across the world, since 'amphibians play a key role in energy flow and nutrient cycling' and thus 'a central role in the food web' (Collins, 2009, 11). Montero's narrative of frog extinctions is thus explicitly global in scope, but plays out within a specific local context, one marked by extreme deforestation, soil erosion and flash floods, as well as the long history of colonialism, extractivism, poverty and under-development.

While Montero's zombies are marginal to the main narrative, they arguably register in condensed form the novel's primary concerns. In chapter six, for instance, Thierry recalls his father's participation in the zombie hunts during his youth, evoking the classic figure of the exploited, branded, enslaved zombie that may awaken after eating salt:

'in those days it was not unusual to see the living dead cross the town at all hours [...] the children threw stones at them and they didn't know how to dodge them, they slipped and fell, they got up and in a little while they fell again, their eyes fixed on the bare hill. [...] the *pwazon rats* [...] rounded them up, roped them like iguanas, and tied them, like iguanas, in bunches. (49-50)

Illustrating the links between poverty, social divisions and environmental degradation, the zombies' plight is situated against a backdrop of deforested hills and eroded soils. It is noticeable that in the narrative present of the novel, which is set during the Raoul Cédras regime, 'the zombies have been supplanted by distinctly non-magical, non-erotic mutilated corpses and burning dogs' (Braham, 2012, 46). Overall, the novel offers a story of increasing (social, political and environmental) violence, escalating in the apocalyptic narrative present in the years after the first ousting of Jean Bertrand Aristide, 'when approximately 5,000 Haitians were assassinated and many thousands more raped, tortured, and terrorized by *macoutes* and paramilitaries' (Braham, 2012, 45).

Within this narrative focalized exclusively through male narrators, gendered exploitation occupies a central place, as is signposted early on by the inclusion of a common gothic trope – femicide.<sup>9</sup> Montero inserts the brutal tale of a white German woman who

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<sup>9</sup> The feminization of poverty as integral to capitalism has been amply commented on (Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004). In the Caribbean and Latin American context, Dupuy writes: 'women have higher rates of poverty, higher rates of unemployment, suffer greater wage discrimination, have less income of their own, are more



escapes into the Haitian forests in a symbolic attempt to go beyond the confines of the patriarchal-capitalist system, but who is quickly hunted down and then beaten to her (presumed) death. This story suggests that gendered exploitation is international and integral to capitalist modernity: here, institutions (doctors), family (brothers, fathers, sons), and other men (in this case, the Haitian men hired to hunt her down) all work together to bring the woman, who was ‘out of her mind’, back under patriarchal control (26). The young Thierry shows some awareness that the woman may not in fact be mad, and thinks of asking her husband ‘not to hit his wife too hard because she could die’ (37). However, both he and his father are instrumental in her capture, which echoes the capture of the zombies. Overall, Thierry’s narrative enacts a patriarchal masculinity of sexual prowess, defined through his relations with different women, while female voices remain absent (Boling, 2008, 62-3). Victor’s narrative is equally characterized by blind spots, especially when it comes to the breakdown of his own marriage, the reasons for which are merely hinted at (one might list here the couple’s complete lack of communication and his overinvestment in a male-dominated academic environment and heroic quest narrative). Both Thierry’s and Victor’s narratives illustrate types of patriarchal masculinities that curtail male-female relations; the women’s stories (that feature rape, death and female promiscuity) are only accessible through these male narratives. In contrast to Kearns, I would argue that Montero highlights that patriarchal exploitation is part of the colonial-capitalist legacy, denouncing both (2006, 122).

Boling has commented in detail on Montero’s denunciation of the link between patriarchal capitalism and environmental violence (Boling, 2006, 317). This is symbolised most poignantly in the tale of the German woman, since it is during the search for her that Thierry first sees the *grenouille du sang*, who functions as a harbinger of death and appears at moments when violence is about to erupt. As the captured woman lies in the back of the car,

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economically dependent, have less access to and use or control over resources, are more politically disempowered, and are more subject to violence than men’ (Dupuy, 2007, 13).

‘she moaned again, and from time to time a putrid bubble boiled up from deep in her throat, it was like the song of the frog’ (37). If environmental degradation is fundamental to capitalist expansion and disproportionately affects poor peripheral countries, so was the feminization and racialization of poverty; and it is those connections that Montero seeks to render visible in her novel. Montero’s (and indeed Vega’s) text may thus be read within an international corpus of environmental feminist work from the last quarter of the twentieth century. Anti-capitalist environmentalist feminist thinkers – important precursors for current work on world-ecology who are often sidelined within mainstream ecocriticism – have gone some way towards providing the global framework that the novel gestures towards, and highlighting the ideological and material links between the ‘subordination of nature, women and the colonies’ (Mies, 1986, 77). This is not to say that female exploitation is the same everywhere or across racial and class differences: capitalism unfolds within ‘nature’, develops through the intertwined subjugations of women and the extra-human environment, but this is differently inflected by class struggles, racialization and peripheralization (Federici, 2004; Mies, 1986). To re-connect this argument with the role of ‘zombies’ in *You, Darkness*, I would suggest that Montero encourages us to read the gothic tale of the German woman – seemingly out-of-place within the novel as a whole – alongside the story of the dispossessed zombie hordes staring at the hills, as well as alongside the depiction of environmental degradation.

The tale of the German woman might also be compared to an episode in the novel involving death through zombie poison, the reversal of the tale of female zombification, and a witch/whore figure. The victim of the zombie poison is white Australian herpetologist Wilson, the first foreign scientist Thierry collaborated with, who eventually dies in the sixties, after showing signs of having ingested zombie poison made from toads and (allegedly) prepared by Ganesha, the black Guadeloupean woman with whom he lived. The chapter is reminiscent of Wade Davies’ sensationalist research on Haitian zombification, with its different recipes for zombie poisons, including toads and puffer fish, as well as its

representation of similar signs of intoxication (1985). Wilson's story not only doubles Victor's quest, but also highlights the gendered violence that underlies stories of female zombification. From the perspective of Thierry, Wilson is to be pitied since Ganesha has 'swallowed his soul' (68) and embodies various negative female stereotypes, from that of the promiscuous woman who 'offered her rump like a dog' to the 'witch' with unusual intimate body marks (70). Yet Thierry is clearly unreliable, as disturbingly violent and increasingly gothic details belie his narrative of the wronged man: Ganesha periodically tries to escape from the house (secured with barbed wire, ostensibly to keep the suitors from getting in), while Wilson always recaptures her, 'grabb[ing] her by the throat and dragg[ing] her back to his lair' (70); he is finally poisoned by her (according to Thierry). The ending thus reverses the common tale of female zombification, in which the woman (normally light-skinned and of a higher social position) is made compliant by a bokor to ensure her amorous availability to the suitor.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, then, the interweaving of these tales could be seen as emblematic of the way in which everything that is alive exists within a 'red de interdependencia' [web of interdependence] (Boling, 2006, 318), arguably offering an implicit self-indictment of the lack of meta-narratives, of a framework that might help the reader understand the implied connections. How do we think the potential of a Haitian apocalypse (evoked by Thierry) alongside the global frog extinctions that have been occurring since the eighties? What insights are offered by Ganesha's story? How can we think the gothic tale of the (presumed)

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<sup>10</sup>In her short story, 'Corinne, Amiable Girl', Montero made these 'sexist, racist, and political underpinnings' (Paravisini, 1997, 51) very explicit: the offspring of a white priest and a black prostitute, Corinne can be 'saved' from her mother's fate through making sure that she will 'never raise her voice' at her unwanted husband-to-be (1994, 837). Significantly, Montero also uses this story to question the usefulness of the gothic mode for understanding Haiti under Duvalier: the gothic plot is derailed by the massacre of anti-Duvalier protesters, and anonymous piles of bodies render the female zombie meaningless.

death of the white madwoman at the hands of her husband alongside the deforestation of Haiti during the second half of the twentieth century? While several characters seek out larger explanatory paradigms, notably Victor does not – for him the violence of the *de facto* military regime merely represents an ‘absurd danger’ (41) that hinders his efforts to find the last of the species. As Rivera Villegas puts it, both he and the scientist who sent him are incapable of looking ‘más allá de los paradigmas que aprendieron en su socialización’ [beyond the paradigms that they learned in their socialization] (161). The inadequateness of Victor’s approach is symbolised quite deftly in what he finds when he returns to his destroyed campsite – the ‘most recent issue of Froglog, a monthly bulletin of data concerning the decline of amphibians, [lying] on a stone, covered with a pile of shit’ (43). Even when attempting to make sense of his experience, the only way in which Victor is able to connect human and environmental degradation is in terms of ‘species extinction’: to him, Thierry looks to belong to ‘a dying species’ (177). This perspective, then, is one that easily slips into a form of environmental racism.

Montero’s critique of Victor is twofold: Victor’s method of enquiry is ahistorical and unable to inscribe itself relationally within a larger geopolitical context; further, his approach to extra-human nature is to objectify it – he is unable to view ‘nature’ as anything more than an object of study. Dr Emile Boukaka, a surgeon, amateur herpetologist and houngan, points to the limitations of a blinkered scientific approach that thinks through environmental catastrophes merely from a consequentialist, mono-causal viewpoint: ‘You people invent explanations: acid rain, herbicides, deforestation. But the frogs are disappearing from places where none of this has happened’ (94). Boukaka proposes a more all-encompassing Vodoun view on the matter, while the novel as a whole presents a narrative universe on the verge of an all-encompassing apocalypse. Victor’s viewpoint is also explicitly challenged by that of Thierry. As background to his family saga, he provides information on the radical restructuring of nature-society relations (with continued references to ongoing deforestation,

impoverishment and political and social violence):

You want to know where the frogs go. I cannot say, sir, but let me ask you a question: Where did our fish go? Almost all of them left this sea, and in the forest, the wild pigs disappeared, and the migratory ducks, and even the edible iguanas, they went too. You only have to see what's left of the people here, take a careful look: you can see the bones pushing out under their skins as if they wanted to escape, to leave behind that weak flesh where they are so battered, to go into hiding somewhere. At times I think, but I keep it to myself, I think that one day a man like you will come here, someone who crosses the ocean to look for a couple of frogs, and he will find only a great hill of bones on the shore, a hill higher than the peak of the *Tête Boeuf*.  
(12)

While Thierry also remains blind to certain issues (especially when it comes to gender), he insists on linking human and extra-human devastation.<sup>11</sup> More generally, Thierry's apocalyptic narrative of increasing impoverishment and starvation (evoked unambiguously in the image of 'the bones pushing out under their skin') registers the neoliberal destruction of local agriculture (including the rice industry, a local staple) during the pro-US Baby Doc dictatorship that unquestioningly accepted free market and development 'solutions'. As a result, by the middle of the 1980s, 'Haiti had become the most impoverished country of the Western Hemisphere by any measure' (Dupuy 2007: 51). Since its occupation of Haiti in 1915, the US has played a major role in increasing Haitian dependency, backing, even if

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<sup>11</sup> Thierry's statement alludes to the extermination of the native pig population (at the urging of USAID) in the early eighties (ostensibly, to eradicate swine fever, but in the process devastating the Haitian peasantry to the benefit of the North American food-processing industry and the Haitian elites) (Dupuy, 2007; Farmer, 2006, 37-41).

reluctantly, the brutal and systemically violent Duvalier dictatorships for their anti-communism and willingness to ‘offer all the advantages to foreign capital’ (Dupuy 2007: 40). Yet, when in Montero’s novel, the US-trained Victor comes to do fieldwork in Haiti during the ‘reign of terror’ of Raoul Cédras (who had come to power in a CIA-backed coup), he is unable to fit the violence that erupts into any narrative that might make sense of what he is experiencing. While the novel does not comment on the role of international finance, the US, or US-dominated institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF, it does ask the reader insistently to look for a larger framework.

In conclusion, Vega’s and Montero’s novels have much to contribute to current debates on the ecologies of the gothic. Both texts demands that the gothic be inserted within global processes, which are inherently ecological. Most interestingly, both texts reflect on the ecology of the trope of the madwoman and other instances of the monstrous-feminine. Miss Susan, Florence, Selenia, Ganesha and the German woman are products of a capitalist patriarchal system, which, as we have seen, also translates into particular ways of inhabiting, dividing and working the land. They are thus also ecological figures, even though their relation to their environments tends to be mediated by patriarchal institutions (which are themselves environment-making processes). As Glissant put it most eloquently, ‘landscape is a character’ in the process of creating history; it is not merely a background. This emphasis on the centrality of the land is reflected in Montero’s insistence on the intertwining of human and non-human animal destinies and Vega’s attention to the characters’ relation to the landscapes they inhabit, whether the gardens or the plantations. As I have argued, the zombie is particularly suited to thinking about these relations, since in its various incarnations s/he not only sits at the fault lines of racial, class, gender and environmental violence, but fundamentally speaks to the metabolic rifts through which capitalism develops.

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