

# GOTHIC NATURE IN FANTASY FICTION: THE WHITE WALKERS AS DREADFUL AGENTS OF NATURE IN GAME OF THRONES

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## ABSTRACT

By applying Elizabeth Parker's seven theses (2020) to *Game of Thrones* as the keys to identifying Gothicised spaces, I assert that the icy and eerie environment north of the Wall manifests as Gothic Nature insofar as it fulfills all seven ways in which nature can become a Gothic threat: the northern space represents a hostile environment, associated with a postcolonial past, and connected to the human unconscious. The second part focuses on the creation of the White Walkers as Nature's agents and their portrayal as dreadful entanglements that alter (non)human life. Introducing the notion of transcorporeality, the dualism human/nonhuman is deconstructed—since the White Walkers aren't naturally born but created out of sacrificed human babies. The White Walkers and their army become one singular monstrous hyperobject that foregrounds how humanity is “at the mercy of larger forces of nature” (Smith and Hughes 2013, 6). The story reflects our responsibility for climate change. Following Gothic tradition, the dark ecology (Morton 2016) in the saga blurs “the lines between the terror sublime and the uncanny” (Tibbetts 2011, 5), thereby, the agency of Gothicised Nature is foregrounded and the White Walkers are established as mirrors for our anxieties about the future of our planet.

KEYWORDS: *Game of Thrones*, White Walkers, Gothic Nature, Transcorporeality, Hyperobject.

## NATURALEZA GÓTICA Y FANTASÍA: LOS CAMINANTES BLANCOS COMO AGENTES DEL MIEDO DE LA NATURALEZA EN JUEGO DE TRONOS

## RESUMEN

A través de la aplicación de las siete tesis de Elizabeth Parker (2020) a *Juego de Tronos* como herramientas para identificar espacios góticos, sostengo que el gélido y aterrador entorno al norte del Muro se configura como una manifestación de la Naturaleza gótica, ya que cumple con las siete características en las que la naturaleza puede convertirse en una amenaza gótica. El espacio norteño se presenta como un entorno inhóspito, vinculado a un pasado postcolonial y relacionado con el inconsciente humano. La segunda parte del análisis se enfoca en los Caminantes Blancos como agentes de la Naturaleza y su representación como fuerzas terribles que transforman la vida (y la no vida) humana. Al introducir el concepto de transcorporealidad, se desmantela el dualismo entre lo humano y lo no humano, pues los Caminantes Blancos no son fruto de un nacimiento natural, sino que se originan a partir de bebés humanos sacrificados. Los Caminantes Blancos y su ejército constituyen un hiperobjeto monstruoso que resalta cómo la humanidad está “a merced de fuerzas mayores de la naturaleza” (Smith y Hughes 2013, 6). Esta narrativa refleja nuestra responsabilidad en el cambio climático. En consonancia con la tradición gótica, la ecología oscura de la saga, difumina lo que Morton considera “las líneas entre el terror sublime y lo siniestro” (Tibbetts 2011, 5), destacando la agencia de la Naturaleza gótica y presentando a los Caminantes Blancos como un reflejo de nuestras ansiedades sobre el futuro del planeta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Juego de Tronos*, caminantes blancos, naturaleza gótica, transcorporealidad, hiperobjeto.

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There's only one war. The Great War. And it's here.  
(*The Dragon and the Wolf* 00:24:00)

While *Game of Thrones*<sup>1</sup> starts out as a political fantasy drama, primarily concerned with who sits on the Iron Throne, the narrative gradually reveals that these political mind games are ultimately inconsequential in the face of the imminent threat 'beyond the Wall.' When several characters realise that the White Walkers pose a real danger, their task becomes to convince the South and political players such as Cersei Lannister that the Walkers and "the army of the dead [are indeed not] a story made up by wet-nurses to frighten children" (*Eastwatch* 00:25:18-00:25:24). Similar to the Southerners, contemporary society is lulled into a denial mentality based on a false sense of security of being in control of Nature.<sup>2</sup> However, unstoppable desertification, species extinction, and natural forces like earthquakes not only visualise how far away we actually are from controlling Nature as such, or any consequences of anthropogenic climate change for that, but also inspire emotional responses that range from "anxiety, horror, terror, anger, sadness, nostalgia [... to] guilt" (Schell 2017, 177). Even though most cultural products can enable us to work through the emotional complexity climate change brought about, it is especially "the negative sublime" (Botting 2014, 69) that re-enchants Nature as evading our control, just as the Gothic monster causes a return of repressed emotions.

In the context of anthropogenic climate change, an investigation of how the ecoGothic in form of Gothicised Nature enters fantasy fiction can hence enlighten the effectiveness of the dark sublime in tackling questions of and working through emotions related to climate catastrophes. In the dark/negative sublime, Nature is established as animate and marked as chaotic, monstrous, and beyond our control. Thus, Gothic Nature becomes "a symbolic whole" in stark contrast to human nature, which enables a re-mystification that foregrounds the anxieties and concerns "that haunt our relationships to the non-human world" (Parker 2020, 20). With their aptness for distorted images of extratextual reality, the 'return of the repressed' is a trope the Gothic shares with Fantasy; that is, both can open and reveal those emotions "that are often ignored and/or repressed" (Baker 2012, 39). Thereby, the uncanny manifests itself through a displacement of desires, drives, or fears onto liminal or hybrid figures that (re)invoke anxiety when an impression revives what has been previously suppressed or when surmounted beliefs are re-established. As Fantasy and Gothic reveal "hidden anxieties concealed within the subject" (Jackson 2009, 38), these figures –often represented by monsters such as ghosts, vampires, or

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the abbreviation *GoT* will be used to refer to the HBO adaptation *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). In addition, 'White Walker' and 'Night King' will be abbreviated to 'Walker' and 'King' respectively when used in succession.

<sup>2</sup> The capitalisation of *Nature* serves to acknowledge the difference between Nature as a space, where the nonhuman defies human control, and nature as a place that humans have been cultivated (Parker 2020, 7-8). Besides, I use the term *space* to refer to "landscapes of fear" (30) whilst *place* is used for cultivated landscapes.



demons— are associated with culture’s dark side and heavily influenced by the Gothic aesthetics of “past, decay and death” (Wester and Reyes 2019, 4). Both the trope of the monster and the uncanny are hence not unique for Fantasy nor for Gothic. However, Fantasy worlds not created in Gothic mode differ in representation from those fantastic narratives that are Gothicised.

As Ulstein demonstrates in her article, Fantasy shares with Gothic a strong opposition towards an “anthropocentric view of the world” (2015, 7). However, whereas Gothic creates an anti-anthropocentric worldview by evoking a dark sublime through a sentient, monstrous Nature, Fantasy generally builds anti-anthropocentric worlds by rendering the nonhuman essential –without necessarily focusing on a darker environment. When Nature in Fantasy does become Gothicised, it then manifests as either “an avenging force, eliminating troublesome humans” (Tyburski 2013, 147), a space that is filled with horror-evoking monsters, or one that was idyllic before but became dark by human interference. While the control of the human over Nature is questioned, the Gothic mode moves the dark sublime to the centre of the Fantasy story, which enables the deconstruction of the anthropocentric notion of a controlled nature. In contrast to this anthropocentrism, Gothic Nature as the negative sublime represents Nature “as a space of crisis” (Estok 2018, 3) and disorder by which the ecoGothic evokes ecophobia –an inherent human anxiety and discomfort based on humankind’s inability “to control and order all nonhuman Nature” (Parker 2020, 23). The application of ecocriticism to Fantasy in Gothic mode can hence uncover “dystopian ecological visions” (Smith and Hughes 2013, 4) in a “darker, more sublime environment” (5).

To demonstrate how Gothicised Fantasy is equipped to address climate change concerns, I outline below how in *GoT* the arctic space north of the Wall is transformed into Gothic Nature. In this, I base my findings on Parker’s seven markers for the Gothic forest (2020) and illustrate how her theory on woodlands can be applied to any other form of Nature –here, a fantastic version of arctic spaces.<sup>3</sup> Based on Alaimo’s *transcorporeality* (2010), I further elucidate how the Gothic notion of consumption promotes climate change as a *hyperobject* (Morton 2013) in the Chthulucene (Haraway 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> Based on Cohen’s theses on the monster (1996) and Murphy’s elaborations on horror (2013), Parker establishes the following seven markers for the Gothic forest: the forest is “against civilization,” “associated with the past,” “a landscape of trial,” “a setting in which we are lost,” “a consuming threat,” “a site of the human unconscious” and “an antichristian space” (2020, 47).



# 1. THE ANTHROPOS AND WILDERNESS BEYOND THE WALL

## 1.1. NATURE AND “WILDINGS” AS ANTITHESIS TO CIVILIZATION

Based on Derrida's thoughts on *différance*, Parker establishes that the difference between *human* and *Nature* is grounded in the human being related to the notion of *civilisation*, which is “constructed in terms of *order*,” while *Nature* is constructed “in terms of *chaos*” (2020, 48; original emphasis). This contraposition then relates to ideas of *control* insofar as a civilisation's quality of being an ordered place is established through human control over nature while Nature as a space of chaos is marked as such due to humanity's inability to exert control here –thus, Nature becomes the antithesis to civilisation based on the degree of control one can exert. Accordingly, Gothic Nature in *GoT* is for once established through various characters commenting on being unable to control the space beyond the Wall. For instance, when Jon Snow is on patrol with Qhorin Halfhand, the latter remarks: “You can't tame a wild thing. You can't trust a wild thing. [...] Wild creatures have their own rules, their own reason. You'll never know them” (*The Old Gods and the New* 00:10:03-00:12:40). In a similar vein, Maester Aemon explains how dangerous it is that the Night's Watch “can't properly patrol the wilderness” (*Lord Snow* 00:50:45); after which the camera cuts to a panning shot of the landscape north of the Wall (00:51:32). In accord with the Gothic tradition, the images are dark coloured, showing a misty scenery of snowy hills and forests up until the horizon. The only sound is the howling of the wind, evoking an eerie feeling. With wild Nature stretching out as far as the eye can see, without any markers of the human, the Wall becomes the border between civilisation and wilderness.

Besides establishing the North as an untameable terrain, the dualistic notions of *civilisation* and *Nature* are further incorporated through the portrayal of the people living beyond the Wall. While an audience may recognise the Free Folk as a distinct civilisation, *GoT* invests considerable screen time in coding them as non-human Nature that exists in opposition to ‘conventional’ human civilisation. Hereby, the show follows the master narrative of centric systems that differentiate “between a privileged hegemonic group awarded full agency status,” i.e. the South, and “excluded peripheral groups who are denied agency” (Plumwood 2002, 29), i.e. the Free Folk among others. Following a pattern of establishing those living north as uneducated, the subsequent conversation between Ygritte and Jon illustrates the superiority those living more south assume for themselves:

*Ygritte*: Is this a palace?

*Jon*: It's a windmill.

*Ygritte*: Windmill. Who built it? A King?

*Jon*: Just some men who used to live here.

*Ygritte*: Must have been great builders sticking stones so high.

*Jon*: [...] If you're impressed by a windmill, you'll be swooning if you saw the Great Keep of Winterfell.

*Ygritte*: What's swooning?



Jon: Fainting.  
Ygritte: What's fainting?  
(*The Bear and the Maiden Fair* 00:40:25-00:41:57)

Furthermore, the people north are generally portrayed as undisciplined and referred to as “wildling bastard[s]” (*And Now His Watch Is Ended* 00:38:54) and “wildling whore[s]” (*Blood of My Blood* 00:20:20). That these people, inhabiting ‘uncivilised’ Nature, have a different perspective of themselves is highlighted when Ygritte refers to her people as “The Free Folk” (*The Old Gods and the New* 00:19:13) –though we are already in season two, this is the first time the audience hears the expression. Ygritte elaborates: “Do you think we’re savages because we don’t live in stone castles? We can’t make steel as good as you, that’s true, but we’re free. Someone trying to tell us we can’t lie down as man and woman, we shove a spear up his arse. [...] Girls would claw each other’s eyes out to get naked with you” (*A Man Without Honor* 00:16:56-00:18:34). While her words emphasise a difference in perspective, i.e. the Free Folk not seeing themselves as chaotic and undisciplined but simply as free, Ygritte’s choice of words also highlights a particular rudeness and primitivism that relates to Parker’s marker of Gothic Nature embracing our “fear that the primitive setting creates the primitive human” (2020, 48). The nature of the Free Folk then becomes particularly apparent when Mance Rayder, the leader of the Free Folk, explains to Jon:

Do you know what it takes to unite ninety clans? Half of whom want to massacre the other half over one insult or another. They speak seven different languages in my army. The Thenns hate Hornfoots, the Hornfoots hate Ice River clans, everyone hates the cave people. So you know how I got moon-worshippers and cannibals and giants to march in the same way? [...] I told them we’re all going to die if we don’t walk south. (*Dark Wings, Dark Words* 00:24:24-00:26:48)

In addition to furthering the narrative of the ‘uncivilised’ Free Folk, the introduction of giants and cannibals serves to reinforce the notion that Nature beyond the Wall is “a fearful space inhabited by threatening characters” (Smith and Hughes 2013, 9) that aim to transgress the status quo; a transgression that is quite literal insofar as the Free Folk attempt to cross the Wall –an endeavour that would ultimately transform the life of all those living south.

As shown, *GoT* gothicises Nature by setting it against civilisation through dialogues and particular camera shots. Hereby, the Wall is established as the symbolic border between place and space, between civilisation and Nature, between Self (Southerners) and Other (Free Folk). Considering the Free Folk’s endeavour to transgress the material border of the Wall, these dualisms concerned with “the question of boundaries” (Parker 2020, 49) are exposed as inherently constructive, malleable, and unstable.



## 1.2. TRIAL AND EDUCATION IN HOSTILE NATURE

Linked to Nature being set against civilisation is the marker of Gothic Nature as a space of trial; i.e. a harsh environment that both threatens human survival as well as it offers education. First, *GoT* incorporates this by highlighting the brutality of the space beyond the Wall. Second, the knowledgeable Free Folk and Bran's journey beyond the Wall establish the educational purpose of Gothic Nature. When Alister confronts Jon and his friends before they swear their loyalty to the Night's Watch, he points towards the difficulty of surviving beyond the Wall as follows:

The wildlings who fight for Mance Rayder are hard men, harder than you'll ever be. They know the country better than we do. They knew there was a storm coming in so they hid in their caves and waited for it to pass and we got caught in the open, winds so strong it ripped one hundred foot tall trees straight from the ground, roots and all. If you took your gloves off to find your cock to have a piss, you lost a finger to the frost and all in darkness. [...] You're boys still and come the winter, you will die. (*Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things* 00:42:03-00:44:30)

Alister then further hints at him and his companions resorting to cannibalism, after they had eaten their horses that died from the cold. Here, the show simultaneously demonstrates Nature's lethality and the adaptive ability of the Free Folk to 'read' Nature, which ensures their survival. In the same vein, Jon gets lost when on patrol beyond the Wall in *The Old Gods and the New*, being at Ygritte's mercy, who knows her way around the arctic terrain and is thus able to find shelter from the cold. It becomes apparent how Nature "challenges one's skill in both internal and external survival" (Parker 2020, 50) as well as how difficult it is "to maintain sanity, whilst simultaneously staying alive in the wild" (51) since the need to eat one's companions can easily bring someone on the verge of lunacy. The scenes above demonstrate how the main task for those entrapped in Gothic Nature is "essentially to stay alive just long enough so as to be able to escape this environment" (51).

In addition to the establishment of Nature beyond the Wall as harsh and testing, Bran becoming the Three Eyed Raven draws the focus on Gothic Nature "instilling education" (Parker 2020, 51). The first time the audience can grasp the knowledge that Bran will gain through the sight –i.e. the ability to see "things that haven't happened," "[t]hings that happened long before" as well as "things that happen right now" (*Dark Wings, Dark Words* 00:46:23) –is through Bran's first dream of a raven with a third eye on its forehead (*Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things*) that reoccurs during the whole Tv show and ultimately leads to Bran's precognition of his father's death (*Fire and Blood*). While obtaining this knowledge is linked to the space beyond the Wall insofar as it is there the Three Eyed Raven is located, the ability of the sight is also closely intertwined with Nature, in particular with the weirwoods.<sup>4</sup> Just

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<sup>4</sup> Weirwoods are trees that have both red foliage and a sad facial expression carved in red into their white trunks.

as the Three Eyed Raven is entangled with the roots of an old weirwood, also Bran's visions are linked to these trees. Before being educated by the Three Eyed Raven, Bran is overwhelmed by an accumulation of various visions when he touches the face of a weirwood (*Valar Dohaeris* 00:00:00-00:03:17; *The Lion and the Rose* 00:24:43-00:28:17): the screen shows the shot of a sundown behind a weirwood mixed with images of Ned Stark, a flock of ravens, the Iron Throne covered in snow, Bran's fall from the tower, King's Landing, and an undead girl in the woods. Depending on the episode, the audience is already familiar with some of these shots. The scenes of Bran's visions and glimpses of the past are thereby always announced by the cawing of ravens, entangling the knowledge of the Three Eyed Raven with the weirwood and the flocks of ravens, i.e. Nature. The intertwining of comprehensive knowledge, weirwoods, and ravens thus establishes a form of knowledge that transcends the boundaries of the human.

Further, the notion of the North as an educational space informed by more-than-human knowledge is also linked to the way Bran acquires the knowledge about the Three Eyed Raven's location in the first place (*The Lion and the Rose*): Having entered his direwolf Summer's mind, Bran is guided by her to a weirwood. By establishing a connection with this tree, Bran gains the vision that reveals the Three Eyed Raven's weirwood on a ridge. In addition to emphasising that it is ultimately the more-than-human knowledge system that enables Bran to find human-transcending education, *GoT* introduces also other people in the North as able to warg, i.e. being able to "enter the minds of animals" (*Lord Snow* 00:25:41). Through the ability of "thinking across bodies" (Alaimo 2010, 4), the show establishes a Chtulucene where everything –the trees, the human and the animal– is intrinsically linked. While the Anthropocene presents the human as the dominant actor, humans in the Chtulucene of *GoT* "are with and of the Earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this Earth are the main story" (Haraway 2016, n.p.). In a similar vein, the inherent interconnectedness between various bodies enables a reading through the lens of Alaimo's notion of *transcorporeality*, assuming the corporeality of the human always being "intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2010, 2), marking the human as inextricably linked to the environment. Through Bran and the wargs as such, 'becoming each other' is thus a reality in the Chtulucene of *GoT*.

The visually most striking representation of Nature beyond the Wall as instilling education then occurs when Bran and his companions finally arrive at the weirwood from his vision. Approaching the weirwood with whose roots the Three Eyed Raven is entangled, the camera follows the group as they climb a ridge, battling against the wind; the ambient sound of swooshing wind underscoring the harshness of the environment. At the tip of the ridge, a panning shot reveals a single weirwood that stands adrift, dark clouds behind it. As the sun breaks through just behind the weirwood, clothing it in bright light, upbeat music starts playing (*The Children* 00:31:54-00:33:00). The weirwood becomes the light in the dark –a place of education amidst a space of primitivism. Throughout season six Bran stays with the Three Eyed Raven to learn from him, ultimately becoming the new Three Eyed Raven.

At the height of Bran's journey, the educational setting once again becomes hostile, marking Gothic Nature as a space one needs to survive in long enough to



escape it once more. After Bran touches the roots of the Three Eyed Raven's weirwood unsupervised, he finds himself in front of the same weirwood –only at a different time (*The Door* 00:35:49-00:39:57). Jump cutting between Bran and an army of undead he walks through, eerie music starts playing while the camera pans over a horse, revealing the Night King<sup>5</sup> atop. The moment the King touches Bran's arm, the latter wakes up screaming and brand-marked; due to this marking, the King is then able to enter the space under the weirwood. The shift from being under the Three Eyed Raven's protection to being under attack by the King is linked to Bran's ultimate transformation to the new Three Eyed Raven after the old one's death. Consequently, though Bran acquires the human-transcending knowledge through his exposure to the Cthulucene of Gothic Nature, it is his ability to also leave this space alive that ultimately rewards him as he is transformed from a boy to a more-than-human being. However, as Bran overcomes the boundaries of human knowledge, *GoT* establishes not just any kind of Cthulucene but a Pagan one.

## 2. PAGAN TRANSCORPOREALITY IN THE ANTICHRISTIAN CHTHULUCENE

### 2.1. OLD GODS AND NEW GODS, OR COSMOGONIC AND CHAOGONIC RELIGIONS

Following the markers above, the notion of the North being antichristian allows to prove the applicability of Parker's other theses (2020); i.e., Gothic Nature as an antichristian space becomes associated with the postcolonial past and the human unconscious. Applying Parker's elaboration on Gothic Nature as antichristian, it is essential to differentiate between the secondary world of *GoT* and the extratextual, Christian ideology woven into the narrative. Although the two dominant religions in Westeros –that of the Old Gods and that of the New Gods– are both polytheistic and therefore do not resemble monotheistic Christianity, the textual representation of these competing religions is still informed by extratextual, Christian beliefs. In the following, I will demonstrate how the North becomes antichristian not through a direct juxtaposition with a fictional version of Christianity but through its association with the ecocentric religion of the Old Gods which is informed by an anthropocentric fear of Nature; in contrast, the religion of the New Gods is linked to cultivated nature.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, religion divides the world into “ordered and sacred” versus “disordered and profane” (Parker 2020, 60) which mirrors the juxtaposition of Nature as chaotic with human civilisation as ordered. In other words, religion is

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<sup>5</sup> The Night King is first White Walker ever created, with a head formed like a crown.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading on Christian doctrine, see Moltmann's *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (1985), James Nash's *Loving Nature* (1991) or Roderick Frazier Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (2001).





*cosmogonic* in that it assumes that it sustains order, and Nature is *chaogonic*, meaning “world-destructive” (Beal 2001, 41). Besides the portrayal of the North as hostile and home to the primitive human, the idea of “cultivated, and colonised” human place versus “wild, and uninhabited” (Parker 2020, 60) space is further reinforced through the religions of the Old Gods and of the New Gods. The comparison of Old and New is thereby closely tied to Nature and the border of the Wall, which becomes evident, for instance, when Jon must go beyond the Wall to stand in front of a weirwood to take his oath before the Old Gods (*You Win or You Die*). This is further contextualised when Osha explains to Bran that the Old Gods “are the only gods” beyond the Wall that can see him as “[... t]he Old Gods have no power in the South. The weirwoods there were all cut down a long time ago. How can they watch you when they have no eyes?” (*The Pointy End* 00:36:48-00:37:53).<sup>7</sup> First, through Osha’s statement, the Old religion becomes again associated with Nature, i.e. the weirwoods, and is thus linked to the space beyond the Wall –while the New Gods stand for order and cultivated nature, the Old Gods are closely connected to chaos, cannibalism, and hostile Nature (see section 1.1 and 1.2). This existential linkage between the Old Gods and the weirwoods then establishes a “nature-religion” (Hutton 2009, 328) that mirrors the Christian imagination of Pagan belief systems.<sup>8</sup> Second, Osha’s remark on how the South as a place of order pushed back Nature’s chaos by cutting down the weirwoods resonates with Christian exploits of Nature grounded in the latter being “devoid of the divine” (Parker 2020, 61) and thus antichristian; leading to the assertion of a “divinely decreed” (61) subjugation and organisation of chaogonic Nature and the propagation of the demonised forest.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting the “demonisation and exploitation of the natural world” by Christianity, *GoT* realises the imagination of “a dangerous and specifically Pagan love of the forest” through the representation of Nature as marked by “darkness, sin, perdition, and alienation” (Parker 2020, 60). For instance, in *What Is Dead May Never Die*, Lord Commander Mormont states to Jon that the wildlings serve more vicious gods; emphasising the association of the space beyond the Wall with something dark and wicked. Further, Osha refers to Bran’s visions as “black magic” (*The Bear and the Maiden Fair* 00:44:50), and as Bran becoming the Three Eyed Raven is linked to the space beyond the Wall, the show establishes the North as a hostile space of evil. The pejorative depiction of the religion of the Old God as a profane and wicked “nature-religion” thereby represents a subjacent incorporation of the popular imagination of Paganism in *GoT*, through which Nature is marked as an antichristian space in the

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<sup>7</sup> While the books mention weirwoods in the South as part of the cultivated nature –a mere symbol rather than a sublime presence as in the hostile North–, the Tv show emphasises their complete deforestation.

<sup>8</sup> Besides Hutton’s elaborations on the shift from Paganism to Christianity (2009), see also Hanegraaff (1998); both of which are Parker’s foundation for her reading of the Gothic forest as antichristian.

<sup>9</sup> See White (1967) or Conradie (2016) for readings on Christian exploits and Christian critique of the same.



show. In alignment with the Christian dualism of divine versus evil, civilisation versus Nature (Moltmann 1985; Beal 2001), *GoT* relates one religion to primitive Nature and another to educated civilisation. Consequently, the fear of the evil forest, linked to Christian doctrine and “contemporary ecophobic anxieties” (Parker 2020, 59), enters the story through the construction of an “*anthropocentric*” worldview in contrast to Paganism as an “animistic, *ecocentric* religion” (61; original emphasis).

## 2.2 THE ARCTIC DEVIL IS NONE OTHER THAN US

Related to the juxtaposition of Christian place and Pagan space is the devil who “is met in the woods” (Parker 2020, 64); a devilish monster that serves to re-enchant Nature by obscuring “the lines between the terror sublime and the uncanny, the rational and the irrational [...] –indeed, between the living and dead” (Tibbets 2011, 5). In the series, the figure of ‘the devil in the woods’ enters the narrative through the White Walkers. As the Walkers are not only monstrous, human-resembling entities that transgress the line between life and death but also become the means through which *GoT* establishes an interconnection between the ‘non-human’ and the human, Nature is re-enchanting while the inherent constructiveness of the human dominance over ‘non-human’ Nature is demonstrated.

In *Winter Is Coming* (00:01:20-00:07:15), the audience is pitchforked into an eerie scene: as a group of riders enters a snowy pine forest, the camera presents the viewer with the Wall rising high above the riders, followed by a cut into the forest beyond the Wall. In this scene, primarily coloured in black and white, the only sound discernible is that of the wind howling and the horses snorting. As a rider (Will) dismounts his horse, he comes upon a spiral of amputated human limbs whose red blood stands out against the white snow. Joining the others, the commander (Royce) orders Will to go and scout the area. Then, a dark figure, of which the viewer can only see glowing, ice-blue eyes (a White Walker), appears behind Royce and kills him. Subsequently, the screen focuses back on Will looking at the black silhouette of a girl who the audience can recognise from when she was pierced to a tree trunk. When the girl turns around, she reveals her white face with blood dripping from her mouth and eyes glowing in ice-blue. Will starts running, and the camera cuts between him fleeing from the girl and the other rider (Gared) fleeing as well; the natural sounds of the shots, mingled with background music that produces a tensed atmosphere, are dominated by snarling and growling coming from the Walkers. Upon meeting, Will witnesses another dark figure appearing behind Gared, who then decapitates him with a long sword. After the Walker hurls Gared’s head to Will, the screen turns black, and the title sequence starts.

Setting the overall mood for the scenes featuring the White Walkers, it is especially noteworthy that this is the first sequence of the whole show as well as one of only a few that are set before the title sequence –foreshadowing the general importance of these shots for the entire narrative. It is here that the audience is first confronted with the sublime Wall as well as the eerie Nature stretching out beyond it. From the outset, Nature beyond the Wall becomes a space of the uncanny where



“anything that ‘should’ be inanimate [...] seems to be living” (Parker 2020, 72). Just as the Gothic in general focuses on transgression, Nature conflated with the Walkers is Gothicised when the boundary between living and dead is first transgressed by the undead girl. Following Smith and Hughes’ remarks on ecoGothic, *GoT* thus establishes “nature as haunted house” (2013, 9) –a traditional trope of the Gothic– through the “malevolent presence” (Tyburski 2013, 149) of both the Walkers and the undead girl. Imbricating both uncanny figures with Nature by connecting their appearance on screen with ambient sounds like the howling of the wind and snarling noises, normally associated with animals, *GoT* introduces not only a monster in the forest but a “monstrous version ... of nature” (Smith and Hughes 2013, 11). Insofar as the girl was dead but then appears to be alive once more, the transcorporeality of animate, human matter and inanimate, corpse matter allows for a dark ecology to enter the story as it breaks with boundaries of life and death/human and Nature. Thus, *GoT* already mirrors Grosz’s understanding of “the body, not as an organism or entity in itself, but as a system [...] functioning within other huge systems it cannot control” (qtd. in Alaimo 2010, 10) in its first sequence. Besides, while the Walkers are closely intertwined with Nature, the wicked practice of creating spirals out of undead human matter further hints at their capacity to think in a way society most often than not only deems possible for the human. Their representation not only follows Gothic’s tendency “to depict nature as a living, acting alien other” (Parker 2020, 27) but also reflects the notion of Gothic “as a system that [...] turns people into objects” (Wester and Reyes 2019, 12). Thus, it is illustrated how the “ability to make things happen [or] to produce effects” (Bennett 2010, 5) is indeed shared by all matter.

Four seasons later, the audience is placed back beyond the Wall, close to the wildling Craster’s settlement. As his last boy is born and taken into the woods, the scene ends with the camera tilting up to an aerial shot of the baby laying in the snow, his screams growing louder (*Oathkeeper*, 00:40:00-00:42:46). This scene is then connected to another one (00:49:10-00:51:32) that begins with an establishing shot of a snowy cliff, only vaguely perceptible through a snowstorm that colours the screen in a bluish white. The camera cuts to a White Walker riding on an undead horse. There is no background music, only the sounds of the wind howling and chains rattling; subsequently, the camera pans around to show the viewer the baby in the arms of the Walker. Thereafter, the camera cuts to a long shot of a valley and, while the rider appears in the left corner, peaked blocks of ice placed in a circle are shown in the right one. In an aerial shot, the audience follows him into the circle, in the middle of which an ice-altar stands. As the baby is placed on the altar and the camera zooms out, the Night King enters the circle. With the camera placed back on the altar, the King’s blurred hand reaches for the boy. In a reverse-angle shot of the baby’s face, a spiky, long nail then taps his cheek: the cooing stops, cracking is audible, the eyes of the baby turn glowing blue, and a new Walker is created. The Gothic fear of “material and psychic invasion [by] a force of contamination and dominance” (Byron 2012, 372) is here related to Bennett’s proposal of material agency that foregrounds a belief in sameness, as “everything is connected” (2010, xi). The entanglement of the human and Walker thereby highlights how permeable the



border between identity and alterity is. The baby starts as part of the human Self. By his contact with the King, however, he is contaminated and turned into a part of the undead Other. The creation of the Walkers then promotes an ecoGothic reading of the entanglement of human and monstrous Nature which relates to the “sense that our monsters, secretly, are none other than *us*” (Parker 2020, 9; original emphasis).

Negating that Nature as well as what waits for us in it is just “passive, inanimate” (69) matter, the show refuses Nature “to be backgrounded” and instead moves it “violently into the foreground” (70). Further, the Walkers enable a re-enchantment of untameable Nature by transgressing the human-Nature binary as they represent ecoGothic’s accentuation of “the mutual entanglements of agentic matter” (Estok 2018, 79). Going back to Alaimo’s “thinking across bodies” (2010, 4), the entanglement of the human population with the Walkers emphasises how Bennett’s notion of *vibrant matter* as the agency of inanimate matter and Alaimo’s *transcorporeality*—i.e. the “interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” in “a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions” (2010, 2)—meshes well with Gothic Nature. Even though Bennett includes all matter and Alaimo’s theory only fleshy matter, considering both approaches enables a well-rounded reading of the portrayal of the Pagan Chthulucene in *GoT*.

### 2.3. DEMONIC DRUIDS AND THE POST-COLONIAL UNCONSCIOUS

As demonstrated above, Parker ties the notion of Nature being Gothic closely to its depiction as an antichristian space based on the dualism between Christianity and Paganism, especially the “Pagan love of the forest” (2020, 59). Connected to this ‘ungodly’ love for Nature is the Druid who is portrayed as just as vile as the Gothic Nature they serve. The representation of the Druids being “profane, wicked and antichristian” (59) is thereby established as they become “associated with human sacrifice” (62) turning the priests of Gothic Nature into the stereotype of the “demonic druids” (Hutton 2011, 418). In *GoT*, the demonic druids enter the story through the figures of the Children of the Forest.

When Bran and his companions are beyond the Wall, they are rescued by a human-resembling figure called Leaf, her skin coloured greenish and structured like tree bark, who proclaims that “The First Men called us the Children, but we were born long before them.” (*The Children* 00:37:49); here, the infantilisation employed by the First Men suggests an attempt to establish a superior position for themselves among the indigenous population of Westeros. Later, Bran’s vision reveals how Leaf and the other Children created the Night King (*The Door* 00:16:05-00:17:50): the sequence is set at the place where the baby boy was turned before—however, where the icy altar stood, a heart-shaped weirwood stands. In an aerial shot, a whispering group of the Children is shown huddled together, and when Leaf gets up the camera focuses on a spearhead in her hand. As she walks towards the screen, the viewer sees a half-naked man bound to the tree trunk. While the man’s wail of pain is discernible, the shot is focused on his naked breast touched by the Child of the Forest’s left hand, the other slowly pushing the spearhead into his flesh. The moment the man’s



body absorbs the blade, background music begins playing and the scene cuts to an extreme close-up of the man's eyes turning blue, followed by a cracking sound and his skin turning an ice-grey colour. The scene ends with Leaf explaining: "We were at war. We were being slaughtered. Our sacred trees cut down. We needed to defend ourselves. From you. From men" (0:17:32-0:17:50).

Besides establishing the Children as demonic Druids that practice human sacrifice and 'black magic,' the sequence also connects the creation of the White Walkers to the postcolonial unconscious –another marker for Gothic Nature. The First Men are the first humans that set foot on Westeros; to whom Leaf refers when she explains to Bran that she and the other Children created the Walkers as a weapon in a war against men. Before their arrival, only the Children and other non-humans such as giants roamed the continent. However, the First Men crossed a land-bridge from Essos and claimed Westeros for themselves. Cutting down the sacred trees of the Children, i.e. the weirwoods, which nearly eradicated these trees in the South, the First Men domesticated and changed Nature to nature. Further, the First Men slaughtered the Children which almost drove them into extinction –only the small group that Bran meets is left.<sup>10</sup> Sharing the same fate of annihilation in the South, the weirwood and the Children are not only both inherently entangled with Pagan Nature beyond the Wall but also enable a reading informed by colonialism.

By introducing a colonial history to *GoT*, northern Nature as the White Walkers' point of origin evokes the Gothic fear of "the return of the past" (Hutchings qtd. in Parker 2020, 50). Related to the Horror technique "to thematically evoke our more bloody histories, which themselves come to haunt us" (50), the Walkers return after thousands of years to now haunt their creators, the Children, just as much as all human population. While the Gothic uses the uncanny to represent repressed fears, the ecoGothic evokes the return of repressed ecofears. In the show, the uncanny liminality of the Night King allows for a return of the repressed knowledge of the colonial history of the First Men and their crimes against the Children as well as Nature. Just as the end of the Holocene and anthropogenic climate change is not only connected to technical advancements or exploitations of Nature but has become recognised as especially tied to colonialism and slave trade (Yusoff 2018), the colonisation of Westeros by the First Men is what ultimately led to the climate monsters' creation. This confrontation with the interrelation of colonialism and climate change may evoke the return of repressed ecofears in the audience as *GoT* mirrors extratextual imperialism and "the crimes [...] against the 'Indians' and against the wilderness" (Parker 2020, 50). Further, the idea of civilisation equating *ego* and

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<sup>10</sup> The simplified portrayal of Westeros' history in *Game of Thrones*, compared to the detailed elaborations in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, doesn't detract from my findings but should be noted. Leaf's remark refers to the long war between the Children and the First Men, but their later peace is only briefly hinted at in *Spoils of War*. Similarly, the First Men's conversion to the Old Gods and the shared ancestry of Northerners and Free Folk are only alluded to. Other colonial powers like the Andals are mentioned but not explored. While Westeros' history is more complex than depicted in *GoT*, the postcolonial undertones persist. See Martin (2014) for further readings.



Nature equaling *id* not only establishes Nature as the shadowy dark counterpart to civilisation, but also highlights that Nature is just as uncontrollable by human civilisation as the *id* is by the ego –marking Gothic Nature as a symbol for “the darkest elements of our [unconscious] psyches” (55). That Nature and its agents, i.e. the Walkers, are both uncontrollable is particularly evident when Jon takes Daenerys to a cave where he shows her ancient wall paintings created by the Children: “They were here together, the Children and the First Men. [...] They fought together against their enemy. Despite their differences, despite their suspicions, together. And we need to do the same if we are to survive” (*Spoils of War* 00:19:50-00:25:38). Thus, even though the Children as Nature’s protectors planned to use the Walkers against their colonisers, they proved to be beyond their control.

### 3. GOTHIC CONSUMPTION AND EERIE HYPEROBJECT

While the entanglement of the First Men and the White Walkers demonstrates how any matter shares and imbricates origins, which further deconstructs the dualism of inanimate and animate matter as well as the juxtaposition of Nature and human civilisation, the narrative also emphasises how “both civilisation *and* Nature are each in danger of consuming –and being consumed– by the other” (Parker 2020, 53-54). As shown above, the Children as representation of the Pagan Druid tied to Nature felt threatened by the First Men, i.e. the colonisers. The Walkers, however, turned on them as well and a circle of consumption was created that ultimately threatens all matter. Hence, *GoT* creates “a setting in which we fear being *eaten*” (54; original emphasis). This fear of being consumed, i.e. losing one’s mind and body, is what Parker identifies as another marker of Gothic Nature. She further emphasises that in Gothic Nature it is not the human who is the consumer but instead they are represented as the “endangered species” (Alaimo qtd. in Parker 2020, 53) with Gothic Nature being “cast as the edacious monster” (Parker 2020, 53). By marking all non-Nature life as endangered and Nature or the Walkers as superior, the anthropocentric idea of human control and Nature’s sole existence to support human life is questioned in *GoT*. Hereby, the Walkers become the embodiment of Alaimo’s transcorporeality, characterised by their capacity for independent action and the pursuit of a singular objective: the construction of an undead army with the intention of consuming all ‘lively’ matter.

However, the Walkers and their army grow out not to be singular monsters but “an all-encompassing monstrous environment” (Tyburski 2013, 148) that relates them to what Morton termed *hyperobject* (2013). Hyperobjects are things, events and concepts that are ‘hyper’ and “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 2013, 1) –even though we understand what they mean, we cannot grasp them. Generally, hyperobjects are viscous, non-local, “involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to” (1), are independent of human-thought and linked to the ending of the world “rendering both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism obsolete” (2). The Walkers are ‘hyper’ in the sense that: they are viscous and stick to the human; they start out as local but quickly



transcend borders of any kind, i.e. the Wall, and are thus a non-local entity; they slept “beneath the ice for thousands of years” (*The Pointy End* 00:38:48-00:39:29) and hence transcend human temporality; and if not defeated, they could very well lead to the end of time.

This hyper-threat for human life is then perfectly illustrated in the episode *Hardhome* (00:28:55-00:56:12), in which Jon and two friends travel to Hardhome, a settling of the Free Folk, to convince the elders to allow the Free Folk to join the fight against the White Walkers. In return, Jon wants to take them south, so they are protected from the Walker’s army. As the natural sound of the sequence is interrupted by dogs barking and the wind crescendoing, the camera pans over the gathered Free Folk and tilts up the cliffs surrounding Hardhome. With continuous rumbling, the camera shows an avalanche forming at the edge of the cliffs that enshroudes everything in front of the settlement’s gate. The sounds outside Hardhome fall silent. When an elder peaks through a hole in the gate, the tension is heightened by reverse-angle cuts until a roaring crowd of undead becomes visible. Following the ensuing battle, Jon is being carried towards life-saving boats, when the loud shriek of a Walker directs the attention back up the cliff. After a cutaway to the cliff in a high-angle, thousands of undead come running and jump off the cliff’s edge: following their fall, the camera tilts down showing the undead rising and charging after Jon and his friend. After they have made it to the boats, melancholic music starts playing while the camera cuts to a long shot of the beach that alternates with extreme close-ups of the Free Folk dying on shore –a mess of grey. The scene then closes with the Night King coming to a halt at the end of the jetty, the shoreline behind him piled with dead bodies. After jump-cutting between Jon and the King, the screen rests on the King raising his arms with the camera zooming in on him in unison; an insert shot pans over the piles of dead Free Folk, whose bodies start twitching. Cutting back to the King with his arms at maximum height, another insert close-up of the dead shows them opening their glowing, blue eyes. From an over-the-shoulder shot of Jon, the dead are seen rising again and, from an aerial shot of the shoreline, the sheer magnitude of the Walkers’ army’s body count is unveiled. With the sound of the wind and water sloshing, the screen turns black.

Just like hyperobjects in the real are overwhelming in their sheer magnitude, something Gothic Nature aims to recreate, the boundlessness of the undead as never aging but ever growing overwhelms not only the characters in the show but may affect the audience as well. *GoT* creates a monster that not only “reject[s] humanity as expendable” (Tyburski 2013, 147) but also “mirror[s] our fears about the fate of our civilization and the planet we call home” (149). Through a Gothicised Chtchulucene, *GoT* demonstrates how we are at Nature’s mercy. While the White Walkers were presented as something intangible, as shadows in the night that are neither dead nor alive, neither nonhuman nor entirely human, they are now displayed as a force of Nature –an avalanche suffocating everything in its grasp, killing and then reviving it in a different form. As representations of Nature, the Walkers “become[...] an avenging force –or, even more monstrous, an alien entity utterly indifferent to the fate of humanity” (Smith and Hughes 2013, 11). Foregrounding Nature’s uncontrollability, the show re-enchants us as an audience by evoking the



ecoGothic though the Walkers who trouble our “state of fear and denial concerning our environmental crisis” (Gonder qtd. In Parker 2020, 59).

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Game of Thrones* is a prime example for how the Gothic mode can enter Fantasy: creating a manifold storyline that foregrounds an inherent interconnectedness of all matter, the Anthropocene is negated in favour of a Gothicised Chthulucene, in which “we come face to face with our alienation from nature” (Tyburski 2013, 150). By applying Parker’s markers for Gothic Nature, I illustrated how *GoT* is a story that reflects the responsibility of colonising forces for contemporary anthropogenic climate change by interlacing the White Walkers as arctic, climate monsters with Westeros’ colonial past. Thereby, the space beyond the Wall unites various dualistic notions: it is at the same time antithesis to civilisation and a place of education; the human is consumed but also finds its history; it is the domain of the devil and the ground of the sacred. Through the disorienting Nature beyond the Wall, eco-anxieties are awoken that may enable the audience to reflect on their own relation to nature. Similar to apocalyptic fiction, *GoT* “tap[s] into our deepest fears by stripping away [all] sense of ‘order, stability, meaning and permanence,’ and replacing it with a vision of destructive chaos” (152) whereby the show portrays how life itself is disintegrated. The impalpable threat of the Walkers creates a horrific Chthulucene that foregrounds feeling “immersed, lost, and frightened” (Parker 2020, 44). The ever-present threat of consumption through the return of the Walkers, i.e. the return of the repressed, establishes a negative sublime that denies the audience to distance themselves from the non-human, inanimate planet. Through the interconnection between Nature, indigeneity, the monster, and the human, *GoT* dissolves the human-Nature binarism and thus highlights how the human is an inherent part of Nature just as Nature is an inherent part of the human. At “a time when global warming turns the sheltering ice and starving bears into victims of hubris rather than the monsters of the yore” (Smith and Hughes 2013, 6), the Walkers as arctic Gothic monsters confronts us with arctic Nature striking back –an apt trope to expose human complicity in climate change insofar as the winter-bringing Walkers are “none other than *us*” (Parker 2020, 9; original emphasis). Besides warning us that this crisis, in Jon Snow’s words, “isn’t about living in harmony. It’s just about living” (*The Dragon and the Wolf*00:19:41), the end of *GoT* foregrounds the importance of humanity banding together in the ‘fight’ against climate change whilst emphasising the inevitability of facing ‘our’ colonial past in order to do so.





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