Alison Rudd

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“We always knew that the dismantling of the colonial paradigm would release strange demons from the deep, and that these monsters might come trailing all sorts of subterranean material,” writes Stuart Hall (1996:259). Hall addresses the ways in which the conduct of debate over the idea of the postcolonial “has become the bearer of … powerful unconscious investments” (1996:242). Scholars of postcolonial literature, including Rudd (p. 1), have prominently cited the sentence about demons and monsters as a segue into their explorations of the entanglement of the Gothic and the representation of colonial history and its legacies. A genre that originated in mid-eighteenth-century Britain, the Gothic has shape-shifted over time and cultures and saturated the modern imagination to the point that Angela Carter could declare in 1974, “We live in Gothic times” (1974:122). Rudd analyzes the “subterranean” reaches of the Gothic in selected, largely contemporary texts from the Anglophone cultures of the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, seeking out the local particularities of the figures that haunt them.

In her chapter on Caribbean Gothic (“The Divided Psyche and the Duppy as Social Figure”), for instance, Rudd examines “schizophrenic splitting and doubling” as “personified by the polymorphous duppy, a figure that shape-shifts between ghost, zombie and soucouyant” (p. 27). Here the influence on Rudd of Marina Warner’s discussion of splitting and doubling (2002) is marked. The account of the Australian Gothic turns to the figures of the bunyip, drawn from Indigenous Australian cultures, and the lost child. In Rudd’s argument, Canadian Gothic thematizes “a haunting sense of absence … arising from a sense of unease surrounding the individual’s location within the landscape” (p. 70) and “signs of haunting in New Zealand Gothic are visible as symptoms that are manifested through physical violence, through the grotesque, or through the abject” (p. 135).

Rudd’s analysis of primary texts is efficient within its own parameters and dutiful, and it usefully places canonical alongside less well-known literature. Over thirty-six pages on the Caribbean Gothic Rudd discusses Derek Walcott’s “West Indian Gothic” (from *Another Life* [1973]), Roger McTair’s “Just a Lark (or the Crypt of Matthew Ashdown)” (from Nalo Hopkinson’s 2000 edited volume, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*), Lloyd W. Brown’s poetry collection *Duppies* (1996), Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Nalo Hopkinson’s “The Glass Bottle Trick” (from her 2001 collection, *Skin Folk*), Dionne Brand’s “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms, and Waterfalls” (from *Sans Souci*

Rudd’s breadth of example does not allow her scope to situate readings of specific texts and authors in relation to the critical literatures on them; an immersion in methodical elucidation of theme and character, at the expense of such engagement, does not produce particularly fresh or radical insights.

As critics of the Gothic point out, “the Gothic tantalizes us with fear, both as its subject and its effect” (Kavka 2002:209). Rudd rarely gestures to the production of Gothic affect in the selected texts, a topic that cuts to important questions around the cultural specificity of readers, readerships, and receptions. Hélène Cixous (1976:533) argues that Sigmund Freud’s reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story “The Sandman,” a crucial theorization of the Gothic, tends to “render uncanniness something too familiar.” Sidestepping questions around affect, Rudd’s critical approach also renders the Gothic “too familiar.”

The pace of Rudd’s discussion exposes the limits of the structure and approach of the book. She pieces together the lineaments of local literary histories from stock texts in the field. Her generalizations about the regional and national Gothic literatures at the core of her study are based on small samples of texts and support derivative understandings of the historiographies of the literatures. Questions about the place, centrality, and influence of the samples in the broader regional and national literary histories are addressed perfunctorily. With respect to Anglophone Caribbean literature, Rudd invokes the familiar historiographical model of postcolonial writing back to the metropole, drawing on Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s 2002 essay “Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: The Caribbean.” Paravisini-Gebert’s literary mapping of the Caribbean Gothic now looks rather dated given the plethora of twenty-first-century scholarship on the contours of colonial Caribbean literatures, for example, editions of colonial texts in the Macmillan Caribbean Classics series, the University of the West Indies Press Caribbean Heritage series, and the Broadview Editions series, as well as Evelyn O’Callaghan’s Women Writing the West Indies, 1804–1939 (2004). Taking account of this new scholarship, Rudd could have redrawn Paravisini-Gebert’s map, connecting her contemporary postcolonial sample with metropolitan texts about, and colonial texts from, the region.

The strengths of Rudd’s book are its breadth of coverage across cultures and canonical and less well-known texts, and its clarity of prose. Depth and originality of historiographical scholarship, though, are sharply curtailed by the breadth.

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References