

**9/11 as American Gothic:
Terror and Historical Darkness in
Patrick McGrath's *Ghost Town***

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Abstract

McGrath's *Ghost Town*, published after 9/11, is an extraordinary fictional response to the tragic historical event. The book consists of three stories, each presenting elements of terror and violence central to the quotidian realities of Manhattan from 1776 to 2001. Through the Gothic mood and devices, these stories unveil dimensions of the culture of 9/11 that have been precluded from the American rhetoric on the disaster and thus provided a new historical conceptualization of 9/11. American Gothic is not merely a literary genre, as McGrath suggests; it is also a discourse on the nation's past that is characterized by contradictions of progress and decay, brightness and darkness. This paper attempts to elucidate McGrath's critical perspective on American political, cultural, and moral life under the impact of 9/11, his Gothic sense of American history, and his notion of the haunting of historical darkness which pre-existed as well as pervaded the 9/11 experience.

Keywords

9/11, Gothic, terrorist, Others, American history, historical haunting,
national identity, *Ghost Town*, Patrick McGrath

Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11, many writers were called upon to express their views of the tragedy that took place on the day two hijacked planes crashed into the World Trade Center, causing death at the hands of an organized terrorist attack on the most appalling scale ever experienced in the U.S. homeland. Literary responses to the event were avidly awaited, as myriad feelings of horror, mourning, confusion, fear, and fury within America and beyond demanded an embodiment, a representation, by which the ethical and psychological burdens of a horrific experience could be deliberated upon and hopefully relieved. This raises the question of artistic responsibility and the role of the writer in relation to the pressure of such a momentous contemporary event.

What distinguishes Patrick McGrath's *Ghost Town: Tales of Manhattan, Then and Now* from other artistic efforts on the subject of 9/11 is the author's choice of historical settings and the Gothic mode. Published in 2005, four years after the event, *Ghost Town* is the first fiction in Bloomsbury's "The Writer and The City" series, in which authors usually provide a guided tour of their favorite metropolis.¹ Unlike other authors in this series, McGrath undertakes a fictional representation of the city's "then" and "now," in order to give his subject a more thought-provoking treatment. In the three stories included in the book, the Gothic mood and devices connect the present with the past, heightening our sense of displacement as well as providing a dark look at this city so haunted by power, desire, and despair. That is, the author shifts the focus from the immediate catastrophic experience of the attack to a historical review of the city's past. On the surface, McGrath seems to detach himself from the event of the 9/11 attack. Only when we pay attention to the structure of the book, along with the careful use of metaphors and ironies, can we begin to understand how each story mirrors the contemporary situation and, furthermore, criticizes the post-9/11 American culture.

The first story, "The Year of the Gibbet," is set in 1832; it is narrated by a character, who is tortured by the guilt over his mother's death during the British assault on Manhattan fifty-five years earlier. The next story, "Julius," concerns an unsolved murder that haunts a rich nineteenth-century family in New York. Only

¹ This series so far has published five titles: *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris* by Edmund White; *30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account* by Pater Carey; *Florence, A Delicate Case* by David Leavitt; *Prague Pictures: Portraits of a City* by John Banville; *Rio de Janeiro: Carnival under Fire* by Ruy Castro; and McGrath's *Ghost Town*. Except for McGrath, all the authors have written in non-fictional, first-person narrative form.

the last one, "Ground Zero," bears direct references to the 9/11 event: here a psychiatrist's relationship with her patient evolves from the professional to the personal level after the falling of the World Trade Center, and finally leads to a love triangle steeped in layered mind games. Although the first two tales, "The Year of Gibbet" and "Julius," are not representations of what happened on that morning of September 11, 2001, nor portrayals of the ravished city afterward, they reconstruct the city's past and set up a desolate, alienated landscape as the psychological backdrop for the last tale. Taken together, they demonstrate McGrath's recourse to a historical perspective for his artistic reflection on 9/11. More specifically, for Americans the terror of 9/11 is rooted in their collective consciousness of their nation's past, one haunted by a historical darkness that can only be understood in Gothic terms.

Therefore, *Ghost Town* is neither a conventional genre novel nor an accidental book on New York City published after 9/11. "The city, its aspirations, its failings, come round again and again," remarks Todd McEwen in his review of McGrath's book, calling these tales "literally, ghost stories."² McGrath describes in one of his stories the sight of the second World Trade Center Tower falling: "it leaves a ghostly image of itself in the empty air" (179). This "ghostly image" will remain long after the reconstruction of the site, and, as McEwen continues to remark, will remind us that the old New York is "lingering into the new" as depicted in *Ghost Town*. While the culture of commemoration of 9/11, the culture of mourning is haunted by history, the memory of the event will soon become a form of "haunting history" itself. *Ghost Town* unveils the Gothic as a complex historical mode: in Teresa Goddu's phrase, "history invents the Gothic, and in turn the Gothic reinvents history" (132).

This paper aims to investigate McGrath's gothicization of a city's past and present, in order to explore the possibility of a new historical conceptualization of the 9/11 culture. Through textual analysis of the three tales, it explicates the author's critical perspective on American political, cultural, and moral life under the impact of 9/11. More importantly, by investigating how the Gothic trope facilitates discourses on 9/11, and why McGrath situates 9/11 within the Gothic narrative, this study attempts to refigure the Gothic nature of American history, and eventually to disclose the historical haunting which is persisting in, and reinforced by the 9/11 experience.

² See McEwen's article "The City That Ate the World," *The Guardian*, September 24, 2005.

9/11 and Historical Haunting

In the overwhelming wave of political and artistic responses to the attack, literary works often found themselves plagued by seemingly contradictory forms of rhetoric: patriotism joined with polemic, the obvious aligned with the oblique. At first, the fall of the Twin Towers called for a humanist compassion which emphasized sympathy for other victims through shared feelings. Later, this sort of compassion was disrupted by the invasion of Iraq. The nation moved with breakneck speed from mourning the tragic event to acting out its drama of vengeance, making self-reflection secondary to military adventure and ideological combat, and visibly putting the conventional, common-sense standpoint of humanist intellectuals into question. The commemorations of the event in contemporary American culture, no matter what forms they have taken, in fact have not allowed sufficient time or means for the society to dwell upon the event's full historical trajectory.³ Most of the commemorative ceremonies and projects have produced nothing but a hegemonic rhetoric of moral outrage and public mourning, which has served only to mute more sober, critical discourses on this globally historic event.

Nevertheless, the event now coded as 9/11 has a past to be rediscovered, a present under constant scrutiny, and a future which the American culture is projecting. Such cultural and historical contexts for understanding the event now seem to be lost in the speedy and sometimes exploitative acts of commemoration. At the New York ceremonies marking the first anniversary of the event, politicians recited from the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence instead of writing new words of their own; yet this struck many as coerced, artificial, even surreal behavior. These words, originally drafted on battlefields and for forthcoming wars, somehow seemed foreboding, since they not only domesticated

³ Among discussions of the decorum of 9/11 commemoration, whether a new memorial tower at Ground Zero is an appropriate use of the site has been most debated. Many critics have voiced their suspicions of politicians' self-interest, since the meaning of the future Freedom Tower has been tarnished by ongoing negotiations between commemoration and commerce. David Simpson is worried that the hastiness of the present ritualization has torn the prospect of this memorial tower "between tragedy and triumphalism, between remembering the dead and celebrating the political credo of the American way of life." The coexistence of the hyperbole of a Freedom Tower and the stark subterranean environment of the memorial "registers a more general uncertainty about what 9/11 means and for whom it means." See *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 18.

the pains of a global event by means of a manufactured nationalism,⁴ but also framed the memory of the dead in an afterlife of historical terror. American history and the memory of 9/11 are forming an endless cycle: both are haunting and will always be haunted by each other.

No doubt such a commemorative culture has its constraining effects on literary efforts to capture the awe and terror of the event. Book critic Michiko Kakutani was disappointed by the outpouring of books, plays, poems, movies, and other artworks that emerged after 9/11:

All too often these creative efforts have tried to impose a conventional narrative upon those events . . . pushing the horror and the chaos of 9/11 into a sanitized form with a beginning, middle and end—an end that implies recovery or transcendence. . . . Thus far, words alone have proved curiously inadequate as a means of testimony.⁵

Kakutani is not offering an aesthetic judgment that literary creations must yield to images. Rather, she is warning that most written words on 9/11 are endeavors of testimony rather than reflection and criticism. If those testimonial words are given as expressions of individual experiences, why do they end up in similar patterns and arrive at the same implied conclusion: recovery and transcendence? Are subversive, even sardonic perspectives still permitted? Do all the stories have to be linear and affirmative? Although everyone is telling stories of 9/11 and professing to bear witness to it, “personal experience” and “first-person point of view” have increasingly become conditions of alienation rather than dialogues. In a way it seems there are no more *true* experiences; there is only compiled data and information.

Susan Sontag has written eloquently in her book *On Photography* about the dynamics and dialectics of photographic observations: photography, she says, has done “at least as much to deaden consciousness as to arouse it” (21); images circulated without credible explanation are an “inexhaustible invitation to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (23). Similarly, when Baudrillard commented on the first

⁴ As Neil Smith points out, the hijackers were of several nationalities and the victims also spanned the globe, from an estimated eighty-three nations. He is quite dismayed that “September 11 [has] become a *national* tragedy. . . . Not only the victims quickly nationalized, but also the new enemy.” See his essay “Scales of Terror,” 98-99.

⁵ See her article “Portraying 9/11 as a Katzenjammer Catastrophe,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2004.

Gulf War, he stated that the power of images worked to flatten all information to the point where it might be true or not true, real or not real: “just as everything psychical becomes the object of interminable speculation, so everything which is turned into information becomes the object of endless speculation, the site of total uncertainty” (41). If photographic images of 9/11 spread through the mainstream media have made “words curiously inadequate,” it is not because they are more authentic or more interpretative than words. On the contrary, it is because of the “inexhaustible invitation to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” the images have projected, which generates a sort of mystification of the day, a sense of uncertainty of the event. Therefore, how the narrative of this historic (and historical) event can manage to go beyond the usual rhetorical, hyperbolic clichés (*heroic, sacred, apocalyptic, crisis, war*) is essential to any forms of memorizing and/or retelling the experience.

The whole story of 9/11 has not been, and will not be, told by either words or images alone.⁶ The question remains: once we get beyond the (verbal and pictorial) clichés—the patriotic images of firemen and rescue squads, the horrific figures jumping from the top of the tower—what stories need to be told, and from whose viewpoint, and how should they be narrated? Judith Butler has also noticed the alarming phenomenon that published works on 9/11 mostly employ a first-person narrative point of view. “The narcissistic wound,” as Butler calls it, has shown how limited is the capacity of most Americans to come to terms with this horrific experience.⁷ The national mourning over 9/11 has been, indeed, tinted by the paranoia as to “who is with us” and “who is against us.” Expressing her concern regarding the “ever-increasing ambiguity” introduced by the very use of the term “terrorist,” Butler writes that “The United States, by using the term, positions itself exclusively as the sudden and indisputable victim of violence.” Lacking a

⁶ According to Garrison Keillor: “Photography couldn’t convey the failure of national defense and intelligence. . . . You need prose reporting for that. And in the end the images become common and one turns to words to find the reality.” Keillor’s melancholy best illustrates the void left by the image culture in the narratives of 9/11: “We saw photographs that week of buildings burning, stunned onlookers, dust-covered fireman. Very few pictures conveyed the fact that people just like us, our fellow passengers on the subway, suddenly found themselves in a mortal predicament and many died. We who weren’t downtown that morning tried to comprehend the horror.” See his article “Bearing Witness,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2006.

⁷ Butler remarks: “I do not mean that the story of being attacked should not be told. . . . But if we are to come to understand ourselves as global actors, and acting within a historically established field...we will need to emerge from the narrative of US unilateralism...The ability to narrate ourselves not from the first person alone, but from, say, the position of the third, or to receive an account delivered in the second, can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken.” See *Precarious Life*, 7-8.

framework for understanding violence, she fears that most literary responses preclude “certain kind of historical inquiries . . . [and thus merely] function as moral justification for retaliation” (4).

It doesn’t require much analysis for Americans to comprehend the irony that those “terrorists” were actually trained in U.S. flight schools and educated in Western ways, which gave them the access to all the contemporary technology. Instead of contemplating the failure of American democracy and wealth to change the pilots’ minds, the conservative American leadership responded to the disaster by initiating the state emergency, claiming that the “enemies” were within and among its people. The war against terror eventually was being waged by the state against its own people, and the term “terrorism” was reserved for attacks against the United States and thus by definition could not be applied to America’s own acts of violence against other governments and countries.

On the other hand, 9/11 has generally been described as resulting from a clash of civilizations—American democratic culture against the “foreign” (or “alien”) culture of terror. However, the terrorist attacks on American soil curiously had about them an eerie sense of familiarity. The news reports and images on the TV screen reminded people not only of the earlier attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 (presumably carried out by Middle Eastern Islamic extremists) but also of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (carried out by white American, anti-U.S.-government, Arian extremists who might in earlier times have been members of the Ku Klux Klan) and the two high school students (outcast white Americans) who massacred other students and teachers at Columbine High School in 1999. Thinking in terms of the WTC bombings, conflated with the intermittent news stories about Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel, Americans may think of the agents of terror and violence as being so “alien” as to seem almost like extraterrestrials; and yet they also appear so disturbingly familiar, so common on TV in everyone’s household that they can hardly be “seen” anymore. David Simpson, assuming the American standpoint, even regards this work of terror as “a part of our inherited culture” (6):

Many people all across America...reported feelings of acute personal anxiety and radical insecurity, but there was never a point at which this response could be analyzed as prior to or outside of its mediation by television and by political manipulation. With the passage of time it may come to appear that 9/11 did not blow away our past in an eruption of the unimaginable but that it refigured that past into

patterns open to being made into new and often dangerous forms of sense. (13)

Simpson continues to argue that “the culture of 9/11” has a longer history than many have supposed” (17). In other words, the documentation, commemoration and representation of the event itself and/or of its ensuing impact were and are conditioned by a long history of terror inscribed in American culture. It was unclear whether the date was chosen by chance or deliberately. How this “9/11” code-name first sprang up and started spreading quickly across the airwaves and into the everyday cultural lexicon is also unknown. However, Americans tend to associate 9/11 with the emergency telephone number 911, along with those callers’ frightened voices broadcast on media during news coverage of previous tragic disasters. Even though it doesn’t give any hints as to the place or nature of the attack, the code “9/11” suggests an American psyche already *attuned to*, and *saturated by*, the repetitious horror and fear. It suggests that, even before the attack took place, 9/11 had in some sense already existed in the American psychic and cultural landscape. Therefore the eerie sense of familiarity, an uncanny feeling of repetitiveness, pervades not only the actual experience of the event but also the national history in a haunting way.

If 9/11 actually “refigured that past into patterns open to being made into new and often dangerous forms of sense,” then McGrath’s *Ghost Town* is a fictional response to the event in which the haunting past and the dangerous forms of sense “materialize” through Gothic narratives. How McGrath reflects upon those cultural and political paradoxes and traces the historical haunting from nineteenth-century America to the post-9/11 climate will be given a close look in the following section.

Gothic as National History

In order to better illustrate how the “Gothic history” of New York City materializes the specter of historical terror that haunts the cultural and political narratives of 9/11, the discussion of the three tales will be structured in terms of independent but interconnected themes. The subtitles serve to ground America’s Gothic history in social references, thus providing a framework for investigating in depth, and challenging, the public discourses on 9/11. From the fight for independence from England in 1775 to the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq and his assault on the U.S. Bill of Rights in 2001, the trajectory of this “Gothic history” is, as McGrath shows, not without paradoxes and ironies, and the manner

in which these weaves the tales together into a portrait of darkness will be the main focus of the following analysis.

“The Year of the Gibbet”: Terrorists Are Us

The opening story, narrated from a first-person point of view and in the present tense, begins with a gloomy line: “New York has become a place not so much of death as of the *terror* of death” (1). However, the time, as the reader will later realize, is not 2001 but 1832. The terror of death hovering in the air is not caused by the threat of a terrorist attack but by that of plague. McGrath’s deliberate blurring of the line between the past and the present brings a sense of displacement, so essential to the overall Gothic mood of the book, and deepens our sense of recognition of historical nightmares that keep repeating themselves. The narrator continues as he stands on the city’s docks: “I have heard it said that New York is finished as a seaport, so vulnerable are we to disease, being a crossroads for all the world” (1-2). The vulnerability of New York in 1832 also finds its parallel in the city’s defenselessness on September 11, 2001. Believing he will not survive the plague, the narrator’s memory starts to freely travel backward in time, to the city’s younger days.

By entitling this volume *Ghost Town* rather than, say, “Ghost City,” McGrath invites us to rethink the history of New York. Wynn Kelley’s view on the sense of “town” in contrast with that of “city” provides a helpful approach to McGrath’s intention: “In linguistic, historical, and political terms, the connection between the words ‘town’ and ‘city’ is complex,” for these two terms enact “a relationship between native and imperial powers, enclosure and incorporation, ground and culture” (3). New York’s evolution from a small port town into a world city, one whose very wealth and late-capitalist center-of-the-world arrogance (symbolized by the WTC’s twin towers) make it Al Qaeda’s target, could indeed be read as reflecting the rise and subsequent decline of two “empires”: the British colonization of the American town and then the American power of globalization as opposed to the other local cultures.

By using the desolate, enclosed landscape of the town as his central image, McGrath also intends to heighten the Gothic effect. In the opening story, New York appears as an undeveloped, small, agricultural “town” during the American colony’s fight against the British army. As the setting for the first story, “town” has a specific meaning and spatial mapping. The seaport town of New York in the eighteenth century encompassed only “the tip of Manhattan, bounded on the west

and east by mighty rivers and on the south by the old fort, the battery, and the sea” (Kelley 8). Strangely but ironically, fatefully even, it was precisely this land on the southern tip of Manhattan (home of Wall Street and the erstwhile WTC) that was ground zero for the 9/11 attackers. In other words, the town once ravaged by the British army curiously foretells the destiny of the later metropolis.

Moreover, by calling New York a “town,” McGrath doesn’t mean it in a literal sense, as if the city contains many formations of small towns inside. Rather, the city and the town are overlapping images, like the effect of double exposure. The “spirit” of town is dwelling on the “mind” of the city, in that sense. This metaphor can be better explained by Freud’s reading of Rome: “Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the last one” (17). What Freud suggests is that a fantasy city where the original, primeval “town” may continue to live on the same site as the “city.” Even though the native town will later be absorbed into the developing metropolis, it will coexist with the city and keep haunting its “psyche.” New York first started as a piece of empty land on a small island, later a rustic seaport town after the Dutch invasion and the American settlement, and finally free from British colonization to become a much populated, industrialized “city.” The “original, primeval” town of New York was, in a way, virtually built upon clashes between different cultures and peoples; the cosmopolitan Big Apple has hardly surmounted those clashes. Multiculturalism, the much celebrated concept by the Big Apple, actually co-exists with a past of which the racial and cultural conflicts have never been completely resolved. Throughout the book, McGrath’s juxtaposition of town and city as overlapping representations of New York works to remind us of the American nation’s political and cultural ambivalence.

Back to the first story, when the narrator’s memory rolls back to the spring of 1776, he says: “From an early age I was taught by my mama to regard the British as cunning tyrants whose sole design was to abase and enslave the American people” (4). While he recollects the past he has—a chilling Gothic touch—his mother’s skull on the table before him. “She was a true patriot and I never once saw her fearful,” he says; “[s]he worked for the cause from within the occupied town and her flame burned bright even if it burned but briefly before being snuffed out like a guttering candle” (8-9). Driven by her “devotion to the republic” (9), she had

embarked on a dangerous mission as a spy, and eventually been apprehended carrying messages for General Washington.

The narrator, as he recalls his mother's arrest, also waits for her ghost to return to take him away from this earth. Haunted by her ghost, he cannot overcome his guilt because he feels personally responsible for her death. To cover up her spying activities, she always brought the narrator and his sister with her, pretending they were going to visit their ailing grandmother after crossing the British lines. However, unlike his sister who was a good companion for their mother, the narrator was afraid, despite his mother's telling him "to be her eyes and ears" (28). It was his fear and nervousness when faced with the British captain's questioning that gave away his mother's disguise: "I was not brave anymore, I was confused and frightened by this loud man with his fierce blue eyes! All I could think was that if I told him a lie he would lock me up in a dark stinking hole without my mama (37-38)." "The year of the Gibbet" is 1777, the year when his mother is hanged. The narrator says, "Those three sevens, an invisible noose dangling from each of their crossbars, and a busy year for the gibbet it would prove to be" (31). On the morning of their mother's execution, the narrator and his sister joined a small crowd at the public hanging, watching: "A squad of red-coats stood to attention in the roadway close by and a small crowd of Americans was gathered a little distance away . . . The watching Americans were silent" (51).

"The watching Americans were silent" is not merely a realistic detail; it has a complex ironic resonance. In the first place those "watching Americans" were supporters of a criminal, a radical revolutionary, a "terrorist" in the British soldiers' eyes. There was a moment in history when the Americans were nothing but a watching crowd who remained silent, even helpless, under British power. Yet the nation that once fought for its independence has now become the world's number one imperial power, dominating in various ways other cultures and societies. The early resistance against the colonizer in contrast with the later global expansion, the enslavement of black Africans coexisting with the love of liberty and freedom leading to the Civil War, these are actually two sides of the same (in a sense schizophrenic) national identity. Meanwhile, "The watching Americans were silent" suggests the impact on a dazed American public watching the event replayed endlessly on TV news programs of the World Trade Center attacks on the morning of 9/11. A further ironic reading of the line simultaneously refers to most Americans' silent acceptance, in spite of their legendary love of individual freedom and the right to privacy, of President Bush's Patriot Act which allows the government to invade individuals' civil rights for security reasons.

Before her execution, the mother's last words are shocking, which could be taken to echo those who supported the 9/11 hijackers: "I am not sorry for what I have done! . . . I am not sorry that I have tried to help my country drive these monsters from our shores! . . . Now I have no wish for peace, I wish for war!" (53) Of course, the narrator's mother is not, after all, a suicide bomber who murders innocent civilians. McGrath's point, perhaps, is to warn us that even the righteous cause can get out of control, if irrationality and hate take the upper hand. In fact, we might even read the mother's last words as the sentiments of the Bush administration with regard to the Iraq War it has gotten so terribly enmeshed in. The U.S. government is obviously not innocent of its terrorist actions which are deemed to be in a just cause. The writer's subtle criticism here of a potentially dangerous American narrow-mindedness recalls Butler's remark that Americans should try to narrate their 9/11 stories from the point of view of the Others. This first story of McGrath's book demonstrates, then, how any serious and far-reaching representation of 9/11 needs to suggest some of the ways in which Us and Them may be transposed, or should be more carefully identified.

At the end the narrator laments: "Half a century has passed since the Year of the Gibbet, and the war has been transformed in the minds of my countrymen such that it now resembles nothing so much as the glorious enterprise of a small host of heroes and martyrs sustained by the idea of Liberty and bound for that reason to prevail in the end" (61). He, however, has lived out his days as a "lonely man" who has "never been free of [his] mama" (61). This sense of being haunted by his mother becomes symbolic when understood in the 9/11 context. After the celebrations in honor of our heroes and martyrs, in spite of all the monuments we have erected, the ghosts will remain and will not be exorcised. The closing line of the story, "It is no more than I deserve," is just as chilling as the specter of the hosts of returning dead.

"Julius": Empire Falling

In the second story, the "I" narrator is a female who tries to trace the downfall of the once wealthy and powerful Van Horn family in late nineteenth-century New York. Her identity is not revealed until later in the story. This gives the text a dreamlike, surreal tone, since the story she tries to tell is about "the phantoms" running through her family's history. Interestingly, she herself sounds like another phantom, one who conjures up a past of which she has not partaken, but her

imagination enables her to replay the fortunes of each character in the story as if she is an unseen ghost always present among them.

It turns out that Sarah Van Horn is her grandmother's maiden name, and the central character Julius is the brother of Sarah, Hester, and Charlotte Van Horn. The story begins with their father, Noah Van Horn, a legendary figure who acquired his wealth when only 20 years old in the Atlantic cotton trade and quickly built his commercial empire. Although he is a man with a "powerful commitment to aggressive enterprise and the getting of money" (64), Noah Van Horn has his regrets. He lost his wife soon after their youngest son Julius was born. Even though he invests his faith and hope in his only son, the boy unfortunately shows more interest in the arts than in business. Under Charlotte's encouragement, Julius starts painting; the aspiring young painter then falls in love with Annie Kelly, a model in Jerome Brook Franklin's studio. Noah disapproves of Annie because of her status as a poor Irish immigrant girl. Once he tries to obstruct this romance, the family curse begins.

The quest for an American national identity again becomes manifest in this second story of *Ghost Town*. McGrath consciously appropriates the literary style of Henry James' social novels, in the meantime paying tribute to James' ghost stories, which are regarded by critics as being, along with the tales of Hawthorne and Poe, important nineteenth-century exemplars of the American Gothic genre. Here we should note that, according to Fred Botting, American Gothic literature is different from the European Gothic tradition in its "use of Gothic images in writing that was predominantly realist." Instead of the conventional European Gothic machinery such as castles, vampires and supernatural forces, in American Gothic fiction "contrasts of light and dark, good and evil, were inflected in texts in which the mysteries of the minds or of family pasts were the central interest" (114). American Gothic literature, as Leslie Fiedler points out, is "a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (29). McGrath succeeds in invoking the American Gothic tradition championed by James, and thereby discloses the internalized terrors and fears inscribed in a self-contradictory national identity. "Homely Gothic," as Botting calls it (113), serves as the ideal narrative mode for the story of the Van Horn family, in which "violence and insanity had erupted in generations past, and plagued the lives of those to come," according to the narrator (172).

But here violence and insanity are also allegorical symptoms of capitalistic monstrosity and unstoppable greed. In the middle of the story, after Noah van Horn learns of his son's infatuation with the Irish immigrant girl, he summons his

manager Rinder to his office. Rinder is a Bavarian immigrant whose calculating and adventurous character not only makes himself Noah's protégé and also, later on, his son-in-law. Noah orders Rinder to "take care of" Annie, because he believes "girls like that" only "preyed on gullible young man" like his son (118). After Rinder leaves the room, Noah looks out his window at the port of New York, thinking:

He had recently read that the coming of the great cosmopolitan city marked the beginning of the last phase of a civilization, the city being a sure symptom of imminent degeneration and decay . . . he knew that what lay ahead was not the first stage of decay but the last preparation for greatness, or more than greatness, for New York's triumphant assumption, rather, of the mantle of distinction of being not only the pre-eminent city of America, but of the world. (120-21)

Noah's despairing mood and secret talk of violence—telling Rinder to "take care of the girl"—quickly shifts to his grandiose, totally optimistic reflection on the future, suggesting too a tyrannical arrogance if not the raving of a megalomaniac. Such juxtapositions illustrate what Goddu observes about the relations between Gothic literature and the American identity:

American gothic literature criticizes the American national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality. Showing how these contradictions contest and constitute national identity even as they are denied, the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it. (10)

As if somehow predestined, after Annie's disappearance Noah's empire begins to crumble. Julius is sent to the mental asylum because the mystery of Annie's sudden disappearance has bereft him of his sanity. Charlotte marries Rinder and moves out of her father's mansion, "a house in the Greek manner, all fluted columns, heavy cornices, and triangular pediments" (65). Sarah marries Jerome the artist, after caring for his wound that was caused by an emotionally distraught Julius. In the meantime Manhattan keeps growing, expanding from Washington Square to Harlem, but the development in geographical space only increases the alienation of the family members. And Annie Kelly's disappearance remains an unsolved

mystery. The climax of the story is the family reunion, which takes place when Julius returns home after 20 years in the asylum. Rinder has now become a “broken creature,” a living corpse in a wheelchair, suffering from a serious case of syphilis. The narrator says: “I see them at a table. . . . A strange family group, comic even, in a morbid sort of a way, in a room dominated by a phantom” (154-55). Noah the patriarch has died in remorse and guilt because he believed Rinder had ordered Annie’s murder. It turns out not to be true. At the reunion dinner, Rinder confesses that he didn’t kill Annie. Knowing that his father-in-law only asked him to threaten Annie to leave Julius, Rinder lied to hurt Noah’s conscience. Still, the whereabouts of the missing girl remain unknown. Julius visits Annie’s old address, only to find that the city has changed drastically and nobody in the old neighborhood has ever even heard of this girl. At the end of the story, the narrator learns by accident from Jerome, her grandfather, that Annie was actually his mistress.

Lies upon lies make it impossible to uncover the truth, and “what survives of them are the phantoms, merely—the daguerreotypes, the photographs, the paintings” (172-73). McGrath tells the story of a disintegrated family, in which each member turns out, in one way or another, to be responsible for Annie’s disappearance. The downfall of the Van Horn family can also be read as the warning sign of an era of the isolated individuals in the big city—the “ghost city,” in which family members are alienated from one another and a missing girl is soon forgotten. Such modern isolation and indifference marks the end of American innocence. Or rather, American innocence only exists in the first place as the other side of Gothic darkness, itself nothing but a phantasmal kind of goodness.

“Ground Zero”: Ghostly Others

There is an uncanny sense of serenity right from the beginning of McGrath’s third and final story in *Ghost Town*. “I was not in New York when the terrorist attacks occurred,” the narrator says matter-of-factly (175). She is a therapist and Dan, one of her clients, is seeking her help because the attack has seriously affected his life. “It became clear to me that our work would for some time be thrown off track by the repercussions of an assault which he was not alone in regarding as having been directed at himself, as in a way it was” (177). When Dan shows up in her office, the narrator describes the scene:

We sat in my apartment on Riverside Drive one warm evening in late September. The sun was setting over the Jersey shore and the Hudson was a lovely silver gray in the last of the light. So tranquil was the view from the window in my consulting room, with its wide western exposure, high above the river, one could almost forget the horror at the other end of the island. (176-77)

The peaceful tone of voice, and the lovely sight of the setting sun on the river, are in stark contrast with the horrors of the catastrophe Dan is about to relate to her. As in the previous stories, the juxtaposition of the dark and the bright is eerie and somehow unnerving. The “historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it” will be revealed as the story continues, while darkness slowly creeps into the narrator’s psyche. Her calmness and detachment are merely a façade. As the sessions continue we recognize that she is in fact self-deceived, and that she is as much altered by 9/11 as Dan is.

Again, this story reminds us of Butler’s comment on the outpouring of first-person narrations of 9/11 experiences. Like us readers, the therapist in the story has to listen to her client’s detailed story about the morning of September 11; she has no stories to give him in exchange. Yet what really catches her interest is not Dan’s horrific experience on the morning of 9/11 but his subsequent involvement with a prostitute. Dan is a civil rights lawyer who, overwhelmed by his work after 9/11, turns to an escort service one day for solace. The prostitute tells Dan after sex that she has seen the ghost of her boyfriend, who had been killed in the attack, in a subway station in mid-town Manhattan. At first the narrator regards the prostitute’s experience as only a typical psychotic case: “I have been in clinical practice in New York for many years, and I have encountered this before.” She tells herself that “Dan was, after all, my primary concern,” since she is convinced that Dan “had been affected . . . by [the prostitute’s] distress, I mean, at having seen what she took to be the ghost of her dead lover” (186).

Under the pretense of professional objectivity she has, in fact, become numb, even indifferent to others’ distress and pain. “I gazed at him, thinking, this poor damaged man who loses himself in the problems of others so as to forget his own. . . . What has he gotten himself into now?” (184). Her concern for Dan seems to be based mainly on a kind of self-interest. Like most people living in a high-tech media culture, one filled with and in a sense deadened by information and data, the

narrator thinks she understands how 9/11 has affected her client. But her coolness and detachment quickly vanish when she visits Ground Zero for the first time:

The destruction reeked of hatred and evil, and it reeked, too, quite literally, of death. I am a psychiatrist. I do not believe in evil, I believe all human experience can be traced to the impress of prior events upon the mind—But this . . . why those men had done what they had to us. To *us* . . . I felt *rage*—the sort of blind primitive destructive rage which I imagine drove those men to attack us as they did. (196)

Along with the narrator's accumulating rage after each visit to Ground Zero comes an increasing feeling of jealousy, for she has learned that Dan's prostitute is of Asian ethnicity. Dan is furious at her for accusing him of hiding something: "You realize you've never asked me her name until now? She's called Kim Lee. And she is as American as you or me though I shouldn't have thought that needed saying!" (207) Battle lines are drawn between the two women, the prize being the man's sanity. In this concluding story McGrath displays most clearly his sardonic view of American moral and political confusions in the aftermath of 9/11.

That everything personal can be political and *vice versa* becomes even more evident in terms of ethnic issues in the wake of 9/11. This story situates the oppositions of "Them" and "Us" in the seemingly non-political context of a love triangle, yet the inescapable connections with the political become harshly apparent. The narrator, a woman of science who claims never to have lost control, now watches the outside world move further into a state of chaos while, in terms of her personal life, she is on the brink of a breakdown. She begins to confuse her own position in this love triangle with her political stance:

The bombing continues in Afghanistan while in America we are under bioterrorist attack. . . . Episodes of peripheral insanity have erupted. . . . I read my newspaper; New Yorkers speak out: "Nothing feels normal." . . . Dan tells me what John Ashcroft's people are up to, the ethnic profiling, the rounding-up of as many men as they can find of Near Eastern or North African descent . . . the wholesale pullback of traditional American freedom . . . and I am beginning to think that John Ashcroft is right. (210-12)

Like Annie the Irish immigrant girl in the second story, Kim Lee is also a target of racial discrimination. Haunted by her dead boyfriend, Kim is traumatized not only by the 9/11 attack but also by her status as an Other, subject to discrimination and objectification. According to Fiedler, “in the United States, certain special guilts awaited projection in the gothic form. A dream of innocence had sent Europeans across the ocean to build a new society. . . . But the slaughter of the Indians . . . and the abominations of the slave trade . . . provided a new evidence that evil did not remain with the world that had been left behind” (143). The writer Ralph Ellison insightfully calls his African-American identity “invisible.” Avery Gordon further expounds on the racial/racist nature of the haunting of the “invisible”:

If Ellison’s argument encourages us to interrogate the mechanisms by which the highly visible can actually be a type of invisibility, Toni Morrison’s (1989) argument that “invisible things are not necessarily not-there” encourages the complementary gesture of investigating how that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence. (17)

In the big city, the oversized ghost town after 9/11, the Others are seen everywhere yet remain invisible at the same time, a paradoxical phenomenon represented here by the narrator’s perception of Kim Lee. Haunting then is an appropriate term to describe such tension. Gordon continues to speak of haunting as “merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present,” as starting with “the marginal” and those “we normally exclude or banish” (24), all of which become most explicit in the third story. When walking past a now-closed store in the neighborhood of Ground Zero, one which used to sell “sexually provocative” underwear, the narrator tells herself right away that this is the kind of store “patronized by Kim Lee” (239). The mannequin in the window is “limbless, headless,” its legs “thrown down by the blast and still sheathed in fishnet.” Next she sees the sign that reads “20% OFF ALL BRAS AND GIRDLES” (239-40). Embodying the injustice and oppression experienced by many minority women, illustrating the fragmentation of identity, the broken mannequin is a spectacle which is in its own way as macabre and shocking as that gothic image of the smoldering ruins of the Twin Towers.

It is noteworthy that here the external turmoil has gradually transformed the narrator’s personal and political ethics. While politicians like John Ashcroft are trying to manipulate the public fear to launch a political campaign, the narrator

begins to manipulate Dan's emotions with her intimate knowledge of his psychiatric history. The narrator thus has become another sort of terrorist, and just as the 9/11 hijackers wore Western-style business suits and polished shoes when they boarded the planes, she knows how to hide her prejudice and hatred under her quasi-intellectual façade.

A subplot of this story centers around Kim Lee's relationship with her now-dead boyfriend. Jay Minkoff, a handsome man much younger than Lee, came from a prestigious family, and their affair began three months before 9/11. "It was late August, and they'd been to a party at the Guggenheim uptown. . . . He showed her a townhouse just off Fifth. They stood on the sidewalk, then suddenly he stepped forward and pressed the bell" (222). The term "townhouse" is used to describe a certain nineteenth-century architectural style which in New York nowadays tends to signify wealth and class. It is an ambivalent term, since it suggests both country modesty (shades of the "ghost town") and metropolitan excess, and such ambivalence is fundamental to the American identity. Jay's father, Paul Minkoff, quickly preys on Lee after his son introduces them; Lee, impressed by the father's money and social status, becomes a willing player in a dangerous sexual game. Lee's deep guilt for Jay's death for a large part is connected to the affair, which later has been found out by Jay and possibly, in her imagination, accounts for Jay's death wish on the morning of 9/11. The sexual obsessions and sadomasochistic desires shared between Lee and Paul give a further Gothic twist to the story. The forlorn lover who sees her boyfriend's ghost has her own dark secrets, which turn the tragedy of Jay's death and what might have been the mournful, Romantic feeling of undying love into hair-raising games of indulgence, degeneration, and deception. This twist further discloses the racist and sexist nature of the historical haunting that pervades American society.

As the final story in the book, "Ground Zero" does not focus on the immediate shock, horror, and pain felt by the characters on the morning of 9/11; instead, it follows the resulting psychological inflections and moral fluctuations in their lives. It shows that the true experience of 9/11 does not lie in what happened that day, but in its ensuing effects on the nation's cultural and political lives. Early in the story, Dan recalls seeing the south tower falling: "For a moment, no more than that, the tower left a ghostly image of itself in the empty air" (179). This impression lingers as a metaphor for the true horror of 9/11. McGrath seems to be saying that the ghostly image of the Twin Towers will not be banished by that memorial tower of the future which is to replace them, or by any other attempts to overcome, erase,

bury or disguise that historical terror which persistently haunts the American national identity.

Conclusion

Hidden history can be made visible through a redeployment of the Gothic trope. McGrath's stories shed new light on not only 9/11 but also on the nation's self-mythologizing narratives that seem to be foundational fiction created out of a historical darkness. Through a Gothic mode, certain invisible dimensions of the pre-and-post-9/11 culture are unveiled by these stories, and a historical conceptualization of 9/11 makes clear its inevitable connections with the nation's Gothic history. For as McGrath suggests, American Gothic is not merely a literary genre; it can be discourses on a national past characterized by contradictions of progress and decay, brightness and darkness. Through the gothicization of New York's past and present (and by implication also its future), *Ghost Town* discloses the wider context of the 9/11 experience and its role in American national narrative as part of a historical haunting and also of its haunted history.

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Prominent features of Gothic fiction include terror (both psychological and physical), mystery, the supernatural, ghosts, haunted houses and Gothic architecture, castles, darkness, death, decay, doubles, madness, secrets and hereditary curses. The stock characters of Gothic fiction include tyrants, villains, bandits, maniacs, Byronic heroes, persecuted maidens, femmes fatales, madwomen, magicians, vampires, werewolves, monsters, demons, revenants, ghosts, perambulating skeletons, the Wandering Jew and the Devil himself.

American Gothic is a 1930 painting by Grant Wood in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. He was inspired to paint what is now known as the American Gothic House in Eldon, Iowa, along with "the kind of people [he] fancied should live in that house". It depicts a farmer standing beside his daughter — often mistakenly assumed to be his wife. The painting is named for the house's architectural style.

Just came across a brilliant documentary regarding 9/11 that, in my opinion, completely outclasses any documentary I have ever seen before it. There are simply no words to describe how superb the presentation is. By the time I was done watching it I was in tears. Anyway this video's source for the budget analyst office claim links to another corbette report video entitled "€\$700 billion is nothing" in which there is a short clip from what looks like a mainline 9/11 documentary, in which the man's voice says that the budget analyst office was right below his, which was hit.