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Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies

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Inside this work

Full Text Contents

16 - 20

Gothic Access.	333
Mind the Gap: From E...	353
"New Directions in C...	371
Book Reviews.	377
About the Contributors.	385

Choose Another Issue

Gothic Access.

ContentServer.asp 1 / 20 100%

Gothic Access

Manuel Herrero-Puertas

National Taiwan University

The article charts gothic fiction's spatialization of disability by examining two representative entries: Horace Walpole's foundational novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Peter Medak's film *The Changeling* (1980). Their different media and historical backgrounds notwithstanding, both texts feature haunted houses where ghosts and nonghosts collaborate in tearing walls, clearing passageways, tracking voices, and lighting up cellars. These accommodations, along with the antiestablishment critiques they advance, remain unanalyzed because gothic studies and disability studies have intersected mainly around paradigms of monstrosity, abjection, and repression. What do we gain, then, by de-psychologizing the gothic, assaying ghosts' material entanglements instead? This critical gesture reveals crip ghosts Joseph (*Changeling*) and Alfonso (*Otranto*) engaged in what the article conceptualizes as "gothic access": a series of hauntings that help us collapse and reimagine everyday life's unhaunted—yet inaccessible—built environments.

Introduction

Right on time for Halloween 2017, Robin Floric opened a haunted-house attraction in Toronto. A pioneer of its kind, Floric's Haunt was "built by disabled people for disabled people" ("Fully Accessible"). It eliminated "ableist props/scenes like straitjackets" and "'mental asylum' rooms" while providing a range of material and sensory accommodations: touchable props, ASL interpreters, zero elevation changes, and the possibility for guests to decide their level of involvement (*Frolic's Haunt*). Frolic's model stands out among

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Articles submitted should not exceed 7,000 words, including an abstract of no more than 200 words and a list of works cited. The journal uses the MLA style for referencing; for full style guidelines, please see the Notes for Contributors on the journal website (www.jlcds.org). Articles may use either UK or US spelling conventions, but not a mixture of the two. Please note that the journal uses 'Oxford spelling', that is, *-ize* endings rather than *-ise*, for UK English (however, some words must be spelled with *-ise* or *-yse* endings in UK English; if in doubt, writers should consult the *OED*).

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Volume 14, Issue 3

Contents

Articles

Reading (Readings of) UK Channel 4's 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Advertisements: On the Undecidability of Texts and Dis/Ability *Itself* 261
Alex Cockain

Representations of Disability in 1960s Greek Film Noirs: *The Secret of the Red Mantle* and *The Fear* 281
Nikitas Fessas

"Krazy Kripples" and the Transformative Body Politics of Disability and Race: Watching *South Park* in the Age of "Cancel Culture" 301
Nicholas D. Krebs

Toward a New Madwoman Theory: Reckoning the Pathologization of Sylvia Plath 317
Maria Rovito

Gothic Access 333
Manuel Herrero-Puertas

Mind the Gap: From Empathy to Erasure in Narrative Fiction 353
Avril Tynan

Comment from the Field

"New Directions in Critical Disability Studies": Postgraduate Symposium, University of Sheffield 371
Neslie Carol Tan

Book Reviews

Jeffrey S. Kahana and Eva Kahana, *Disability and Aging: Learning from Both to Empower the Lives of Older Adults* 377
Johnathan Smilges

Ann Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie, eds, *Disability and Art History* 381
Alice Wexler

About the Contributors 385

Gothic Access

Manuel Herrero-Puertas

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The article charts gothic fiction's spatialization of disability by examining two representative entries: Horace Walpole's foundational novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Peter Medak's film *The Changeling* (1980). Their different media and historical backgrounds notwithstanding, both texts feature haunted houses where ghosts and nonghosts collaborate in tearing walls, clearing passageways, tracking voices, and lighting up cellars. These accommodations, along with the antiestablishment critiques they advance, remain unanalyzed because gothic studies and disability studies have intersected mainly around paradigms of monstrosity, abjection, and repression. What do we gain, then, by de-psychologizing the gothic, assaying ghosts' material entanglements instead? This critical gesture reveals crip ghosts Joseph (*Changeling*) and Alfonso (*Otranto*) engaged in what the article conceptualizes as "gothic access": a series of hauntings that help us collapse and reimagine everyday life's unhaunted—yet inaccessible—built environments.

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1. Chicago's 13th Floor Haunted House answers the question "Is It Handicap Accessible?" with a misleading "Yes. We do our best to be handicap accessible inside the attraction! There are a couple areas that may have to be by-passed" (*13th Floor*). The Hauntings of Boogeyman (Corpus Christi, Texas) website displays a prominent "Our haunted house is wheelchair accessible" sign, although fine print reveals this applies to "one level" only (*Hauntings*). For disclaimers involving strobe lights, see *Beck Mountain*.

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"disability as an opportunity for expansion at the consumption end of late capitalist marketplaces" (Mitchell and Snyder 11). Outliers like Floric's Haunt and Binghamton's Haunted Halls of Horrors withstand this profit-driven ethos. Frolic's Haunt is free and volunteer-run. Haunted Halls donates its benefits to independent living organizations (*Southern Tier*). Both redefine people with disabilities' status in the haunted house: from second-class customers to informed contributors, from fixtures to designers of space, from scary to enjoying being scared.

This article honors this exercise in crip world-making by digging out its continuities with a gothic tradition whose provocative spatialization of disability remains troublingly undertheorized. The gothic's return of the repressed, I argue, has historically eclipsed an advent of the accessible. This claim is counterintuitive, for gothic fiction hardly strikes us as synonymous with accessibility. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick finds "the self['s]" default position in gothic texts "massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access" (13). This negation of access—to epistemic certainty, to causality—and the complication of seemingly ordinary loci via walled enclosures, hidden corridors, and extravagant ornament have lured audiences to the gothic since the eighteenth century. At the same time, why should ever-shifting locales constantly animated, expanded, and contracted by mysterious forces terrify people with disabilities, already familiar with the stationary, exclusionary designs of countless public and domestic venues? What forms of creative adaptability do people with disabilities bring to supernatural realms? And what accessibility lessons drip from the dislocations of matter and ontological inversions unfolding there? In this article, I locate disabled ghosts bending haunted houses' fluid materiality to their will, opening literal and figurative windows of opportunity in the face of stigma, exclusion, and normalization.

A case in point is the Chessman House in Peter Medak's *The Changeling* (1980), a canonical haunted-house film and shorthand for all things gothic.[2] Its climax features Claire (Trish Van Devere) entering the house searching for tenant John Russell (George C. Scott). Visibly overwrought after witnessing several paranormal events there, Claire climbs the steps toward the second, third floor, and then a dimly lit attic at the top of a narrow flight of stairs. Drawn by eerie voices, Claire opens the attic's squeaky door and is relieved to find it empty. At this point Claire and John already know that an arthritic boy named Joseph Carmichael was confined and murdered by his father in

2. Scholarly silence on this film is puzzling, given its growing cult status. Martin Scorsese labelled it one of the scariest films of all time (Dixon 9).

this room eighty years ago. Joseph's toys and furniture lie scattered now under layers of dust, his child-sized, cobwebby wheelchair ominously placed in the shot's margin. The instant Claire notices it, its wheels start spinning toward her, propelled by an invisible power. Claire whizzes downstairs screaming in agony; the wheelchair catches up.

Hailing this sequence as the pinnacle of filmic terror, Stephen King ignores its disability subtext. King exults in how "the camera dwells on those long, shadowy staircases, as we try to imagine walking up those stairs toward some as-yet-unseen horror" (111). But the film also intimates Joseph's perception of the stairs: "I can't walk," his ghost whispers. For Joseph, those "shadowy staircases" represent a painful known rather than a creepy path toward the unknown. This and other elements invite a crip reclamation of the scene. Claire, in whom the wheelchair first awakened feelings of pathos ("Oh my God. It's so small"), panics at the sight of it nimbly negotiating four floors of stairs. Medak unsettles our identification with her by placing the camera in the wheelchair during the fast-paced chase. This perspectival shift proves oddly exhilarating, as physical space no longer compartmentalizes Joseph's social experience and his ghostly movements transfer vulnerability to Claire, who comically trips near the lobby. Haunting transmogrifies the house into a topsy-turvy domain where stairs function like ramps and the able-bodied lose their navigational mastery.

I call this radical reconfiguration of space "gothic access." The "access" in gothic access veers from its *OED* definition as "[t]he power, opportunity, permission, or right to come near or into contact with someone or something; admittance; admission." Prevalent since the fifteenth century, this definition supersedes an etymology in which "access," like Joseph's wheelchair, neither asks nor waits for "permission." Around the thirteenth century the Latin "*accesus*" gave way to the French "*accés*," standing for "paroxysms, torments, [and] suffering," and the English "access," which in medical parlance designates "an attack, or the onset (*of* fever or disease)." Gothic fiction abounds with moments when access as attack yields access as contact, when haunting opens up space to non-normative occupations and alterations. By returning "access" to its semantic origins, these texts counter the timorous logic of retrofitting and inclusionism, which casts people with disabilities as recipients—not producers—of accessibility (Dolmage 105–06; Mitchell and Snyder 2–5). The gothic contributes thus an unlikely—yet efficient—arsenal of tactics for questioning uncritical framings of access today as well as probing its entwinement with other fronts of inequality (for instance, *Changeling* ascribes Joseph's confinement to capitalist greed).

Aimi Hamraie, Bess Williamson, and Tanya Titchkosky among others have explored how variables of race, gender, and class determine who enjoys the accessibility we create and celebrate as a society. Their work shifts access from an individual-based right to "a complex form of perception that organizes socio-political relations" (Titchkosky 3). This relational matrix and its architectural manifestations pervade the gothic imagination, with chaotic, unmanageable settings signifying institutional oppression, intrafamilial violence, and fear of an Other in need of constraint. Contemplating Giovanni Piranesi's etchings *Carceri d'Invenzione* (*Imaginary Prisons*), though, Sedgwick realizes that gothic spaces' excessive extravagance, their architectural and decorative over-the-top-ness, ends up undoing their allegedly rigid partitions: "it is impossible to organize the spaces in any of these prints into architectural space […] it is impossible to construct in imagination the shell that would delimit this inside from a surrounding outside" (28–29). What better way to critique oppressive locales than rendering their inaccessibility materially impossible? An analogous process unfolded in the semantic shift of "gothic" from an architectural style toward an experimental literary form, as pioneered by Horace Walpole and Clara Reeve (Longueil 457–58). Subtitling *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) "A Gothic Story," Walpole displaced "gothic" from background setting to narrative foreground. Architecture became plot, and in gothic plots buildings became unreliable and prone to break down. Michael Gamer notices Walpole's eagerness to "build in his reader's imagination what an architect cannot build in reality" (167). Gamer's authoritative take on the gothic as a "'shifting' aesthetic" confirms Walpole as the key innovator replacing physical buildings' limitations with the limitless possibilities of fictional, supernatural buildings. Among these possibilities lies the creative–destructive force of gothic access, given that late eighteenth-century audiences already perceived a seizure of normative spaces via the gothic "as foreign invader, as cancer, as enthusiasm, as emasculating disease" (4).

Despite the gothic's suggestive materializations and volatilizations of access, its scholarly intersections with disability studies remain anchored to psychoanalytical paradigms of the likes of abjection, repression, and the uncanny (Anolik; Gregory; Miller). Pushing for a material–discursive method instead, I take my cue from the gothic overtones of barrier-free design as well as from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the misfit. This notion defamiliarizes gothic space, no longer a monstrous repository of monstrous subjectivities but a malleable construct in which unbounded bodies, spirits, and objects rethink access beyond localized scenarios. This frame in place, I proceed in chronological reverse to analyze two representative gothic texts: a horror flick from

the 1980s and Walpole's genre-defining novel, which has yet to be examined from a disability angle. Their formal and thematic differences notwithstanding, *Changeling* and *Otranto* depict cycles of usurpation and corruption redressed by wronged disabled characters who claim—from the otherworld—their right to occupy space in the world.

Hurting Stones

Every house is haunted by the bodyminds it excludes.[3] Architects and designers who first catered to people with disabilities found in the gothic a worthy repository of tropes. In "Fleshing Out the Phantoms," a section of the collaborative volume *Rethinking Architecture* (1986), Raymond Lifchez recounts the arrival of disabled consultants to his studio at Berkeley for several pedagogical experiments around a disability-informed architectural practice. At first, the new collaborators seemed to Lifchez "phantom people who moved silently about in the background while I collected information about them from a bureaucratic third party. But once I began talking to individuals, each became a full-bodied person who engaged me directly" (14). Lifchez de-haunts this collective by dropping inefficient mediators and dispensing with institutional knowledge. Pushing his clients from a silent "background" to a proscenium where they tell their stories removes their phantomatic aura while advancing the model of productive haunting we see in Frolic's Haunt and classic gothic fiction.[4]

Hence the importance of unfiltered narrative. Lifchez and his students soon resented appropriations of disability in Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) and other reading assignments (7). Besides the trite construction of Quasimodo's hunchback as an index of hidden virtue, one wonders what in Hugo's architecturally minded novel irked Lifchez. In fact, Essaka Joshua has identified a pro-disability stance in its florid renditions of the cathedral's gothic contours and Quasimodo's meanderings within its upper levels. The novel's "architectural spaces"—Joshua claims—align "body, building, and voice in ways that emphasize the multiplicity of meanings." This alignment rests on an aesthetic isomorphism between an exuberantly deformed container

3. I borrow the term *bodymind* from Price in order to underline the inseparability of body and mind, resisting the tendency to bury "mind" (and intellectual disabilities) under a generic "body" ("The BodyMind Problem" 269).

4. In *Otranto*, Matilda exclaims: "If they are spirits in pain, we may ease their sufferings by questioning them" (40).

(Notre-Dame) and a deformed contained (Quasimodo). Joshua's reading hinges, then, on the superimposition of anatomy and architecture via figurative substitutions such as synecdoche and metaphor. While I welcome this turn toward a polysemic architecture, I am impatient with the fact that the only flexible thing about it is its interpretation. Notre-Dame provides Quasimodo with shelter and literary critics with a fascinating, multilayered symbol, but Hugo otherwise ossifies power relations in fifteenth-century France. His conservatism reverberates in the closing shot of the 1939 film *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, when a dejected Quasimodo leans on a gargoyle and mutters, "Why was I not made of stone, like thee?" The camera slowly zooms out until man and gargoyle blend into the cathedral's imposing whole. Through its clichéd presentation of disability (pitiful nearby, invisible from a distance), this sequence dramatizes the shortcomings of Hugo's conflation of building and dweller, reducing Notre-Dame to Quasimodo's accessible cage.[5]

Gothic access replaces the image of Quasimodo forever locked in his isomorphic abode with that of crip characters loudly grating against their material surroundings.[6] Such is the contestation Garland-Thomson vindicates in her misfit theory. Her starting point is a "material anonymity" that invisibilizes both normative users of space, whom architects conceive as a homogenous mass, and people with disabilities, whose invisibility results from being too *sui generis* to accommodate (597–98). This "material anonymity" owes to a "fitting" relationship in which two entities come together seamlessly. Against the complacency of a fit, Garland-Thomson fixates on the dynamic cacophony of misfitting. Misfit entails "an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole." Its "problem inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together" (592–93). A misfit generates noise, scandal; it draws attention to what does not fit and whatever environment is not allowing the fit to occur. Consequently, misfitting "confers agency and value on disabled subjects at risk of social devaluation by highlighting adaptability, resourcefulness, and subjugated knowledge as potential effects" (592). Because Quasimodo's body and mind "seemed to have been fashioned to fit the cathedral," the bell-ringer's subjectivity is buried under his—fitting—silence (Hugo 164).

Tales of haunted houses are logs of violent misfittings. Reading them as such advances one of misfit theory's main insights; namely, its deindividuation of

5. The film's alternative ending reenacts nonetheless the stasis of Hugo's original one, in which Quasimodo starves himself to death next to Esmeralda's corpse (492–93).

6. Considering "gothic's" evolution from an architectural to a literary term, one wonders how Lifchez would have reacted to a gothic novel instead of a novel about a gothic building.

identity and agency. For Garland-Thomson, "[t]he performing agent in a misfit materializes not in herself but rather literally up against the thingness of the world" (594). But who is the "performing agent" in a haunted house? Haunter or house? The peg or the hole? What happens to symbolic and material relations between physical world and language once we factor in *the thingness of the otherworld*: those sounds, motions, and overall phenomena caused by supernatural entities presumably operating from immaterial realms? The indissolubility of specter and matter manifests itself every time a door opens on its own, a piano key rings without a finger pressing it, or a painted portrait leaves its frame—to cite three instances of haunting from *Changeling* and *Otranto*. Garland-Thomson's concept allows us then to investigate narratives that deliberately confound *what* does not fit and *where* it does not fit.

This confusion places the body–house tandem on a material continuum rather than on a figurative analogy of the Quasimodo–cathedral kind.[7] To return to Joseph: is he haunting the house or *through* the house? Does he own the house or has he become it? Unruly habitational modes commonly referred to as haunting, poltergeist, and paranormal activity invite us to conceptualize a house's technologies as prosthetic extensions of a body who is everywhere and nowhere. Or, to heed the current neomaterialist turn in disability studies, we may see haunted houses as hubs of "intra-actions" through which diffused entities (spirits, humans, artifacts) co-constitute each other beyond the part–whole logic of prosthesis (Barad 140). Characters with disabilities' frenetic afterlives as disembodied ghosts—deprived of matter while interpenetrating matter of many kinds—reinforce David T. Mitchell, Susan Antebi, and Sharon L. Snyder's view of disability as "matter in motion and the exposure of the lie through which we think materiality as a stable baseline of limited plenitude" (8). This is important because blurred actor–setting boundaries reverse the many testimonials in which disabled tenants decry an unsurmountable gap between their bodyminds and rigid material environments: "This floor level in here was two inches lower than the hall. So I couldn't bring food in and out, I wouldn't have been able to have used a tray because everything was going to slop" (qtd. in Imrie 26). Non-conforming ghosts à la Joseph haunt and misfit a specific locale not to stabilize its spatial properties—say, by leveling floors. Instead, haunting as misfitting—what I am calling "gothic access"—drives an estate toward a gradual, at times brusque, disintegration, one eventually noticeable from the outside, its impact transcending the domestic into the

7. Critics of *Otranto* have similarly erred on prioritizing a "Manfred-Castle dialectic" over the ways in which Alfonso inhabits/becomes the castle (Davison 72).

social. Haunted houses have and tell a story. Their revelations and the process of arriving at them exemplify the "epistemic activism" Hamraie posits against the rehabilitative nature of much universal design and so-called inclusive architecture (182).

There is something genuinely gothic in this productive destruction of space. In late eighteenth-century Britain, gothic literature and its attendant architecture revival peaked in collaborative designs aiming not toward complete forms but ruins sempiternally in flux, ready to be reassembled by others (Silver 537). An obvious example is the Committee of Taste Horace Walpole summoned to design Strawberry Hill, his celebrated anti-neoclassical mansion-museum. For all its attention to detail and even if Strawberry Hill still stands, Walpole did not erect it to last: "My buildings are paper, like my writings, and both will be blown away in the ten years after I am dead" (*Letters* 140). Indeed, Walpole describes *Otranto* in his second preface as "capable of receiving greater embellishments," opening a "new route" for "men of brighter talents" to explore (10). This mentality revolves around a rehabilitation of disqualification, one that prioritizes collaboration across time and space over preservation, resisting the hegemonic pull of many institutional sites, even when these waive inclusionist flags.[8] Haunting's transgressions of matter upset thus those for whom monolithic spatial designs safeguard a social and economic status quo. Reader-response critics Norman Holland and Leona Sherman acknowledge this attitude in passing, as they interrogate their yearning for stable spatialities when reading gothic texts: "I want those stones to be inert, neither hurt nor hurting" (283). Of course, gothic enclaves—the Castle of Otranto, the House of Usher, the Overlook Hotel—have a reputation for not staying put. Their stones do hurt and are hurt, transformed, often demolished. To declare "I want those stones to be inert" betrays an anxiety toward metamorphic spaces and the adaptive efforts these demand from non-disabled users.

Most people with disabilities do *not* want stones to be inert. Whereas body-house isomorphisms grant continuity, misfitting thrives toward collapse, which Jay Dolmage understands as the ultimate defiance of spatio-social hierarchies:

> Collapsing is a way to fall apart as we come together, and connects to invigorating, powerful rhetorical acts of refusal and delay [...] the idea of "collapse," which has

8. Today neoliberalism erases crip difference in phrases like "welcoming school" or "inclusive classroom, which" emphasize "space itself—the school or classroom—thus eliding the question of who needs to be welcomed, who is positioned as doing the welcoming, or why that welcome has been deemed necessary" (Price, "Un/Shared Space" 156).

> come to powerfully inflect all of our discussions of capitalism, must be thought *from* disability, and this will save it from purely pejorative readings: what is beautiful, useful, inevitable about collapse? (112)

In the following case studies, disabled and nondisabled characters and audiences come together in the wake of a misfit followed by a collapse. The gothic does not retrofit; it collapses. As Joseph and Alfonso demonstrate, it prefers manageable ruins to unsurmountable steps and backdoor ramps.

The Wheelchair in the Attic

"What you want, Mr. Russell, is to tear this room apart," says the owner of a lake house build atop the well where Joseph was buried. In one of *Changeling*'s many jump scares, we follow this woman's daughter from her bed to the room in question. It is night time and, as the girl stumbles into the pitch-black threshold, she hears "wood bursting." Glancing at the floor, from where the sound arises, she discovers a naked Joseph staring at her. In the follow-up shot, a chainsaw buzzes its way through the floor's wooden planks, unveiling Joseph's skeleton and a family medallion that confirms the circumstances of his death. To wit, when Richard Carmichael's wife died, her family fortune passed to five-year old Joseph. Her will specified that, if the boy died before twenty-one, the money would go to charity. "There he was," explains Russell, "with a son who was weak, sickly, bedridden. Couldn't even walk. He must've decided not to take a chance on the boy. The money was just too tempting." Richard drowned Joseph in his attic bathtub, buried him, and claimed to have dispatched him to Europe in search of a cure for his arthritis. Meanwhile, he secretly adopted a boy from a local orphanage, introducing him years later as a fully rehabilitated Joseph—the title's changeling—who eventually became a prominent US senator and publicity-loving philanthropist.

That the original Joseph is at once potentially wealthy and a destroyer of wealth cleverly anticipates disabled people's position in late capitalism, oscillating between ideal consumers and nanny-state parasites. Even if Joseph's murder is gruesomely depicted and decried by Russell as being of "the cruelest kind," its taking place in 1900 makes it concurrent with a rising American eugenics movement, as scientists, jurists, and large sectors of the population justified eliminating society's most burdensome members for the sake of progress (Nielsen 101). Graced by this practice, Senator Carmichael is presented as a curmudgeon eighty-year old who has amassed extraordinary capital and

influence since he allegedly "returned" from Europe "to inherit an Empire." This empire is headquartered in the Spenser/Carmichael Tower, for whose location Medak chose the Rainier Tower in Seattle. A forty-one-story skyscraper finished in 1977, the Rainier Tower's design aptly symbolizes Carmichael's fragile hold on power. Its rectangular structure resembles most skyscrapers in any financial district; however, this structure rests on an inverted-pyramid pedestal. The inversion of capitalism's pyramidal iconicity raises connotations of poor accessibility, detachment from the ground level, and exclusivity, traits all embodied by the senator. At the same time, the Rainier design mimics a precarious balancing act; its tiny resting point conjures the possibility of collapse, which Joseph will revengefully bring about.

An antithesis to the Spenser/Carmichael Tower, the Chessman House hints in its name at different pieces navigating a chessboard in unique, reciprocal ways. After tragically losing his wife and daughter, a doughty Russell enters a relation of interdependence with Joseph, seeking him in the ghost's own terms—like Lifchez fleshing out "phantom bodies"—and assembling the fragments of his narrative. This involves, most notably, finding and tearing down the fake closet blocking the entrance to Joseph's attic. A renowned composer, Russell also records a séance and then replays it until Joseph's voice arises from the static. Far from a passive state, being haunted involves for Russell an ethical imperative to create accessible spatio-temporal bridges toward Joseph. The film's original poster plays out this approach (Figure 1). At first blush, it conceals the boy, whose body is silhouetted against the wall while his empty wheelchair stands front and center. On the one hand, Joseph is available to us only as a shadow. On the other, his profile emits a glow that sheds light on the wheelchair. Who is a shadow of what and what illuminates whom are left unclear. This ambivalent image subordinates a character to his disability, yet shows him in command of how, when, and where his ghost manifests itself (and how much of itself); capitalizing on disability's impenetrable Otherness (for an able-bodied audience), yet also entertaining the communicability of its subject positions. If Joseph speaks to us indirectly, from the shadows, the opposite is evinced in the questions presiding over the image, questions a medium asks Joseph during the séance and which synthesize *Changeling*'s mystery plot: "How did you die, Joseph? Did you die in this house? Why do you remain?"

Joseph answers in full misfit mode, solving the mystery while/by manipulating the house. Medak portrays his ghost performing actions he could not carry out while alive and which disabled tenants often signal as challenging: turning faucets, climbing stairs, opening doors, and briskly moving across different rooms (Imrie 30–32). Joseph's high (postmortem) functionality draws

Figure 1. *The Changeling*, 1980.

Russell and, by extension, the audience into a misfit position, where we lack clues for inhabiting the house's unpredictable materiality. The film's many startling scenes convey this experience of inhabiting a site we cannot help but misfit—consider if not people's loud, embarrassing reactions when startled in public. Film theorist Robert Baird roots the somatic process of being startled in "microsecond failings to predict (perceptually anticipate) the identity, location, or status of a stimulus in a threatening context" (16). Often decried as cheap filmic tricks, startle effects build suspense, but their neurocognitive shock also registers the dynamics of gothic access: bringing ghosts and nonghosts together through jolts and whoomps rather than premeditated, consensual accommodations.[9] Medak jumps back and forth between Joseph's perspective as house master and our own as befuddled guests. The film indulges in empty shots in which seemingly inert matter is animated: the attic door opening, a piano being played, a window that breaks. This trend culminates in the wheelchair scene, in which Joseph overcomes spatial barriers without letting go of the physical object that prevented him from surmounting these in life. Through these actions, a disgruntled Joseph shares his story piecemeal, embarking Russell and us on a mystery that can only be solved by realizing the connivance of ableism and eugenics with a society in which privilege and power are inherited, not equally distributed. *Changeling* thus eschews sentimentality and abjection, building a complex disabled character whose ghost refracts our dread and animosity toward nepotist elites.

Through its gradual disclosure of information, *Changeling* transfers villainous traits from Joseph to his supplanter. As a result, the eventual collapse of the Chessman House unleashes catharsis rather than tragedy. Right after Russell visits Senator Carmichael and confronts him with the truth, the latter suffers a fatal heart attack while staring at a portrait of his putative father. Back in the Chessman House, Russell's decision not to denounce Senator Carmichael publicly triggers Joseph's fury. As fire spreads across different rooms and floors, a slow-motion camera revels in the burning and sinking of those stairs and structures that had prevented Joseph from moving around freely. Right before escaping the falling debris, a dumbfounded Russell glimpses Senator Carmichael demurely climbing the stairs toward the attic, heading toward the room of the one he replaced in life. There, the senator witnesses Richard Carmichael's original crime, a full-circle revelation punctuated by an explosion

9. Today Alfonso's apparitions, the animated portrait, and the falling helmet in *Otranto* seem rather campy and innocuous, yet these passages startled original audiences when read aloud (Flint 253). The indispensability of startling to gothic access suggests a formal echo between *Otranto* and *Changeling*, among other literary and filmic texts within the gothic genre.

damaging the house beyond repair. The film ends on a resilience note, with Joseph's charred wheelchair erect amidst a pile of rubble. An adjacent music box opens suddenly and a lullaby begins to spin: Joseph's triumphal march over an exploitative family and corrupted system, echoing a similar collapse from two centuries ago.

Misfitting *Otranto*

The Castle of Otranto commences where *Changeling* leaves off, with the cathartic endpoint of a lineage of usurpers. Manfred, the novel's tyrant, has inherited the principality of Otranto from his father, who in turn inherited it from his father Ricardo, who poisoned rightful prince Alfonso the Good and stole the throne from him. Like Senator Carmichael, Ricardo tried to offset his murky ascent to power through philanthropy, erecting "a church and two convents" to honor St. Nicholas (63). St. Nicholas nonetheless appeared in his dreams to issue an enigmatic curse: "*That the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it*" (17). This prophecy starts to unravel in the novel's preposterous opening, when Alfonso's giant helmet falls from the sky and crushes Conrad, Manfred's ailing son, on the day of his wedding with the noble Isabella. Walpole's plot revolves around a two-fold misfit that begins with Conrad mashed by a material confine (helmet) and ends with Alfonso's enlarged ghost bursting the castle's walls. If *Changeling* narrates the murder of a legitimate heir on the grounds of his impairment, *Otranto*'s plot originates in the murder of brawny Alfonso, who as a ghost no longer controls his acromegalic body. Alfonso's haunting is all the more disconcerting by the fact that his gigantic, detachable body parts and accessories—a hand, a foot, the helmet, a sabre—appear in different locations within the castle, indexing an anatomical whole no one perceives as such.

Conrad's insufficient and Alfonso's excessive corporealities respectively mirror Walpole himself at different stages of his life. While working on the novel (and Strawberry Hill), Walpole developed chronic gout. He underwent his first attack in 1755. By 1760 the gout returned more virulently, confining him to his bedroom, discontinuing his socialite lifestyle, and subordinating him to servants who hauled him around the house (Porter and Rousseau 77; Walpole, *Letters* 78). As he confessed to a friend: "I am laid up with the gout, am an absolute cripple" (*Letters* 79). Unsurprisingly, while witnessing his hands and feet swelling and paralyzing him, Walpole started to dream and write about expansive body parts that tear buildings apart. The inspiration for *Otranto*

famously arrived in a dream in which he saw "on the uppermost banister of a great staircase […] a gigantic hand in armour" (*Letters* 378). This vision preconizes the novel's recurrent misfits, with Alfonso's hand and foot too big to cross thresholds and other transitional areas within the castle. Walpole, in sum, came to understand his existence and labor in misfitting terms (33, 95). To read *Otranto* through this lens does not endorse the biographical-diagnostic school of interpretation Michael Bérubé denounces as pervasive in literary disability studies (20–21). Instead, my approach builds on the realization that certain creators with significant impairments launch artistic quests for alternative ways of sensing and being in the world (Garland-Thomson 604).

That Walpole wrote *Otranto* as a text about misfitting becomes evident in the second edition's purposefully deformed epigraph. Walpole truncates in content and prosody two lines from the beginning of Horace's *Ars Poetica* (*c.*19 BC). Walpole's version—"*vanae / Fingentur species, tamen ut Pes, & Caput uni / Reddantur formae*"—translates as: "nevertheless head and foot are assigned to a single shape" (4, 114). Horace's original states the very opposite: "in such a manner as that neither foot nor head can be assigned to one uniform shape" (206). For Horace, writers who trivialize mimetic referentiality by treating "heads" and "feet" as interchangeable foster an anarchy of representation responsible for species interbreeding and monstrous hybridization: "a woman fair to the waist were to end foul in the tail of an ugly fish" (206). By disfiguring a classical precept about the risks of disfiguration, Walpole's epigraph acts as a wedge widening the gap for anomalous bodies to infiltrate literature and strain the formal strictures of classical aesthetics.

The problem is that Walpole does not know what to make of abnormal bodies once Horace's ban has been lifted. As Conrad's death offstage suggests and Alfonso's ghostly returns confirm, *Otranto* dramatizes Walpole's struggle to articulate disabled subjectivities, including his own. The author mentions this unsolved problem half-sardonically in *An Account of the Giants* (1766):

> If we could come at an heroic poem penned by a giant! We should see other images than our puny writers of romance have conceived; and a little different from the cold tale of a late notable author, who did not know better what to do with his giant than to make him grow till he shook his own castle. (102)

Revisiting *Otranto* as the story of a giant who could not tell it himself, Walpole syncs an architectural and narrative misfit. Silenced and obliterated as Conrad, Walpole returns via Alfonso's ghost, whose indeterminate position between specter and flesh conveys the author's efforts to solidify a disabled perspective

in literature, and who, by haunting everybody else and blowing up the castle communicates his strained relationship with language and architecture.

Alfonso's anemic nemesis, Conrad constitutes the novel's obvious disabled figure as well as a fictional rendition of young Walpole, often mocked for his weak constitution, effeminate manners, and dilettantism starkly contrasting the Walpoles' line of robust, larger-than-life statesmen (Viseltear 139, 142). Conrad never speaks. By the time we encounter him, he has been reduced to a corpse whose fragments have to be peeled off from Alfonso's helmet. Our impression of him derives from others' callous accounts. The narrator introduces him as "a homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition" (17). His bridegroom "had conceived little affection" for him (18). Manfred sees his worst fears come true as his "sickly puny child" proves indeed "so frail a foundation" for the dynasty's future (23). Accordingly, Alfonso's helmet is eugenic and euthanasic. Conrad's infirm health is no longer a problem once it smashes him, ending his misery as well as others' ordeal of having him in their lives, not to mention the misstep of betting the principality's future on an incapacitated heir.

But the helmet that kills Conrad simultaneously alters the castle's materiality and, with it, the system of values that justifies his removal. Conrad misfits the gigantic helmet, squashed by its metallic rim rather than fitting its hollow cavity. To an extent, the helmet scene actualizes Horace's caveat about a literary form that equates heads, feet, and other body parts, for Alfonso's head does not equal Conrad's body. Conversely, its second impact against the courtyard breaches it, turning a sealed zone into an opening. Theodore, the novel's hero and Alfonso's legitimate descendant, escapes through it. Accused by Manfred of participating in Conrad's death, Theodore is "kept prisoner under the helmet itself," which Manfred's men lift cumbersomely and then drop with Theodore inside (21). In a destructive-creative iteration of gothic access, "one of the cheeks of the enchanted casque [...] had broken through into the vault, leaving a gap through which the peasant had pressed himself" (29). Conrad's disease and death may reiterate the cliché of disability enacting a divine punishment for transgression, but in opening a gap for Theodore's escape, the helmet that undoes Conrad also activates the process of restoring Otranto to Theodore.

Alfonso's helmet creates an exit ramp and a guidance device. In his escape, Theodore meets Isabella, who is running away from Manfred's lustful advances. Both enter the chthonic "lower part of the castle," consisting of "several intricate cloisters" giving way to a "labyrinth of darkness" (26). Although neither Theodore nor Isabella are disabled, their journey through the vault places them in conditions of absolute darkness, forcing them to collaborate through constant communication and tactile exploration (27). Feeling her way

through the floor, Isabella bumps into "a smooth piece of brass inclosed in one of the stones" (28). This opens a trapdoor leading them out of the castle but, for that to happen, first they need to find a nearby lock. It is here that Alfonso's strategic destruction of space turns providential again, when "a ray of moonshine streaming through a cranny of the ruin above shone directly on the lock they sought" (28).[10] Like Joseph driving Russell to fake walls and surfaces, Alfonso's removal of an architectural element reorganizes both the locus and the plot of the novel toward an eventual restoration of justice. This entails opening and closing off certain sites, but also portraying characters interacting with material space in unexpected, ingenuous ways. When Theodore loses his grip on the trapdoor handle after Isabella has gone through, it closes with a blast, leaving him on the wrong side while drawing Manfred and his guards. Theodore pretends then not to know how the trapdoor opens. In order to alert Isabella, he collects "a fragment of stone [...] fallen from above" and begins "to beat on the piece of brass that covered it; meaning to gain time for the escape of the princess" (31).

As in any misfitting event, agency throughout this escape becomes diffused. There is the combined opening of the trapdoor, the ray of moonshine courtesy of Alfonso's helmet, and the impossibility to assign speech to specific characters. *Otranto* proves notoriously difficult on this front, since Walpole rejects quotation marks and often portrays several characters speaking at once. The resultant seepage of individual identities plays out the misfitting thrust of Horace's misquotation. These dislocations also apply to the unstable ontology of castle and ghost. Alfonso is by turns made of steel, marble, stone, and flesh. His statue gets nosebleeds (89). By fragmenting his former body he terrorizes courtiers, who wish they rather had "seen ten whole ghosts" than his foot or hand alone (32). His spectral body reaches its oxymoronic apogee in the final scene, in which Alfonso constitutes both "a specter [...] and a material body, apparently unable to pass out of the interior of the castle without bursting it asunder" (Campbell 255). Although Jill Campbell frames Alfonso's materiality as an incapacity, Walpole aestheticizes the castle's collapse as an exhibition of Alfonso's pent-up power:

> The moment Theodore appeared, the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore the true heir

10. The fact that the Alfonso-operated ray of moonlight disrupts the prevailing darkness may be read as Walpole returning to an epistemology of sight rather than co-opting the experience of blindness.

> of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven. (103)

Like its Joseph-house analogue, the material, non-figurative continuum Alfonso-castle entails the obligation for Alfonso to implode the castle and its vitiated regime. Breaking its walls literally gives him a voice. Also the author. Even if Walpole fails to construct round characters with disabilities, he renders his own disproportionate, gout-ridden body into a haunting presence that redesigns Otranto's physical and political structures. Like with Conrad, Walpole fleshes out Alfonso only to eject him from the novel; unlike Conrad, though, Alfonso does so in the throes of a sublimely beautiful and restorative collapse.

Conclusion

The usurpation theme in *Changeling* and *Otranto* underscores the violent fate of buildings which, like the structures of state and economic power they materialize, are designed with a one-size-fits-all mentality. For Joseph and Alfonso, telling their story and destroying constraining spaces are one and the same thing. Through their material undoings, haunted houses in these texts deliver a narrative thread that disturbs and ultimately reorients the main plot. From initial misfit to total collapse, haunting advances a model of gothic access that tears down doors before gently knocking on them. Glossing over Jacques Derrida's "hauntology," Fredric Jameson speaks of "the very uncertainties of the spectral itself, which promises nothing tangible in return; on which you cannot build: which cannot even be counted on to materialize when you want it to" (142). Far from heralding failure, the promise of an unstable materiality has travelled from gothic stories to disability-rights history: legends of activist group The Rolling Quads roaming the streets of Berkeley at night in the early 1970s and smashing curbs with a sledgehammer ring with a gothic tone. Two decades later, President George Bush articulated the Americans with Disabilities Act's commitment toward a more accessible society as an overdue demolition: "Let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down" (qtd. in Shapiro 140). For us to grapple with these and further imbrications of gothic and crip spatialities, we need to re-read gothic fiction as something other than a way to access the repressed: a way to stop repressing bolder forms of access.

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