Apartheid Colonialism and the Domestic Gothic of *The Cutting Room* (2013) by Mary Watson

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Abstract

Mary Watson's 2013 gothic novel, *The Cutting Room*, deals with a woman who does not feel at home in her house. Her unease can be attributed to her conflicted feelings about being a wife, to South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, as well as to a fear of crime. Using feminist theories of women's relationship to the domestic sphere, Freud's writing on the *unheimlich* as well as Homi K. Bhaba's notion of the "postcolonial unhomely", I argue that the genre of the gothic provides appropriate metaphors and an aptly uncanny atmosphere for the exploration of a South African woman's complex relationship with the home.

Keywords: feminist gothic, gothic literature, Mary Watson, postcolonial gothic, postcolonial unhomely, uncanny

One of the themes of Njabulo S. Ndebele's celebrated novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) is South Africans', and specifically South African women's, conflicted relationship with the idea of home. One of the characters in the novel describes this relationship as follows,

> In a country where so many homes have been demolished and people moved to strange new places, home temporarily becomes the shared experience of homelessness, the fellow feeling of loss and the desperate need to regain something. (Ndebele 2013: 100)

Compounding the violence wrought on homes by colonialism and apartheid, and the enduring effects thereof, is the ubiquity of violent crimes committed in post-apartheid South African homes, both by intruders and by inhabitants of the homes against each other. This article is about the representation of the resulting "feeling of loss and the desperate need to regain something" in a contemporary South African gothic novel, *The Cutting Room* (2013) by Mary Watson. Referring to feminist theories of women's relationship to the domestic sphere, Freud's writing on the *unheimlich* as well as Homi K. Bhaba's notion of the "postcolonial unhomely", I argue that the genre of the gothic provides appropriate metaphors and an aptly uncanny atmosphere for the exploration of a South African woman's complex relationship with the home.

The Cutting Room is Watson's debut novel and follows on a short story collection, *Moss* (2004). Lucinda Blankenberg, the novel's protagonist, is a film editor. Her husband, the architect Amir, recently left her – apparently on a research trip to visit churches in Europe. Shortly after he left (and before the novel opens), she was attacked in their home by a stranger wearing a mask and bearing a knife, who left her with a scar on her throat. She starts working on a documentary film about a haunted house at the fictional mission station of Heuwelhoek, near Cape Town. Throughout the novel, the different histories that haunt this house are interspersed with Lucinda's present, attempting to deal with Amir's absence in a large house that he adapted to his needs, but in which she does not feel at home.

The Cutting Room's fascination with haunted spaces and the past's haunting of the present is typical of gothic literature. The term "gothic literature" is usually used to refer to a group of European novels written between 1760 and 1820 (Punter 1996:1). These novels are suspenseful and aimed at terrifying the reader, and are characterised by the depiction of "the haunted castle, of heroines prayed on by unspeakable terrors, of the blackly lowering villain,

of ghosts, vampires, monsters and werewolves" (Punter 1996:1). Although the large-scale production and popularity of gothic fiction is judged to have ended in 1820, the genre continues to exert an influence. The figures of the gothic novel reappear in horror films, and Punter (1996:2) also discusses gothic elements in contemporary popular romance novels, as well as the twentieth-century literature of the American South.

In *The Cutting Room* there is one explicit reference to the gothic tradition, when Lucinda compares herself, in her and Amir's house, to "old bones rattling inside a gothic castle" (Watson 2013:124). This simile, highlighting the importance of space (and a specific type of domestic space) to gothic fiction, acts as a point of departure for my argument.

Eugenia DeLamotte posits, in *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (1990), that the gothic can be considered proto-feminist in its depiction of domestic entrapment, and its portrayal of the captivity of women as something horrific. Similarly, Kate Ferguson-Ellis (1989:ix) traces the emergence of gothic literature to the stark distinction between the public sphere (considered masculine) and the "feminine" private domestic sphere that was demarcated in Europe in the eighteenth century. Along with this distinction, an ideal of "domestic happiness" was cultivated with a concomitant anxiety about its loss or corruption (Ferguson-Ellis 1989:ix). It is this anxiety that fuels classic gothic literature, in its "home [that] has lost its prelapsarian purity and is in need of rectification, or else the wandering protagonist [who] has been driven from the home in a grotesque reenactment of God's punishment of Satan, Adam, and Eve." Ferguson-Ellis (1989:xiii) calls narratives dealing with the first trope (the besieged heroine in an infiltrated home) the "feminine gothic", and the latter (a hero expelled from home) the "masculine gothic". *The Cutting Room* contains elements of both these narratives, with Lucinda a vulnerable woman in a home that cannot protect her, and Amir a hero away from home. Lucinda's (feminine gothic) narrative is, however, foregrounded.

Apart from Lucinda who feels herself to be rattling bones in a gothic castle, in *The Cutting Room*, housewives, especially, are depicted as entrapped female figures. They are portrayed as almost ghostlike, in their captivity in a certain set routine and a certain space. This comparison is made explicit in the focalisation of Thomas, the director of the documentary that Lucinda is editing. He thinks back to a visit to the house at Heuwelhoek when he was a child:

> While looking for the ghost in the house he noticed, in a way that he hadn't before, his mother. He saw her passing by as she made his bed, tidied the kitchen, prepared their lunch. He saw her sit down with a cup of tea, a cigarette between her fingers. And as she blew out the smoke, it occurred to him that even though she was the most constant thing in this world, the only presence he could be sure of, she was strangely absent. (Watson 2013:320)

In this passage, Thomas is looking for a ghost, but he only discovers the ghostly presence/absence of his mother. His description of his mother's actions is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's seminal description of woman's role within patriarchy in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949):

> Since the husband is the productive worker, he is the one who goes beyond family interest to that of society, opening up a future for himself through co-operation in the building of the collective future; he incarnates transcendence. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home that is to say, to immanence. [Woman] has no other job than to maintain for everyday life in an orderly way; she perpetuates the species without change, she ensures the even rhythm of the days and the continuity of the home, seeing to it that the doors are locked. (De Beauvoir 1997:449-450).

More recently, Sara Ahmed (2010:78) describes this paradoxical absent presence of the housewife as the result of her being haunted by lost possibilities, the other lives she gave up on in accepting this socially sanctioned role that is supposed to make her happy. Ahmed (2010:78) explores the representation of this "sadness in recognizing gender as the loss of possibility" in various feminist novels. The routine of Thomas' mother is therefore a not unusual description of woman's activity within patriarchy. His mother maintains the everyday life of the family and "ensures the even rhythm of the days and the continuity of the home" without cultivating a transcendent public identity that Thomas would presumably have registered as presence.

Thomas' mother is perhaps haunted by the other possibilities she gave up on, but some other women in *The Cutting Room* did not give up on these possibilities but in doing so are haunted by patriarchal expectations of what constitutes a "good wife". The women of the novel are therefore seemingly inevitably haunted, regardless of the choices they make.

Jelena, one of the ghosts who supposedly haunts Heuwelhoek, disappeared after being unable to bear children, clean the house or make crockery (Watson 2013:99-118). Even Lucinda, who has a professional career and who does not seem to be attracted to traditional feminine roles, wonders whether she should not have had children. After Amir leaves her, she also starts baking, "as if she were willing herself to become the good wife" (Watson 2013:153). She is also plagued by guilt because of her various infidelities. Even though she can move out of her house and the house at Heuwelhoek as she pleases, she is still haunted by a tradition of domestic entrapment (here associated with woman's traditional place in the domestic sphere) and the expectations that come with it.

Developing De Beauvoir's insights on feminine domestic routines, her fellow French philosopher Julia Kristeva (1981:15-6) claims, in "Le Temps des Femmes" (1979), that women are conventionally associated with space, for example in transforming a certain space into a home. Conversely, men (conceptualised as the "neutral" human) are associated with the passing of time and the teleological process of "becoming" and the realisation of change. When women *are* associated with time, it is in terms of repetition (as in the repetition of everyday household tasks) and eternity (what De Beauvoir identifies as the perpetuation of the species and "the continuity of the home", to which could be added ensuring the continuity of traditions and cultural practices within the home). Kristeva (1981:16) understands the association of the feminine with repetition in terms of the menstrual cycle.

Kristeva's emphasis on the relationships between female social roles and female biology means that she is sometimes criticised for being essentialist in her thinking. Kelly Oliver (1993:182) explains that critics see Kristeva's centring of the female body as being "[a]historical, biologically reductive, psychologically revisionist [and] universalist." Kristeva's thought (and this aspect of her thought) is not the focus of this paper, and setting out the nuances of this debate falls outside of its scope. Suffice it to say that I consider the value of Kristeva's argument here as its location of feminist potential within traditionally philosophically neglected feminine embodiment and experience. Kristeva (1981:17), namely, does not consider the association of the feminine with repetition as only limiting, but rather associates it with (and sees it as "perhaps" the cause of) a conception of women as monuments that transcend linear time. She refers, for example, to the Virgin Mary, who seemingly does not die but repeatedly reappears, "mov[ing] from one spatiality to another" (Kristeva 1981:17).

Kristeva (1981:17) argues that linear time, traditionally associated with the masculine, fulfils ideological functions in its focus on becoming and its conception of history as a progressive and civilising project. She therefore sees it as a political act to identify with marginalised groups (contrary to the view of her work as essentialist, she specifies that these groups can be male or female) that do not benefit from this project (Kristeva 1981:17). Monumental time, with its reappearance of figures from the past, particularly figures associated with pain and repression, is a reminder of the progress that has not been made and of the violence committed in the name of civilisation.

Kristeva (1981:31) posits that literature is an appropriate site for the exploration of "women's time", because it reveals "an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe [and] it thus redoubles the social contract by exposing the unsaid, the uncanny". By using the word "uncanny" she is invoking Sigmund Freud's theorisation of the *unheimlich* as describing the feeling that everything familiar to the subject is suddenly unfamiliar. While *unheimlich* is usually translated as "uncanny", the original German word contains a reference to the home to describe this alienation of what should be familiar or homely. Freud (2001:244) ascribes this feeling to the subject's realisation of his repressed familiarity with the mother's genitals and body. In both its reference to the domestic sphere and to the mother's embodiment, the *unheimlich* is therefore a gendered concept. It is not only Kristeva who associates this return of the repressed (maternal) femininity with literature. Freud (2001:219) too is inspired to investigate the concept by uncanny literature and stories that "arouses dread and creeping horror". While Kristeva does not specifically refer to horror stories or the gothic, it should be clear that her engagement with Freud's theorisation of the concept *unheimlich* can be used to understand gothic literature, concerned as the genre is with that which is usually unsaid and repressed. Following from this, the appearance of uncanny monumental figures from the past involves the return of the repressed feminine, and specifically the repressed maternal and sexuality of the mother, but also the return of all that is repressed in linear conceptions of progressive history.

I have already referred to the female characters in *The Cutting Room* who are stuck in alienating routines and oppressed by gendered expectations that cause them to become ghostlike. They display the "the indecisive lifelessness of dolls" (Watson 2013:159), as Lucinda thinks about her nieces, playing with make-up and dresses. The ghosts who are said to be appearing to the present generation in Heuwelhoek, all of whom are female, can also be

interpreted as monumental figures who represent repressed injustices and violence of the past. They are implicitly compared to Kristeva's preferred example of a monumental figure, the Virgin Mary, when Lucinda thinks back to her honeymoon in the Czech Republic, when she and Amir had listened to village lore about "a sighting of the virigin" (Watson 2013:331). This lore is reminiscent to the villagers' around Heuwelhoek's recounting of ghost sightings, which Thomas and Lucinda record for their documentary (Watson 2013:58).

The repressed histories represented by the ghosts of Heuwelhoek will be discussed shortly. First, however, I will discuss a ghost in *The Cutting Room* that is more like the Virgin Mary in her mythical status, and is also telling of the nature of the repressed histories that are resurrected in the novel. This ghost is the ghost of Princess Vlei, a real (as opposed to the fictional Heuwelhoek) wetland near the Cape Flats, near to where Lucinda and her sister Cat grew up. In *The Cutting Room* this wetland is said to be haunted by its eponymous princess (Watson 2013:170), a Khoi princess whose people were driven from the land by Portuguese settlers and whose tears are said to have flowed from the mountain to fill the wetland (Source to Sea 2016). The haunting of the princess is therefore a reminder of violent history specifically connected to colonialism, and it is therefore necessary to discuss Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial reconceptualisation of the unhomely, in order to sufficiently address the specifically colonial history related to the hauntings in *The Cutting Room*.

Bhabha (2004:13) uses Freud's concept to consider the unhomely as a "paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition", in which "the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other". He links this confusing of the borders between private and public with Freud's *umheimlich* by using Hannah Arendt's understanding of the private home as that which "should be hidden" and the public "as that which should be shown" (Bhabha 2004:14-15). The concept of the unhomely allows Bhabha (2004:15) to explore how "the domestic space [is] the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the-personal-*is*-the-political; the-world-*in*-the-home." Bhabha (2004:18) uses the insight to analyse, *inter alia*, the "unhomely houses" in Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* (1990), which (like *The Cutting Room*) is set in Cape Town, indicating the usefulness of this concept for analysing novels about the atypical colonialism of Apartheid.

As implied by the quote from *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* that this paper opens with, the home (where people live and who they live with) was a central concern of the apartheid

project. Legislation such as the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the Group Areas Act of 1950 proscribed where people could live based on their so-called race and ethnicity and tore people from the places they had made their homes. The Immortality Act of 1927, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immortality Amendment Act of 1950 took the apartheid state into the private realms of people's bedrooms, prohibiting sex between people of different "races".

The people of Princess Vlei are only the earliest example in *The Cutting Room* of a history of people displaced from their home, and of larger political forces intruding on the supposed privacy of the home. The already mentioned Jelena, one of Heuwelhoek's ghosts, was a white woman in a relationship with Kurt, a man who would have been classified by apartheid bureaucracy as "coloured", but whose skin was light enough to pass for white. Their relationship does not only suffer from the pressure Jelena feels to be a better wife, but also from the attempts to hide the truth about Kurt's identity. This pressure is brought to the fore when Kurt notices Jelena treating their "coloured" cleaner, Tina, like a subordinate. In this way, the state's ideology infiltrates their home, rendering it unhomely.

If housewives become alienated and ghostlike in their daily routines, this is even more true of those labourers who are invisible to middle class society, as in the case of Tina: "Kurt began to feel that Tina was almost a ghost, that she was elusive, always leaving, just as he reached out." (Watson 2013:109). While Thomas is made aware of the limiting immanence of the housewife's routine by watching his mother, Kurt is reminded of the ghostlike existence he would have been relegated to (as a coloured man in white suburbia he would have, most probably, been a manual labourer rather than a cleaner) had he not been living a white life. Tina is still alive, but her ghostlike presence is experienced by Kurt as a haunting of the past that he is trying to escape.

Lucinda is an upper-middle class woman who grew up in poverty and was classified as coloured during her late-apartheid childhood. Like Kurt, she is also haunted by this past while trying to transcend or even hide it. Lucinda thinks of herself as different from her similarly upwardly mobile sister Cat, whose attempts at denying her personal history is more blatant. At one time Cat even calls herself Barbie (Watson 2013:29), that epitome of white femininity (see Deliovsky 2008:50). Even though Lucinda is dismissive of Cat, she knows that they are not that different. As children they both "watched, covertly, the white children hand in hand with their parents and envied them their privilege: the best homes, the best schools and

unbroken families." (Watson 2013:44). Even though Lucinda and Cat do not literally hide their race as Kurt did, their efforts to repress their past (and the uncanny return of this repressed history), echo his.

As individuals, Lucinda, Cat and Amir's family live the lives of luxury that, during apartheid, were reserved for white people. Lucinda is, however, reminded that many people are still more directly affected by the injustices of the past when she visits a (fictional) government housing project called Blueberry Hill, which reminds Lucinda of the houses near Princess Vlei where she grew up. They are shocked by how oppressive the design of the buildings are, with Amir's sister asking, "Haven't they studied the architecture of housing estates and agreed that this kind of building was a very bad idea?" (Watson 2013:255). Apartheid patterns of suppression through urban planning are apparently repeating themselves and this leads Lucinda to wonder, "If buildings did affect our consciousness, as Amir was always saying, what did it mean if coloured kids, those lucky enough to have houses, all lived in more or less the same kind of space?" (Watson 2013:252).

Gerard Gaylard (2008:2) argues that Southern Africa's "coy ignoring of that which we would rather not acknowledge but which subtly defines us" and its manifestation in literature is comparable to that of the "baroque European fantasies" that are usually considered gothic. He therefore classifies work by writers such as Doris Lessing, J.M. Coetzee, Karel Schoeman, Etienne van Heerden, K. Sello Duiker, Dambudzo Marechera, Bessie Head and Zakes Mda as gothic. According to him, their work has not traditionally been seen as gothic because realism is conventionally considered the only seriously politically engaged mode of writing in Southern Africa (Gaylard 2008:3).

It should be clear by now that the gothic tropes in *The Cutting Room* do relate to the return of repressed histories, including large-scale political histories. It should be equally clear that the use of gothic tropes in the novel is not only to signal the continuing influence of the past, but also to how uncanniness make homes unhomely, particularly for women. This includes the way patriarchy encloses women in certain roles within the home, as well as the postcolonial unhomely effected by public intrusions on the privacy of the home. These two uncanny forces are both present in the relationship between Lucinda and Amir.

Amir's career as an architect can be read as a metaphor for the larger forces that shape buildings and environments and in this way influence people's everyday lives, sometimes in sinister ways. When designing a hotel he starts experiencing "a desire to punish" and

designing the building in a way that would inflict pain (Watson 2013:337). On Lucinda and Amir's honeymoon he had already displayed signs of interest in cruelty, when insisting that they visit a museum of torture (Watson 2013:137). He specifically notes, with "brightness in his eyes", that the site of the museum was an actual historical torture chamber (Watson 2013:140) – linking his fascinations with inflicting pain and with specific spaces.

While there is no indication that Amir had any sadistic intentions when buying and adapting their house, Lucinda does feel that it was not designed for her: "It was though it had only ever tolerated Lucinda, and now that Amir had left, it heaved and jolted to eject Lucinda" (Watson 2013:295). In this way the inhospitability of their house becomes a microcosm of the larger state of "the shared experience of homelessness" that the home signifies in South Africa. The ways in which South Africa's colonial and apartheid history contributed to this state has already been discussed. Also contributing to it is the fear of criminals intruding on the home, a common dread in South Africa with its high crime rates. The events of *The Cutting Room* are after all set off by the break-in of a masked stranger.

Leon de Kock (2016:3-4), in *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid South African Writing*, relates the "remarkable efflorescence" of South African crime novels to the precariousness and unpredictability of the country given its pervasive atmosphere of violence and criminality. De Kock sees these novels as engaged in "exacting and forensic examination" of this situation, and I argue that *The Cutting Room* also participates in this investigation. The genre of the gothic, rather than that of the contemporary crime novel, is however, a more appropriate mode for the investigation of *The Cutting Room*'s specific crimes, because of its emplotment of homes become uncanny, anxieties around the rightful inhabitancy of homes, women entrapped in homes and "fallen" men cast from them.

In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Ahmed argues that the concepts of "home" and "stranger" are interdependent and constitute each other: "The recognition of strangers is a means by which inhabitable or bounded spaces are produced" (Ahmed 2000:22), and likewise "others are recognized as strangers by those who inhabit a given space, who 'make it' their own" (Ahmed 2000:25). When Lucinda discovers a robber crossing her yard, carrying someone else's DVD player, she thinks that the thief looks "ordinary", not like a criminal (Watson 2013:2). In imagining the strangers who intrude homes, she had imagined them to have "mean eyes, or a jagged scar down the temple" (Watson 2013:2).

Apart from crimes committed by strangers, South Africa also has high rates of domestic violence. By the end of *The Cutting Room*, Lucinda discovers that this was also the nature of "her" crime, when Amir tells her that he was the "stranger" who had attacked her. Lucinda's surprise at the everyday humanity of the thief at the beginning of the novel, turns out to have been foreshadowing that the violence committed against her had also been perpetrated by an "ordinary" human, one she knew intimately:

> It was an ordinary crime. Far more common than hooded men with guns, knives and broken glass: a man with his wife's blood on his hands. All the ghosts and bad scary men that she had feared lurking in the shadows, stealing along high walls, peering through her window, dissipated when the light turned on them. Her danger had always come from within. It was domestic violence [...] how the tame became menacing. Innocuous household objects turned bad: cake laced with poison, electrics wired to harm. (Watson 2013:341).

Amir, the one who feels at home in their house, takes on the role of the stranger to attack Lucinda, the one who feels strange in the home. Earlier in the paper, I said that Amir, although mostly significant in his absence from the novel, could be compared to the heroes of classic masculine gothic novels, cast from their rightful homes. It should now be clear that he had indeed been cast from his home, and not on a research trip. His banishment from his house was brought about by his own actions, though, and he had banished himself in order not to do more harm (Watson 2013:336).

Lucinda seeks reasons for his actions, speculating that it was retaliation for her infidelity (Watson 2013:334). Amir says that she should not blame herself and the only answer that the novel provides is that Amir himself had become uncanny. Lucinda realises that she never completely knew Amir that parts of himself that he had repressed were returning. This return of the repressed is described in decidedly gothic terms:

> It had been a gradual corruption, like water eroding the skin of the princess or a grave turning a body to bones, Amir had slowly changed. He was unwell. Something malignant had inhabited a small pocket of his brain, then his heart, and now [...] it had extended to his body. (Watson 2013:336).

Lucinda not only feels alienated from her home because of her unease with adopting the role of wife, the one who cares for the immanence of the private sphere. In his role as architect, Amir not only symbolises the ways in which others shape the home and intrude on it. He also embodies the threat of domestic violence. Lucinda's feeling of being ill-at-ease is not the fear of crime in general, but also the result of a reality that many women (as well as a significant amount of men) live with: that their most intimate partners could potentially turn dangerous. These fears and the nature of the relationship between the sexes portrayed in *The Cutting Room* are common to the gothic novel, and using the genre's tropes and archetypes conveys the prevalent uncanniness of the home in contemporary South Africa.

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