The Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies International (CN-CSI) presents:

**Halloween Workshop, *Nature and Horror in the Nineteenth Century***

RUNNING ORDER (Central European Time)

**9.45am - 10.00am:** Professor Bennett Zon (Durham University), **Welcome Address**

**10am - 10.45am:** Dr Jonathan Greenaway, **‘Zola the Horror writer? Labour, Nature and *Germinal* as eco-gothic’**

Chair: Dr Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou(University of Paris 1–Panthéon Sorbonne)

*10.45am - 11.00am Break*

**11.00am - 11.45am:** Dr Joan Passey (University of Bristol), **‘Vampires on the Beach: Queer Gothic Ecologies at the Coastline’**

Chair: Alice Dodds (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

*11.45am - 12.00pm Break*

**12.00pm - 12.45pm:** Dr Eleanor Dobson (University of Birmingham), **‘“Familiar[s] of the deep”: shipwrecks, horror and the animal from *The Wreck of the Titan* to Titanic’**

Chair: Professor Robert Rix (University of Copenhagen)

*12.45pm - 2.00pm Lunch Break*

**2.00pm - 2.45pm:** Daisy Butcher, **‘Tree Mothers, Hollow Women and Flower Maidens: The representation of plant-women in George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858)and Jane G. Austin’s “Prince Rudolf’s Flower” (1859)’**

Chair: Dr Emma Merkling (Durham University)

*2.45pm - 3.00pm Break*

**3.00pm - 3.45pm:** Professor Matthew Wynn Sivils (Iowa State University), **‘Conjure and Rot—Ecogothic Decay in Charles Chesnutt’s Plantation Tales’**

Chair: Dr Emily Vincent (Durham University / University of Birmingham)

**4.00pm - 4.45pm:** Dr Janette Leaf (Birkbeck, University of London), **‘Gothic Insects Creeping Out the Nineteenth Century’**

Chair: Katrina Jan (University of Birmingham)

**4.45 – 5.00 pm:** Dr Emma Merkling (Durham University), **Closing Remarks**

ABSTRACTS & BIOS

**10am - 10.45am**: Dr Jonathan Greenaway, **‘Zola the Horror writer? Labour, Nature and *Germinal* as eco-gothic’**

Zola’s Les Rougon-Macquart is a twenty novel series produced between 1871 to 1893. The series subtitle explains Zola’s intentions -- a “Natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire.” In contrast to a writer like Balzac, Zola aimed not to mirror an entire society but to trace the fortunes and struggles of a single family through the decline and fall of the French Empire. Zola insisted that his method was naturalistic, and he drew heavily, if idiosyncratically from the scientific theories of the time around evolution and heritability, tracking the influence of (in his words) “blood and environment.” Of all the novels in the series, *Germinal,* the thirteenth in the sequence is often considered to be Zola’s masterpiece and is widely regarded as one of the great novels of not just French literature, but also the wider aesthetic movement of which Zola is widely taken as exemplar -- namely, naturalism.

Yet despite the all-too-easy confluence between naturalism and realism, Zola’s interest in these issues of inheritance and degeneration places him in close proximity to the concerns of Gothic and horror writers in the late nineteenth century.  The atavism of Hyde, the degeneration and depravity of Dorian Gray, and the scientific theories of Lombroso are not far removed from Zola’s own sociological and political engagement with French society. Reading the gothic and horror elements of Zola’s work raises complex questions about the political utility and function of horror and the ways in which Zola understands the interactions between nature and society. In short, in Zola we can find a deeply political class consciousness even if ultimately he remains, as Lukacs points out, prone to a kind of biological mysticism.

*Germinal* follows a young migrant worker, Étienne Lantier, who arrives in the mining town Montsou. From its opening pages the novel establishes a close link between a natural world which is terrifying and imposing and the exploitation of the working class. The natural world is the site of wealth extraction but this wealth is generated at the cost of nature and the spilt blood of the working classes. When the Montsou mine rises in strikes and the mine itself collapses, Zola’s naturalism shows what David Baguely referred to as his “entropic vision.” *Germinal* shows us that the Earth is full of coal, but also blood, an ecogothic vision of what exploitative labor does to the web of life that binds classes to certain environments.

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**11.00am - 11.45am**: Dr Joan Passey (University of Bristol), **‘Vampires on the Beach: Queer Gothic Ecologies at the Coastline’**

**‘**Vampires' likely don't spring to mind when you think of the sunny climes of the seaside. Yet, many well and lesser known vampires have trod sandy shores. This paper investigates the representation of the coastal vampire as an access point to developing a thesis on a nineteenth-century queer gothic ecology, or a queer ecogothic, whereby ecological, queer, and gothic methodologies intersect to provide new ways of untangling the relationship between the natural, unnatural, and supernatural.

**BIO:** Dr Joan Passey is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Bristol where they specialise in the histories, literatures, and cultures of seas and coasts, and the gothic from the eighteenth century to the present. Their monograph, *Cornish Gothic 1840-1913* was released by University of Wales Press in 2023, and their co-edited collection with Robert Lloyd, *Dark Tales: Re-evaluating the Short Fiction of Shirley Jackson* was released with Bloomsbury in 2024. She has edited anthologies for the British Library and is a regular contributor and presenter for BBC Radio 3.

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**12.00pm - 12.45pm:** Dr Eleanor Dobson (University of Birmingham), **‘Familiar[s] of the deep’: shipwrecks, horror and the animal from *The Wreck of the Titan* to Titanic**

When Morgan Robertson’s novel *Futility* was first published in 1898 the author conceived of the horror of the loss of an ocean liner in terms that intersect with the animal in several ways: in establishing a sense of scale that suggests human powerlessness; in highlighting the dangers posed by aquatic or semi-aquatic animals; and in evoking a folkloric tradition of marine monsters. In 1912, in the wake of the sinking of the RMS Titanic, *Futility* took on haunting new resonances, and was republished to capitalise on some of the eerie similarities between Robertson’s narrative and actual events under the new title *The Wreck of the Titan*. Using Robertson’s text as a starting point, this paper illuminates the ways in which non-living entities are animalised and other forms of animal life spotlighted in poetry reflecting on the Titanic’s demise, attesting to the physical and psychological horrors of disaster at sea and – contrary to nineteenth-century ideas of progress – a renewed understanding of humankind’s fragility when confronted with the awesome forces of nature.

**BIO:** Eleanor Dobson is Associate Professor in Nineteenth-Century Literature at the University of Birmingham, and the author of *Writing the Sphinx: Literature, Culture and Egyptology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020) and *Victorian Alchemy: Science, Magic and Ancient Egypt* (UCL Press, 2022). This paper marks the beginning of a new project entitled *Gothic Archaeologies* exploring the dark resonances of sites that have a particular hold on the popular imagination, including that of the Titanic wreck.

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**2.00pm - 2.45pm:** Daisy Butcher, **‘Tree Mothers, Hollow Women and Flower Maidens: The representation of plant-women in George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858)and Jane G. Austin’s “Prince Rudolf’s Flower” (1859)’**

The hybridisation of botany and the female body has existed in storytelling since ancient times with examples such as Daphne, Syrinx and even Lilith. These plant-women can come in many varieties, each exhibiting unique poisons, thorns or ensnaring botanical qualities. To understand how the plant-women of the  nineteenth-century emerged, it is necessary to interrogate George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858) and Jane G. Austin’s ‘Prince Rudolf’s Flower (1859), which were published just a year apart. It can be argued that Austin’s tale takes inspiration from MacDonald as both texts follow a male protagonist travelling through a dreamlike fairyland and feature various plant-women who represent extremes of femininity and can shapeshift between their plant and human forms. This paper will compare the representations of MacDonald’s Beech Tree and Alder Maiden with Austin’s various flower maidens. Particular focus will be given to highlighting the ways in which these plant-women embody nineteenth-century anxieties surrounding the female body.

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**3.00pm - 3.45pm:** Professor Matthew Wynn Sivils (Iowa State University), **‘Conjure and Rot—Ecogothic Decay in Charles Chesnutt’s Plantation Tales’**

“Racial capitalism leads to the violent destruction of the Black body and psyche as well as the earth itself.”[[1]](#footnote-1) —Teresa A. Goddu

Set on a plantation sowed with half-buried horrors, Charles Chesnutt’s stories portray the plantation system as an undead monster, a persistent rotting corpse feeding upon the torment, death, and decay of enslaved Black bodies. In this talk I examine how Chesnutt—particularly in stories such as “The Goophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,” and “Dave’s Neckliss,”—creates an indictment of the human and environmental abuse inherent to what scholars now call the Plantationocene. By integrating African American conjure traditions, Chesnutt’s tales incorporate a spiritual element that enacts a form of resistance, but these traditions also yield a multi-dimensional specter of decay.

“Black authors,” writes Maisha L. Wester, “appropriate and revise the genre’s tropes in unique ways to both speak back to the tradition’s originators and to make it a capable and useful vehicle for expressing the terrors and complexities of black existence in America.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Chesnutt’s stories fully demonstrate Wester’s observation while also factoring in the plantation environment itself, portraying how the natural elements that pervade these tales enact and embody the tropes of existential decay and pervasive trauma. Drawing upon scholarship by critics such as Wester, Teresa A. Goddu, Donna Haraway, and Katharine McKittrick, I investigate how Chesnutt’s stories leverage these tropes to serve as conduits between the natural, unnatural, and—through conjure—supernatural experience of the plantation where trauma and greed grinds Black bodies into the soil.

**BIO:** Matthew Wynn Sivils is a Professor of American Literature at Iowa State University. His publications include an edition of Harriet Prescott Spofford’s *Sir Rohan’s Ghost*; the collection *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*; and the monograph *American Environmental Fiction, 1782–1847*. His essays have appeared in various journals and edited collections, and he is an Associate Editor for the journal, *American Gothic Studies*. He recently guest-edited a special issue of *Studies in American Fiction* on the ecogothic.

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**4.00pm - 4.45pm:** Dr Janette Leaf(Birkbeck, University of London), **‘Gothic Insects Creeping Out the Nineteenth Century’**

Insects in their natural form – multi-legged, on an entirely different scale to humankind, with unreadable faces and metamorphic life cycles – are already inherently weird to us. This paper argues that these characteristics make them ideally suited to gothicisation and the generation of horror.

It begins by establishing the methodological framework of approaching nineteenth-century prose fiction texts via cultural entomology and defines precisely what is intended by that specialist term. It gestures towards contemporaneous popular exposure to the habits of insects and points to some supernatural concepts of those creatures. It then outlines positive associations of insects with resurrection, immortality, gem-like beauty, and educative value. It contrasts those good associations with negative associations of repulsiveness, disease, parasitism and even evil, and demonstrates how these contribute towards entomophobia. It constructs a spectrum of responses linked to pre-conceived ideas about insects and offers a framework for analysing a selection of short stories and novels. The main body of the paper teases out how authors writing in the Gothic genre call upon the natural characteristics and cultural associations of insects – good and bad sometimes co-existing in tension with one another – and how those authors exaggerate and distort them still further to evoke sensations of fear and dread.

Species of insect under the microscope are flies, beetles, moths and ants. Literary works containing those insects are: Marry Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818)*;* Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Sphinx” (1846); A. G. Gray Jun’s “The Blue Beetle” (1857); Anonymous’s “The Mummy’s Soul” (1862); Jane Goodwin Austin’s “After Three Thousand Years” (1868);Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897)*;* and H. G. Wells’s “The Crystal Egg” (1897) and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901).

Finally, this paper summarises key ways in which Gothic insects crawl, fly, flitter, feedand “creep out” the nineteenth century.

**BIO:** Dr Janette Leaf is an Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. The dominant narrative of her work is late-Victorian prose fiction which she often situates at the intersections of literature with science, fine art, museum studies, and material culture. She has presented at numerous conferences on Gothic subjects including Egyptomania, redheads, weird water, and of course insects! She has published on Neo-Victorian Gothic in *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* and has a forthcoming chapter on Spectral Insects in Palgrave's *New Directions in the Ghost Story.* She is also co-editor of the British Library's *Crawling Horror: Creeping Tales of the Insect Weird* (2021).

1. Teresa A. Goddu, “The (Neo-)Slave Narrative and the Plantationocene,” *African American Review* 55, no. 4 (2022): 269-285. 279 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maisha L. Wester, *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)