

Imperial Gothic for Global Britain: BBC's *Taboo* (2017-present)¹

Aris Mousoutzanis, University of Brighton

Abstract

This article discusses the BBC drama *Taboo* (2017-present) as a contemporary example of imperial Gothic and places the series in the context of a current trend of 'imperial nostalgia' in British culture. It provides a close reading of the series with regard to its use of gothic traits like the exploration of morbid psychology, the function of the ghost as a metaphor for past trauma, the use of locale for Gothic effect, and the evocation of body horror. By reading this contemporary narrative against this generic tradition, the paper highlights the ability of the Gothic to reflect on historical transformations and contemporary manifestations of discourses of Empire. The series, the discussion argues, seeks to critique Empire by portraying it as the agent of monstrosity and horror but eventually reproduces stereotypes of colonial otherness that were fundamental to imperialist ideologies. In this sense, *Taboo* is a text just as ambivalent as earlier imperial Gothic texts.

Keywords: *Taboo*, television, imperialism, postcolonialism, cannibalism, Regency

Taboo, a television series written for the BBC by Tom Hardy, Steven Knight, and Edward John 'Chips' Hardy, is a period drama set in 1814 during the regency of George IV. It follows James Keziah Delaney (Tom Hardy), a rogue adventurer who returns to London after twelve years in Africa upon receiving news of his father's death. Delaney finds out that his father has bequeathed him the Nootka Sound, a strip of land in the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada in a strategically important position – not only for the war with the US that has been waging since 1812, but also for the tea trade between Vancouver and Canton. It is therefore a point of contention between the British Crown, the American government, and the East India Company (EIC). Founded by royal charter in 1600, the EIC was a trading body fundamental to the foundations of the Empire which assumed increasing military and political power over the centuries. The plot of *Taboo* follows Delaney's conflicts with his relatives and the EIC as he sets out to avenge his father's death and build his own trade empire with the latter's Delaney Trading Company. This paper discusses the series as a contemporary instance of imperial

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Gothic insofar as it both replicates generic conventions of the subgenre and demonstrates an attitude to Empire just as ambivalent as earlier texts.

In its use of generic tropes, conventions, and themes of imperialist adventure fiction, *Taboo* follows a recent trend of ‘imperial nostalgia’ in popular culture. Examples include films such as *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011), *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2015), *Victoria and Abdul* (2017), or *The Viceroy’s House* (2017), and television series such as Channel 4’s *Indian Summers* (2014-15), the BBC’s *Real Marigold Hotel* series (2016-present), or ITV’s *The Good Karma Hospital* (2017-present). As Muneeb Hafiz puts it, ‘[s]elling the Empire, or as always has been the case, a version of it, is still profitable it seems’.¹ Within this climate, Hafiz identifies ‘some potentially fruitful parallels’ between ‘popular imagery in contemporary British cultural life’ such as the above examples ‘and imperial propagandist activity of the 19th and 20th centur[ies]’.² Examples he cites from the nineteenth century include advertisements for the Empire in school textbooks and on biscuit tins, tea boxes, and cigarette cards, but the argument could be extended to encompass contemporary popular fictions, including from our own century, as a major site of imperialist propaganda.

Taboo’s replication of imperialist settings, plots, and themes within a bleak tale of murder, incest, cannibalism, and insanity parallels the popular genre that Patrick Brantlinger terms ‘imperial Gothic’: a ‘blend of adventure story with Gothic elements’ ranging from H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) to John Buchan’s *Greenmantle* (1916).³ Imperial Gothic emerged during the ‘New Imperialism’, a period extending roughly from 1875 to 1914 that witnessed ‘a more frenetic vision of expansionism and militancy’ between established imperial powers like Great Britain and France and emerging rivals such as Germany and the United States.⁴ As the British Empire had expanded to encompass more than a fifth of the globe by the turn of the century, imperialism had become ‘one of the pivotal facts of the late Victorian and Edwardian years’ and British society was ‘saturated with nationalist and militarist ideas’.⁵ But the size and diversity of the Empire also generated fears that it was no longer manageable or that its extent and complexity might even lead to its destruction. The period Eric Hobsbawm has described as the ‘Age of Empire’ created ‘both the conditions which formed anti-imperialist leaders and the conditions which [...] began to give their voices resonance’.⁶ The increasingly jingoistic fervour of the time was therefore matched by an underlying fear of decline and impending doom that ‘accompa[ni]e[d] this era of seemingly unstoppable expansion’.⁷ The New Imperialism, as Ailise Bulfin puts it, was ‘as anxious as it was assertive’.⁸ As ‘a practice that entailed great dangers as well as great rewards for the colonising nation’, the attitude towards imperialism within *fin-de-siècle* culture was one of ‘a paradoxical mixture of confidence and

anxiety'.⁹ Accordingly, imperial Gothic fictions associate imperialism with both heroic adventure and repulsive horror, and thus emerge as 'at once self-divided and symptomatic of the anxieties that attended the climax of the British Empire'.¹⁰ In this respect, they reflect the ways in which imperialism is 'capable of constructing itself as a contradictory process' and 'profoundly split in its identity and value-scheme'.¹¹ By exposing the contradictions of imperialism, imperial Gothic texts may contain 'the potential for powerful critiques of imperialist ideology'.¹²

If scholars like Brantlinger and Stephen Arata identify the emergence of imperial Gothic with the specific political realities of the late Victorian period, others such as Howard L. Malchow suggest that this critical trend 'overburdens' this particular historical moment: 'Racial gothic, if not imperial gothic, has an older and deeper provenance'.¹³ The genealogy of the term 'Gothic' itself evokes political connotations of resistance to authority, tyranny and empire, reaching back to the ancient times of the Visigoths, the tribe believed to have brought about the collapse of the Roman Empire. By the time of the first cycle of Gothic writing – a period ranging roughly from the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) to Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and the time in which *Taboo* is set – 'Gothic' was already associated with 'the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed' as well as 'the wild and uncivilised'.¹⁴ Malchow underlines the extent to which, in the nineteenth century, such vocabulary derives from 'tales of the cannibal South Pacific', denoting an 'intimate connection between the gothic literary sensibility and a popular culture of racial fantasy and fear' informed by contemporary imperialist discourses.¹⁵ The emergence of the Gothic was 'at some level a response to expanding knowledge of cultural and racial difference', knowledge whose expansion was enabled by travel to and encounter with other cultures in the interest of the imperialist project.¹⁶ If, then, the Gothic is a writing of Otherness, this is an Otherness that 'derived from the external impetus of empire over the course of the nineteenth century'.¹⁷ During this century, 'involvements with empire become themselves "Gothicised", in the sense that the racial or national "other" comes to be seen from a Gothic perspective, endowed with diabolical, monstrous or merely melodramatically powerful qualities'.¹⁸ The relationship between the Gothic and discourses of Empire therefore precedes the late Victorian period and may be identified in texts that fall within the first cycle of Gothic writing, such as William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir* (1798), or Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810). The 'problematization of empire' thus seems to be 'an intrinsic function of the gothic' whose 'dark metaphors' made a 'formative contribution to [a] negative imperial imaginary'.¹⁹

However, to paraphrase Malchow, imperial Gothic does not have only an older provenance but also a newer one. In the ‘wake of neo-colonial efforts and a new wave of imperial sentiment’ in the global political context of the early twenty-first century, Johan Hoglund suggests that ‘a great deal of modern literature and film’ as well as television ‘should be termed as imperial Gothic’ insofar as ‘they threaten the audience with similar imagery, often, in fact retelling the old late-Victorian Gothic stories’.²⁰ *Taboo* may be seen as part of this trend, insofar as it both invokes imperial grandeur in its rendering of the colonising forces of an institution such the EIC as omnipotent, beyond the reaches of its actual power, and, at the same time, renders imperialism as the agent of horror, monstrosity and villainy. In both reproducing and contesting colonial discourses, it is a text that is as ‘self-divided’ as its late Victorian predecessors.

My discussion below explores continuities and disjunctures between the BBC series and the generic tradition outlined above, yet its purpose is not to suggest some conscious or magical replication of history. The relationship of *Taboo* to the histories with which it opens up a dialogue is more complex than that: this is a contemporary text that recreates the Georgian period with motifs and conventions from a late-Victorian genre while using a twenty-first century idiom – it is debatable, for instance, whether EIC leaders would have used the profane language that this series presents them speaking. Knight has specifically described *Taboo* as ‘a different way of doing English period drama’, a way that follows from other contemporary trends to rewrite the past from a present perspective, such as neo-Victorianism or steampunk.²¹ This article therefore does not simply explore whether ‘history repeats itself’. Instead, *Taboo* will be placed within a tradition of Gothic texts infiltrated by imperial, colonial and postcolonial discourses in order to help unravel further the ways in which these discourses have developed historically. Such an approach also highlights the ability of the Gothic to respond to historical transmutations and contemporary manifestations of these discourses. *Taboo*, I argue, is imperial Gothic for the days of Global Britain, Empire 2.0, and Brexit.

According to Fred Botting, a generic characteristic of the Gothic is the articulation of ‘[u]ncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality’.²² All these uncertainties are present in *Taboo*, which presents an unfolding conflict over possession of territory, wealth, and power between Delaney and the EIC, intertwined with an Oedipal family drama involving his succession of his father Horace (Edward Fox), his traumatic fixation with his mother Salish (Noomi Rapace), and his incestuous relationship with his sister Ziphra (Oona Chaplin). The two narrative threads are interwoven through a shared preoccupation with

legacy, inheritance, possession and ownership – in legal terms, in the case of the former, and in psychosexual terms, in the case of the latter. Both of them are ignited by the originary event of the series, Horace Delaney's Nootka Sound Treaty that secured his purchase of land and wife, who was a slave included in the property deal. The Delaneys were thus 'produced' by patriarchal, colonial capitalism and the family's morbid psychosexual dynamics, the series seems to be suggesting, are its symptom.

Delaney himself could have emerged from the pages of a Gothic novel; he is variously described by others as a 'ghost', a 'dead man walking', a 'demon' or even the devil himself. 'Is hell opened up?' Ziphra exclaims when Delaney enters the church during his father's funeral, while at the end of the first episode he admits to Dr Powell (Michael Shaeffer): 'I know things about the dead'. During his father's wake, we hear a woman commenting that 'madness comes out through the umbilical cord', a suggestion reiterated later in the episode by EIC records officer Wilton (Leo Bill), who reports to a meeting: 'in temperament, he [Delaney] takes after his mother' who was committed as a resident in Bedlam asylum and it was his 'confidence that allowed his true nature and mother's madness to emerge'. *Taboo* demonstrates another Gothic trait here: the exploration of morbid psychology and abnormal states of mind, though the character of Delaney and his parents. His father is described as having been 'sick from madness' by his solicitor Thoyt (Nicholas Woodeson) and as 'half human at the end' by his loyal servant Brace (David Hayman): 'he would squat right here and make deals with ghosts in the flames. And he would speak in a language that was like ravens fighting'. Both characters tell Delaney that his father would call out to him and Delaney admits that he could hear him, suggesting some telepathic or psychic connection between the two.

The Oedipal undercurrent of this narrative thread continues throughout the season as there is a growing sense that Delaney is assuming his father's place and repeating his fate. In this respect, *Taboo* restages a recurring pattern of classic narrative whereby 'the absence of the father' is 'almost a precondition for narrative development' insofar as it 'initiates the narrative' and 'forces the protagonist to assume the role of the hero'.²³ When, in the third episode, Delaney asks Brace to have the windows of the house boarded and the river hatch closed in order to protect themselves from intruders who are after him, Brace says:

So we are besieged. I suppose I can use the same carpenter to board up the windows that your father used when he was under siege and he can put the same old nails in the same old holes. You can sit there with the same old gun cocked on your lap. And when you sit there with that same look of defiance on your face, I will ask you the same old

question: for what do you risk your life?

Repetition is also important in this narrative in another sense, in the recurring intrusive flashbacks experienced by Delaney, which bring back repressed memories of two major traumatic events haunting him. The recurrence of these scenes in different episodes reveals a preoccupation with various forms of psychopathology typical of the Gothic. A trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, is 'the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena'.²⁴ The 'compulsion to repeat' a distressing event by re-enacting it in nightmares or hallucinations in order to master an experience too overwhelming to process at the time of its occurrence is one of the most common post-traumatic symptoms. In films and television series dealing with traumatic events, the 'flashback trope' is typically used 'as a way of signalling and exploring the return of trauma' and it is used accordingly in *Taboo* in order to represent these two events.²⁵ Each event corresponds to the two narrative threads of the series previously outlined and it relates to the double generic status of the series as both political, imperialist adventure and personal, psychosexual drama.

The first event is evoked through Delaney's memories of his mother who, in a fit of insanity, tried to drown him in the river when he was still a baby. In the sixth episode, Brace describes to Delaney what he himself can only recall in fragmented, intense hallucinatory flashbacks: 'Desperate for your death! It took three men to pull you apart. She was clawing and spitting, dragged from the river howling and screaming'. His father committed her to Bedlam, Brace continues, only in order to protect him from her. Delaney's attraction to his sister, the plot suggests, is a compensatory attempt to possess the mother and come to terms with this trauma. The Oedipal subtext of this subplot is most obvious in episode six when Delaney eventually seduces his sister: the editing clearly suggests her role as a substitute for the mother, as the scenes of their sexual encounter in bed are intercut with intrusive flashbacks of his mother trying to drown him. In fact, Delaney's entire project seems to be propelled by his attempt to recover from this trauma as it is revealed to be one of a return, a return to his mother's land: while embarking to America, he chooses not to include Brace in his team: 'you have always been my father's man, in my father's world. We're headed to my mother's now'.

The second event of which Delaney experiences post-traumatic flashbacks relates to the sinking of a slave ship upon which he was travelling while en route to Antigua. Delaney's guilt is shown in one of those flashback sequences when he addresses the apparition of an African slave on the ship: 'You are not here. I have no fear for you and I have no guilt for you. I did as

others did and as others had me do, and we are all owned, and we have all owned others so don't you dare stand there and judge me'. Ghosts are a common trope for denoting trauma: theoretical discussions and fictional representations of trauma often invoke metaphors of haunting and spectrality in order to convey the experience. According to Roger Luckhurst, 'the traumatic memory persists in a half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent presence of another time in our time'.²⁶ The series' hallucinatory scenes dramatize, in particular, those '[u]nspeakable instances of colonial horror' that 'repeatedly return to haunt and terrorise the postcolonial text'.²⁷ In this sense, the 'post-' of the postcolonial converges with the 'post-' of the post-traumatic: 'its apparent insistence on a time "after", on an "aftermath", exposes itself precisely to the threat of return, falls under the sign of repetition'.²⁸ The return, in this context, is threatening because it unearths the now buried but then central presence of slavery, which was fundamental to the operation of the Empire – a fact often overlooked in official and dominant discourses of slavery, in which it tends to be associated predominantly with the history of the United States. That these are the horrors and traumas of colonial capitalism is underscored by Delaney's use of the language of ownership and possession during a nightmare by which he himself is possessed.

This language permeates not only his traumas but also the means to overcome them – by putting them in writing. *Taboo* is a drama whose intricacies and machinations are propelled through the endless circulation of texts, whether these are personal notes, legal documents or financial agreements: throughout the entire season, contracts are signed, wills are read, letters are written, propositions are sent, accounts are kept, inventories are made by and between various characters in this series whose overarching narrative motivation is the discovery of a hidden document, the Nootka Sound Treaty. It is not surprising, then, that coming to terms with trauma is also achieved through writing, in a plot detail that is in line with theoretical and practical approaches to treating trauma: by attempting to put the experience into representation, whether this be art, literature, painting, or other similar media.

In the case of *Taboo*, representation is in the form of a legal document, a written account of Delaney's experience of the sinking of the ship, which he is asked to produce by Esquire George Chichester (Lucian Msamati). Chichester is a member of the abolitionist group The Sons of Africa, and he has been appointed to prepare the evidence for a Royal Commission opened by the Crown on the sinking. Chichester is the character through whom the series most directly enacts a critique of possession and ownership, in the form of slavery. When, for instance, Wilton comments that Chichester is 'very well-travelled', he responds by saying 'I just wish I had seen those wonders without the benefit of chains around my arms and legs'.

Described by EIC leader Sir Stuart Strange (Jonathan Pryce) as an ‘educated blackamoor’, he is someone who has embraced the ideals and principles of European Enlightenment and describes himself as a rationalist who believes in justice and the rule of law. In this respect, Chichester embodies what Homi Bhabha theorises as ‘colonial mimicry’, the process whereby the colonised imitates the culture of the coloniser either consciously, in order to gain access to the latter’s power, or unconsciously, after having been interpellated as a colonial subject. For Bhabha, however, mimicry is also a subversive practice insofar as it exposes colonial authority to be fragile enough to be able to be mimicked in the first place. Mimicry ‘mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them’.²⁹ It is therefore ‘at once resemblance and menace’ and its menace is ‘its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority’.³⁰ Mimicry enables the colonised to appropriate the culture of the coloniser in order to challenge and subvert it from within. Chichester clearly adopts this practice. For nine years he had been trying to launch an investigation on the sinking of this slave ship, an EIC sloop named *The Cornwallis* that was renamed *The Influence* after taking on human cargo in the port of Cabinda on the West African coast. Chichester claims that this was a case of an illicit shipment of slaves for personal profit as the ship was officially registered as departing the port empty, and the scarcity of crew is the main reason for the sinking of the ship. He therefore asks Delaney, as the sole survivor of the ship, to write his account in order to present it as legal evidence to support this claim.

That this investigation serves the narrative function of helping Delaney overcome his trauma is suggested by the fact that, for him, Chichester ‘doubles’ the ghosts of the slaves that he sees: when Delaney first meets Chichester, he asks him if is ‘a spirit, like the others’. The penultimate scene of the first season shows Chichester acquiring Delaney’s signed written statement in which he confirms that Strange was the person who organised the loading of the ship with slaves for a sugar plantation owned by his brother. The following, final scene is the one where Delaney and his team embark to America upon his ship, in an editing sequence that suggests closure and a new beginning.

This new beginning, however, represents an imperialist project that is not unlike those of the EIC: Delaney embodies both the trauma of colonialism and its very epitome. Throughout the series, he is presented as a product of the EIC itself. Delaney was an exceptional cadet when serving at the EIC military seminary in Woolwich and his current motivations and activities replicate those of the EIC. Delaney travelled to Africa like a slave, but then he stole diamonds and other slaves and sold them. ‘Conquest, rape, plunder?’ he admits: ‘I studied your methods in your school. And I do know the evil that you do because I was once part of it’. Even if Tom

Hardy has stated that Delaney's character was inspired by that of Marlow in that 'highwater mark of imperial Gothic', Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1900), there are also similarities to Kurtz at this point.³¹ In his discussion of Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of Conrad's work in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Slavoj Žižek describes Kurtz as 'a perfect soldier' who, 'through his overidentification with the military power system, [...] turn[s] into the excess which the system has to eliminate'.³² Žižek suggests that Kurtz is "presented not as a remainder of some barbaric past, but as the necessary outcome of modern Western power itself" but perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that Delaney, like Kurtz, is presented as both at the same time.³³ Andrea Major's approach seems more appropriate as she suggests that Delaney is 'symbolic of both British colonial violence and imperial paranoia about supposed "native" savagery'.³⁴

Major's very useful reading of the series underlines the relevance of its preoccupation with Empire to contemporary political discourses and conditions: the 'portrayal of the dark heart of colonial expansion is a timely reminder of the violent, ambivalent and moral origins of globalisation' in 'a world in which jingoistic nationalism and imperial nostalgia are becoming increasingly potent forces'.³⁵ As already raised, the importance of imperialist discourses at work in this narrative is evident in Steven Knight's conscious efforts to present the EIC as an almost omnipotent institution, indeed much more powerful than it was during the period when *Taboo* is set. Knight describes the EIC as 'the equivalent of the CIA, the NSA, and the biggest, baddest multinational corporation on earth, all rolled into one self-righteous, religiously motivated monolith', a description that 'raised eyebrows among historians' for suggesting that the institution was both more powerful and more malign than in reality.³⁶ Accordingly, the script emphasises the EIC's power. 'When you left London', Thoyt tells Delaney, 'the East India Company was a trading company. Now it is God Almighty'. Strange himself admits:

We can use every resource we have, every resource! We are richer than God. I blaspheme with impunity because the company is at my heel. Now, we've screwed Maharajas, we've screwed Moguls and this man - this man - is merely a London mongrel.

Major directly addresses the historical contradictions within the series, whereby '*Taboo* inflates the role of the EIC as a global power, while simultaneously erasing its most significant sphere of influence and its most profound impacts'³⁷. As she points out, 'India is strangely absent from *Taboo*'s depiction of early nineteenth-century London'³⁸. It is indeed one of the most striking

aspects of this series that it chooses to exaggerate the power of an institution whose influence was already receding by 1814 and whose last transatlantic voyage from Cabinda, Major reports, dated back 50 years, to 1765. The imperial institution is presented ‘both as more powerful than it actually was and as guilty of atrocities it was not responsible for’.³⁹ The tendency to focus on the more sinister aspects of the institution is also addressed by historian Tirthankar Roy, whose response to the series’ portrayal of the company highlights that the EIC was mainly a ‘business firm’ that ‘made a very positive contribution overall’ by ‘creating a whole new business world’.⁴⁰

The representation of the EIC as both more powerful and more sinister than its real-world counterpart reveals *Taboo* to be a fiction that is both in tandem with and in reaction against the imperial nostalgia discussed earlier in this paper. Connections that have been identified by historians between the early twenty-first century’s global political climate and Hobsbawn’s Age of Empire certainly encourage an approach that directs this nostalgia to the days when imperial Gothic germinated. For instance, shortly after 9/11, Jonathan Schell highlighted

the similarities between the old style of imperialism and the new: the gigantic disparity between the technical and military might of the conquerors and the conquered; the inextricable combination of rapacious commercial interest and geopolitical ambition and design [...] the appeal to jingoism on the home front.⁴¹

More recently, Hafiz has discussed the popularity of fictions that revisit Empire as symptomatic of a wider political climate of ‘xenophobia, racism, anxieties of national decline and hopes for renewed greatness’.⁴² that has led to political realities such as Brexit and its commitment to creating a ‘global Britain’ that reveals a pervasive ‘nostalgia for Empire’.⁴³ As Jonathan Lis confirms, the ‘British imperial imagination’ seems to be ‘one of the root causes of Brexit’: membership in a union that operates in terms of horizontal collaboration and shared institutions would seem to be offensive to the legacy and history of Empire, according to this imagination. Accordingly, reviewers of *Taboo* specifically associated its preoccupations with colonialism and Empire to political realities such as those of Brexit. The series was seen as reacting against the contemporary culture of imperial nostalgia by ‘Gothicising’ discourses on Empire. Sonia Saraiya, for instance, encourages such a reading when she describes the show as a ‘foul corrective to the period nostalgia of *Downton Abbey*’, only echoing Tom Hardy himself who has admitted that the series was conceived as an ‘anti-*Downton*’⁴⁴.

The ambivalence of *Taboo* towards colonialism and Empire, however, extends even further. Its critique of Empire by means of ‘Gothicising’ it is accompanied by a tendency to reproduce the motifs, tropes and images that served to legitimate the imperialist project in the first place. More specifically, the series directly portrays Delaney’s ‘monstrous’ and ‘bestial’ nature as symptomatic of his experiences in Africa. Delaney is variously described by his sister’s husband Thorne Geary (Jefferson Hall) as a ‘savage’, ‘that animal from Africa’, or ‘nothing more than a nigger’ whereas an old man suggests that he whispered some ‘Negro words’ over the dead body of his father and, later, over his grave. In this sense, the series demonstrates an even deeper indebtedness to the late Victorian legacy of imperial Gothic, since ‘individual regression or going native’ is one of the three principal themes of the subgenre outlined by Brantlinger.⁴⁵ ‘An African showed me to myself’, Delaney tells Strange. ‘The things I did in Africa make your transactions look paltry. I witnessed and participated in darkness that you cannot conceive’. Yet another reference to *Heart of Darkness*, the associations of Africa with darkness, the supernatural and the occult reproduce the ‘imaging of Africa as locus of the Gothic’ that was grounded in ‘a sensational literary style characteristic of early nineteenth-century reportage’ by French missionaries or African explorers.⁴⁶ As such, the series reproduces racist stereotypes endemic to colonialist discourses that supported the very imperialist projects that the series seeks to critique. In this respect, *Taboo* demonstrates a characteristic notable in ‘Gothic writing which was produced within a colonialist context’ since the eighteenth century, whereby ‘a *Gothic* language of otherness becomes conflated with images of *colonial* otherness’.⁴⁷ Imperial Gothic fictions often present the colonised culture as ‘the source of barbarism, temptation and horror’.⁴⁸ In attributing Delaney’s monstrous nature to his experiences in the colonies, *Taboo* reproduces the narrative pattern of the genre whereby ‘the colonizer may be contaminated by the essence of what he fears or desires most’.⁴⁹

This is most pertinent to the ways in which Delaney’s monstrosity is constructed in the text by ‘perhaps the most important element of nineteenth-century racial discourse’ that was ‘itself a gothic discourse, a fearful and sensational imagining of the unnatural and the unseen’: cannibalism.⁵⁰ At the end of the second episode, Delaney is attacked at a London street by someone who stabs him, but he fights back and ends up biting his attacker’s neck and tearing a vein. A close-up shot of Delaney with his mouth and neck covered in blood then flash-cuts to a shot of an African tribesman holding a knife before the episode’s closing credits start rolling. Such editing essentially harkens back to ‘a growing colonial discourse’ that developed during the nineteenth century and ‘ultimately objectified the idea of cannibalism as an inherent racial characteristic rather than merely a barbaric practice’, associating cannibalism first with

the South Pacific islands, then with Africa⁵¹. ‘White cannibalism,’ Malchow points out, ‘came to be read as racial primitivism, a blackness under the skin, until, at the end of the century, Kurtz’s savagery is merely a form of “going native”’.⁵²

Taboo’s intertextual relationship to *Heart of Darkness* is strengthened here, while at the same time the relationship of Delaney’s cannibalism to discourses of race is more complex if no less problematic. On the one hand, Delaney embodies both of the two major racialised taboos of the nineteenth-century West: the cannibal and the ‘dangerously half-bred child of miscegenation’, both of whom posed a threat to the established order in their ability to eradicate boundaries between self and other: ‘In both, the transgression of taboo evokes an essentially gothic unnaturalness – a crossing of lines, a contamination, and an obscenity – not merely an “otherness”’.⁵³ On the other, the ‘whitewashing’ involved in the casting of a white actor like Tom Hardy to play a mixed-race character makes the associations between cannibalism, miscegenation and whiteness even more problematic – a point raised by Sarayia during her sustained critique of the series for its reinforcement of hegemonic colonial discourses:

James’s decade in Africa is given a kind of hand-waving occult power. James speaks a tribal language, seems familiar with a set of symbols from some kind of ritual or worship, and according to the rumours of others, engaged in some kind of cannibalism. But without the grounding specifics, these are lazily sketched signifiers about ‘dark magic’, which either capitalize on James’ mixed-race heritage or his time with ‘savage’ tribes.⁵⁴

Taboo thus demonstrates the aspect of the Gothic whose ‘labelling of otherness is often employed in the service of supporting, rather than questioning, the status quo’, a genre that ‘often debates the existence of otherness and alterity, often in order to demonise such otherness’.⁵⁵ The ‘vagueness around “Africa” in the series’, according to Sarayia, only leads to a stereotypical representation of ‘the dark Continent’, which contrasts strikingly with the way in which the series ‘excels at creating the texture and nuance of London at this time’⁵⁶

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of colonial Africa to the imperial metropolis highlights the way in which the series also re-enacts what Robert Mighall identifies as a ‘double movement’ typical of imperial Gothic: a movement ‘outwards to the margins of the Empire’, which are portrayed as the area of the occult, the monstrous and the supernatural; and a movement ‘inwards to focus on the domestic “savages” which resided in the very heart of the civilised world’⁵⁷: the homeless, poor, sailors, homosexuals, prostitutes of London’s East End – social

types that were portrayed by hegemonic discourses as just as ‘threatening’ as people of different races and nationalities from the colonies. But these are precisely the types of people with whom Delaney works closely in order to launch his enterprise against the EIC and the Americans: he receives support from former sailor and current criminal Atticus (Stephen Graham), German brothel madam Helga von Hinten (Franka Potente) and closeted transvestite and homosexual Michael Godfrey (Edward Hogg). What is more, these are precisely types that were associated with cannibalism in the domestic sphere by nineteenth-century sensationalist popular press accounts, according to a ‘fluid mobility of cannibal representation, which, having been exported, as it were, in order to Gothicise the racial Other, flowed back again further to establish the depravity of the domestic subject’.⁵⁸ Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the lower classes were variously associated with cannibalism as either victimisers or victimised:

The underclass as imaged by the sensational press were alternatively represented either as criminal fiends or pauper victims – the former driven by a blood lust that produced both metaphoric and actual deeds of cannibalism, the latter fearing, we are told, a workhouse diet of the dissected bodies of deceased fellow paupers.⁵⁹

Imagery of animals being slaughtered and humans being dismembered in the scenes set in the East End of London certainly seem to encourage a reading of the series from such a theoretical perspective.

Indeed, Delaney’s interactions with these characters are mostly set in that area of the city, which is portrayed as a bleak, dark and dirty place ridden with crime and disease. This is in keeping with Gothic uses of space and locale for the evocation of terror and horror – whether this be castles, crypts, haunted houses, derelict churches, or graveyards, among others. In the Georgian London of *Taboo*, ‘dogs live off the flesh from suicides jumping off Blackfriars bridge’, as farmer Ibbotson (Christopher Fairbank) tells Delaney, even as dead bodies are dumped or surface to the banks of the river Thames. The river’s recurring presence in the series serves manifold purposes: it relates to the recurring symbolism of water in Delaney’s phobias of drowning and sinking, it provides the area of murder and death, it is also the place where Delaney’s Trading Company is located, and it also stands for ‘the heart of the British Empire’.⁶⁰ For a series that is, in Knight’s words, about ‘the ships and money and warehouses and docks that formed the engine of the empire’,⁶¹ it makes sense for the river to be at the centre of the narrative as it was ‘the entrance to and exit from the Empire’.⁶² In this respect, *Taboo*

demonstrates one further intertextual relationship with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, since its frame narrative is also set on the Thames, whose waterside has been described by Conrad as '[d]ark and impenetrable at night, like the face of a forest' – a jungle.⁶³

It is from the docks of the Thames that Delaney and his team embark upon their journey for America – a 'ship of fools', as Knight describes it, 'a ship full of the damned', 'people who don't fit in' who are 'leaving the Old World and headed to a New World'.⁶⁴ For a text with strong intertextual relationships to a genre deeply saturated with British imperialist discourses, it is most intriguing that its creators describe it as 'quintessentially American' – its first season only represents the 'Escape' from Great Britain, to be followed by a second on the 'Journey' and a final one on the 'Arrival' in America.⁶⁵ It might seem ironic that Delaney flees from one Empire towards another, nascent one, whose history will be ridden with the horrors of slavery and extinction of indigenous populations. This, however, is consistent with the ambivalent relationship of Delaney to Empire – he is both its monstrous progeny and enemy, and his own project is a business empire. And all this, in turn, is consistent with the ambivalence towards Empire that permeates imperial Gothic. *Taboo* therefore may be read as a fiction that both resuscitates and updates the subgenre of imperial Gothic in this respect as well as in the other themes explored in this paper: its use of the ghost as a metaphor for (colonial) trauma; its evocations of monstrosity in order to critique patriarchal colonial capitalism; its fascination with insanity, obsession, incest; its use of space and the body as sites of horror. As the second season is still in production at the time of writing this paper, it remains to be seen how these themes will develop and relate to a rapidly shifting political landscape in Great Britain, Europe, America and the rest of the world.

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- ¹⁸ David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 45.
- ¹⁹ Bulfin, *Gothic Invasions*, p. 16.
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