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A Dark Domesticity: Echoes of Folklore in Irish Contemporary Gothic

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Folklore casts long shadows, and this chapter sets out to trace the influence of folklore on contemporary Gothic art in Ireland, using the common trope of home as strange space. Recurrent fine art and literary iterations of the Irish home posit it as a problematic and contested place; a site of anxiety and terror. The Gothic home in contemporary Irish art practice is often portrayed as *Unheimlich* or uncanny, where the familiar has grown unfamiliar and strange (Jentsch 1906; Freud 1919). In the fine art practice of (among others) Alice Maher, Rita Duffy, Michael Fortune, Aideen Barry, Martina Cleary, and Anthony Haughey, home is represented as a place of permeability and of cultural otherness, or alterity. Images of the Gothic home also permeate the work of contemporary Irish writers, from the brooding house of *The Book of Evidence* (John Banville 1989), the nightmarish Monaghan homes of *The Butcher Boy* (Patrick McCabe 1992), to the claustrophobia of *Room* (Emma Donoghue 2012).

Where do these Gothic homes stem from? Critics such as Killeen (2006, 2008) and McCormack (1991, 1998) have looked to the Neo-Gothic revival in Ireland as the font of these uneasy spaces, the dark homes of Stoker, Maturin, and Le Fanu. I argue here that the oldest appearance of these strange places is found in Irish folklore. The Gothic home in contemporary Irish culture can be seen as a manifestation of earlier tropes of dark domestic space in folklore, transmitted to contemporary culture through tradition, collective memory (Durkheim 1912; Halbwachs 1925), and social memory (Connerton 1989; Fentress and Wickham 1992). To explore this argument, I will examine works by Irish artists Alice Maher, Rita Duffy, and Michael Fortune and their use of folklore in terms of imagery, metaphor, and materials to create Gothic versions of home as an uncanny space, a site of strange narratives,

transformation, and cultural otherness. In this analysis I will pay special attention to the different modes of folklore that each artist embodies in their reconstitution of Gothic homes, from the use of fairy-tale motifs, the retelling of legends and the practice of collecting contemporary versions of these legends in a way that both links the modern hearth with the ancient hub of tale-telling, and creatively blurs the lines between fine art and folklore itself.

At this stage it is useful to consider some definitions relevant to this exploration; those of *Gothic*, *Irish Gothic*, and *Irish Vernacular Gothic*. *Gothic* is an accepted area of academic study that is interdisciplinary, transcultural, and transnational in nature, spanning the study of literature, film, TV, cultural and subcultural studies, performing and visual arts. Although there are common tropes, subjects, and features of the Gothic across the world, it also has distinct cultural and national representations, depending on the region of the world from which it emerges. Mapping the Gothic as global, national, and local is useful in terms of charting how the genre defines itself in different locations; as a reflector of general Gothic themes but also as mapping its interaction with regional interests; local stories and sites, folklore, and dialects. The idea of a cultural mapping of the Gothic is also useful not only in identifying regional characteristics of the Gothic, but in creating a system of way-finding or interpretation that allows a richer reading of the cultural products produced in this context, a kind of cultural geography of otherness.

Irish folklore as referred to in this chapter is taken to constitute elements of traditional Irish culture, the oral tales, customs and superstitions we collectively refer to as folklore. Folklore itself is considered as a precursor of an influence on the later Gothic tradition. In Ireland, folklore develops slowly in terms of traditions, rites, and rituals up to the present day, growing and evolving as a discourse of otherness in a colonial context. As O'Giollain (2000, 164) states; '[T]he notion of folklore was predicated on the recognition of cultural difference: folklore belonged to the "others".' The nature of this association between folklore and the Gothic is particularly pertinent in the case of legends, both local and migratory, and their lasting relationship with visual art practice.

Irish Gothic is taken here as the specific sense of otherness that emanates from Irish culture, history, and geography, and is expressed through creative arts. This sense of cultural and national otherness arises from Ireland's rich folklore of strange stories, its troubled history, its liminal geography, and its postcolonial sense of identity. This otherness is both a construct of alterity in relation to Englishness, but also