Siân Silyn Roberts, Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790-1861, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, £39.00/$59.95. Pp 264; 978-0-8122-4613-1.)

In *Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790-1861*, Siân Silyn Roberts explores how Enlightenment concepts of the self-contained individual, as proposed by John Locke, are tested in a post-Revolutionary American environment. Silyn Roberts aims to answer why the gothic genre significantly changed when crossing the Atlantic at the end of the 1700s, contending that the newly-formed nation served as a ‘testing ground’ (7) for ‘idiosyncratic’ and ‘fantastic’ formations of individuality that are rendered ‘phobic’ in the British tradition (15). Her work revises the ‘familial-nationalist’ concept of the Early Republic, arguing that individuals were not ‘disciplined ontological totalities’ (19) within familial units, but existed as mutable and fragmented subjects within continually changing local and national environments.

Silyn Robertscharts how texts by Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Montgomery Bird, Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Wells Brown postulate new forms of subjectivity and society. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the shift from British gothic, widely read in the Early Republic, to the first American gothic texts. Silyn Roberts suggests that the new Republic could not uphold a British model of society composed of self-contained individuals who were connected to each other through social contracts. Instead, Early American subjects existed in much larger communal networks that subsumed the individual. Focusing on tropes of contagion in Brockden Brown’s yellow fever novel *Arthur Mervyn*, Silyn Roberts distinguishes the American subject as ‘porous, fluid, and projected beyond the metaphysical boundaries of the body’ (41) and who could circulate between and across communities. Chapter 2 furthers this line of argument, as the wilderness of Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* serves as a rhizomatic environment where ‘going native’ encouraged individual incorporation into a much larger collective mass. Chapter 3, ‘A Mind for the Gothic’, addresses how Enlightenment concepts of ‘common sense’ and ‘property-in-oneself’ are challenged in Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Montgomery Bird’s works. Silyn Roberts proposes that in the face of irrational events found in Poe’s short stories, ‘uncommon sense’ or an irrational mind ‘maintains the self-enclosed individual’ (99) more successfully than Lockean rationality. Turning to Bird’s *Sheppard Lee*,she argues that the tale of body-hopping offers an ‘alternative model of the mind’ (104) that disconnects identity from geographical location, economic and social position, presenting a performative subject continually in a state of ‘becoming’ (111).

Both Chapters 4 and 5 focus on representations of mass population. Viewing *The Scarlet Letter* in more complex terms than the ostracization of the individual by society, Silyn Roberts instead argues that Salem represents a ‘mass life’ composed of all people, including those excluded from citizenship. Hester Prynne offers an ‘alternative to citizenship’ (128) as a member of the mass population who simultaneously exists within and outside the restrictions and expectations of society. In her final chapter, Silyn Roberts positions Wells Brown’s *Clotel* as a ‘bio-novel’, whose gothic tropes emphasise the failure of the sentimental individual in abolitionist literature. She highlights the text’s light-skinned slaves as representative of a population in which individuals exist as ‘a single biological mass’ (154), no longer distinguished by race.

*Gothic Subjects* deftly unites the cultural form of the gothic with transatlantic socio-political debates on the individual and society in the antebellum period. Silyn Roberts demonstrates a thorough understanding of Enlightenment thought and the relationship between core philosophies and Early National literature. Without overstating connections between the works of Locke, David Hume and Adam Smith and the Early Republic, Silyn Roberts successfully roots her argument in textual analysis to uncover these distinctive manifestations of subjectivity and community. Her definition of the gothic as a ‘versatile rhetorical mode’ (142) incorporates a range of texts outside the traditional scope of the genre, including captivity narratives, the romance and accounts of slavery, which cements her claim that American gothic is a way of viewing the world and its inhabitants, as well as a literary genre with recognisable tropes of plot and character. Most refreshing is Silyn Roberts’ revisionist approach to the gothic that decidedly moves away from the ‘guilt thesis’ school of gothic criticism, first put forward by Leslie Fiedler, which claims American gothic as a site of repression of national sins, most notably the enslavement of African Americans. *Gothic Subjects* intelligently considers issues of exclusion, oppression and ‘social death’ in the Early Republic whilst opening up critical space for less symptomatic interpretations of canonical and lesser-known antebellum gothic texts. Engagingly written and demonstrating astute criticism, *Gothic Subjects* is a timely intervention in the fields of both American gothic literature and Early National studies.

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