

**Hanna Stelmaszczyk**

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

**QUEER GOTHIC OTHERNESS OF TRUMAN CAPOTE'S *OTHER VOICES*, *OTHER ROOMS* AND RANDALL KENAN'S *A VISITATION OF SPIRITS***

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**Introduction**

The Gothic motif of Otherness has a significant presence in the genre. As Louis S. Gross (90) notes, in the case of American Gothic especially, the motif's prevalence lies in "the singularity and monstrosity of the Other: what the dominant culture cannot incorporate within itself, it must project outward onto this hated/desired figure". The Gothic thrives on difference—there must always be a juxtaposition that is analysed, the opposition between something known and the unknown one may venture into. Transgressions, forbidden desires, breaking the social norms and reaching beyond the acceptable are inherently connected to Gothic narratives. However, the status quo must be ultimately reinscribed—the characters may plunge into the darkness, but only to eventually resurface. Thus, the purpose of the Gothic tale is to name what is unacceptable and point out the transgressions. Desire must be carefully controlled for fear that the fabric of society will break down (Haggerty 12). However, in the course of the genre's development, Otherness has also become a metaphor for oppression and discrimination. In other words, the villains became the protagonists.

Despite the variety of American Gothic subgenres, as Eric Savoy (67) claims, what they all have in common is “an epistemological frontier in which the spatial division between the known and the unknown, the self and the Other, assumes temporal dimensions”. The signification of the Other in Gothic narratives evolved from showing a threat and emphasising the dangerousness of the one that is beyond society to pondering the feelings and experiences of the outcast. As aptly put by Savoy (72), “the recent queer theoretical project conceptualizes the interplay between repression and preterition by redeploying the allegorical tropes of the gothic, in particular by personifying the haunting ‘Other’”. As such, the motif became an important mode of describing the internal struggles of queer people. The motif of the Other developed “a certain preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as spectre and phantom, as spirit and revenant” (Fuss 3) and started emphasizing the self-doubt of queer individuals and the fear of the reaction they might receive should they ever come out. This is especially visible in the paranoid Gothic, a literary mode that bares the mechanisms of homophobia.

This paper aims to analyse Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) through the lens of paranoid and queer Gothic. Both are Southern Gothic novels describing the struggles of queer characters—adolescent boys who have been cast as the other by their environment. In both novels the protagonist is a part of a somewhat isolated community and grows into his identity, discovering new things within himself and, eventually, facing them. Yet the tales and their endings are fundamentally different. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Joel begins his journey of discovering his identity and the community he finds himself in is a source of support, inspiration, and liberation. Whereas in *A Visitation of Spirits* Horace knows perfectly well who he is—his journey is an attempt of coming to terms with his identity. For him, the community is the source of the oppression. Instead of helping Horace accept his identity, society punishes him for it. He is effectively forced into hiding his true self, which results in self-hatred and,

ultimately, his death. The first section of the paper will focus on a methodological inquiry into the topic of queer and paranoid Gothic. The second will focus on *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and the third—on *A Visitation of Spirits*.

### **Methodology: Paranoid and Queer Gothic**

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990: 186) defines paranoid Gothic as “Romantic novels in which a male hero is in a close, usually murderous relation to another male figure, in some respects his ‘double,’ to whom he seems to be mentally transparent”. As she notes, homoeroticism and homophobia have their inherent place in this type of narrative, as “the Gothic novel crystallised for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between male homosexuality and homophobia, in which homophobia appeared thematically in paranoid plots” (Sedgwick 1985: 92). To be precise, in those texts the individual is terrified of being accused of homosexuality, and thus “paranoia is the psychosis that makes graphic the mechanisms of homophobia” (Sedgwick 1985: 91). As will be shown, this term is also applicable to narratives of queer individuals who are still in the closet and fear they will be outed.

As a genre obsessed with transgressions, Gothic fiction has always had a fascination with liminal themes, especially those regarding dissident sexualities or even sexual taboos, from homoeroticism to incest. Therefore, the Gothic “was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality” (Sedgwick 1985: 91). Among the classic examples are such works as *Caleb Williams* (1831), *Frankenstein* (1818), *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and, from later narratives—*Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Although same-sex attraction is present in many works of Gothic fiction, being both “unlivable passion and ungrievable loss” (Haggerty 16), the genre has never restricted itself to it. In fact, the genre can be even said to have anticipated certain discussions about sexuality and gender identity, preparing the ground for them with its exploration of human identity and desires (Haggerty 2). As George E. Haggerty (2) notes, the peak of Gothic fiction

correlated with the beginnings of the modern codification of gender and sexuality—he calls the genre “a testing ground for many unauthorised genders and sexualities”. In this way, despite the sensational matter in which those themes were—and still are—often presented, Gothic can be rather progressive, thanks to its departure from narrative conventions (Dos Santos 25). The Gothic means to scandalise and outrage, but by doing so, it also blatantly challenges the cultural system and the dominant social mores (Haggerty 10). It is especially visible in queer Gothic—as defined by Andrio Dos Santos (26), queer Gothic, if treated as a thematic, structural and analytical approach, refers to those texts in which sexuality and gender identity occupy a central role in the narrative. Its primal concern is analysing the way it treats and presents those themes.

Queerness, if defined broadly, means simply being different—in other words—being the other. Sedgwick (1994: 7) defines queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically”. Yet, according to William Hughes and Andrew Smith (3), queerness “is a quality which may be said to inflect a sense of difference not confined simply to sexual behaviour but which may equally inform a systematic stylistic deviance from perceived norms in personal style or artistic preference.” Thus, while being queer might not necessarily be connected to heteronormativity, in this paper I will define queerness as a transgression of cultural norms and social constructions regarding gender and sexuality; and queer Gothic—as narratives operating around issues regarding gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality.

### **Others Looking and Other Looks**

The plot of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is rather simple—following his mother’s death, the protagonist, Joel Knox, travels from New Orleans to Alabama to live

with his father and his family in an isolated plantation house, Skully's Landing. The boy has never met his father—he does not even bear his last name—and, upon his arrival, the father remains mysteriously out of sight, which creates an atmosphere of secrecy and alienation. The novel stays true to the Southern Gothic conventions, most notably its love of the grotesque, obsession with the past, the bygone glory, and, naturally, its dilapidated mansions (Lloyd-Smith 121–122). Almost every inhabitant of the once grand, now decaying house is strange in some way. Among them are: a histrionic stepmother, an invalid father, a Black servant who bears scars of past violence, her dwarfish grandfather, and decadent Randolph, brother of Joel's stepmother. There is also the mysterious Lady, who is connected to Cousin Randolph's secretive past.

In the novel, otherness is clearly noticeable. From the very first moment the reader meets the protagonist, it is quite obvious that Joel does not fit into the gender norms and the stereotype of boyishness. Radclif, a driver who will take him to Noon City, “had his notions of what a ‘real’ boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them. He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned; each of his features was shaped with a sensitive accuracy, and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes, which were brown and very large” (Capote 8). Interestingly, the driver is not portrayed as a positive character or a masculine role model for Joel—Capote here “upends the stereotype of the monstrous queer by making the ‘normal’ man grotesque and contemptible” (Haefele-Thomas 117).

Thus, Joel is from the onset recognised by those around him as the other. The protagonist is aware of this—in fact, it seems to be something he is ashamed of. Joel's anxiety over his otherness being noticed is particularly perceptible in his relationship with his father, Mr Sansom, a harrowing spectre haunting the mansion. Perplexed by the fact that his father is not there to greet him, Joel's deep fears start to raise their head:

what if his father had seen him already? Indeed, had been spying on him ever since he arrived, was, in fact, watching him at this very moment?

(...) And his father thought: that runt is an imposter; my son would be taller and stronger and handsomer and smarter-looking. Suppose he'd told Miss Amy: give the little faker something to eat and send him on his way. And dear sweet Lord, where would he go? (Capote 42)

Irrational as his thoughts may seem, this internal monologue does allow the reader a glimpse into Joel's worries and his state of mind—this child, with his dead mother and absent father and never feeling at home while living with his relatives, is afraid of being abandoned again. As Bri Lafond (67) notes, the boy fears that there is something in his nature—his looks, character, behaviour, or his failure to adhere to the standard of manliness—that will drive away the only family he has left. He is afraid of being seen, weighed, and found wanting.

The judging gaze of a parental figure is represented in the novel by the cold, unmoving eyes of bedridden, paralysed Mr Sansom. His eyes are, in fact, his most described feature. Their impact is even more poignant as, since Joel's father is unable to talk to him, they will never have a meaningful conversation—he will never know what his father thinks of him and whether he is accepted or not. Sansom's looks might not be antagonistic; however, the intent behind this persistent watching is destined to be forever unknown as are the thoughts behind them. In his father's silence, Joel's paranoia rings clearly.

Despite those festering fears, Skully's Landing gives the boy opportunities for self-discovery, outside the reach of the father's judging stare. To occupy himself during the day after his arrival, Joel turns to a game he had devised when still living in New Orleans—Blackmail. It has a voyeuristic character, "the idea being to approach a strange house and peer invisibly through its windows" (Capote 52). Back in New Orleans, it allowed him to experience life by proxy—to witness love, eroticism, and death while remaining safe on the other side of the glass:

On these dangerous evening patrols, Joel had witnessed many peculiar spectacles, like the night he'd watched a young girl waltzing stark naked to victrola music; and again, an old lady drop dead while puffing at a fairyland of candles burning on a birthday cake; and most puzzling of all, two grown men standing in an ugly little room kissing each other. (Capote 52)

The game continues in Alabama, just as Joel's growing up is ongoing. What the boy is doing in the strange world of the Landing is "having a look around"—it is here that, probably for the first time, he gets to experience queer companionship and is coaxed into questioning his identity, or is allowed to see how multi-faceted queer experience is. This experience of trying to find one's way in the confusing world is a part of the process of growing up. In Capote's novel, this process is given a Gothic colouring, but the heart of it remains unchanging—through a series of encounters and through experience, a young person learns something new about themselves. Most importantly, it is during the game of Blackmail that the protagonist meets the more benevolent of the Landing's ghosts:

She was holding aside the curtains of the left corner window, and smiling and nodding at him, as if in greeting or approval; but she was no one Joel had ever known: the hazy substance of her face, the suffused marshmallow features, brought to mind his own vaporish reflection in the wavy chamber mirror. And her white hair was like the wig of a character from history: a towering pale pompadour with fat dribbling curls. (Capote 54)

The aspect of fascination and recognition is essential—for Capote, finding one's identity, or one's otherness, is inherently connected to finding one's reflection in others. He is once again relying on the visual aspect to communicate this notion to the readers—"in the process of (...) discovering someone, most people experience simultaneously an illusion they are discovering themselves: the other's eyes reflect their real and glorious value" (Capote 157). As the author has Randolph say, "They can romanticize us so, mirrors, and that is their secret: what a subtle torture it would be to destroy all the mirrors in the world: where then could we look for reassurance of our identities?" (Capote 107–108).

Continuing on the motif of mirrors, despite her ghostly otherness, Joel describes the Lady as "his own vapourish reflection" (Capote 54)—he immediately identifies with her and feels drawn to her, much like he takes a liking to the eccentric Randolph. He is similarly (platonically) attracted to a tomboyish Idabel, whom he meets shortly after his arrival and who becomes his

friend—despite her rowdy behaviour, his internal reaction to her appearing is a friendly “Hi, Idabel—watchasay, Idabel?” (Capote 24). Idabel comes in “[w]hooping like a wildwest Indian, the redhead whipped down the road, a yelling throng of young admirers racing in her wake” (Capote 20). In contrast, Joel, as previously stated, is described as petite, with delicate features (Capote 8). She is stereotypically boyish, loud, and brash while Joel is slightly effeminate, insecure, and unsure of himself—they are mirror reflections, as they both represent a kind of androgyny (Mitchell-Peters 129). Ultimately, it is the Lady who is beckoning the boy, not Idabel. The girl is on her own journey, although she does offer Joel friendship and some of her adventurous spirit. The Lady seems both foreign and familiar at once: she is simultaneously “no one Joel had ever known” (Capote 54) and his reflection.

Joel is also intrigued by various queer-coded Others he meets, such as dwarfish Miss Wisteria, a carnival performer; or masculine Miss Roberta, an owner of a shop in Noon City, where Joel starts his journey. Even when there is no conscious recognition of their shared Otherness, there is undeniable fascination. Thanks to the people he meets and his reactions to them, Joel learns to accept his own budding otherness and queerness. As Brian Mitchell-Peters (127) notes, “Joel’s realizations come about through exposure to the queer gender rebelliousness of Idabel and Randolph, rather than a homosexual love affair with another character. Consequently, Joel’s discovery is a queer-sexual awakening, rather than sexual experience”. By the end of the novel the metamorphosis is complete—even though Joel’s sexual orientation and gender identity are never precisely stated, since, unlike Idabel, he does not develop romantic feelings towards anyone, he has gathered a deeper understanding of himself which prompts him to state happily: “I am me (...) I am Joel, we are the same people” (Capote 170).

As has been previously mentioned, the novel portrays multiple queer and queer-coded characters and does so in a non-judgmental way. For example, it is explicitly stated that Randolph, one of the Landing’s inhabitants, was in love



with a man, and he can be described as gender non-conforming or genderqueer, as he is, in fact, the Lady. The man is an eccentric decadent, a walking mystery parading around in silks, “[f]aceted as a fly's eye, being neither man nor woman, and one whose every identity cancelled the other, a grab-bag of disguises” (Capote 159). Moreover, Joel’s friend, Idabel, does not identify as a girl. As she bluntly states, “I never think like I’m a girl; you’ve got to remember that, or we can’t never be friends. (...) I want so much to be a boy” (Capote 101). When the duo visits a local carnival, Idabel experiences what can be called a homosexual awakening upon meeting Miss Wisteria, an attractive young woman with dwarfism who works at the fair. It is Idabel who is instantly smitten with her, not Joel, who reacts with astonishment: “Joel could not understand what had taken her. Unless it was that the midget had cast a spell. But as she continued to fawn over tiny yellow-haired Miss Wisteria it came to him that Idabel was in love” (Capote 147). Within the closed-off world of the Landing, and among its inhabitants, Idabel’s gender identity and her infatuation, Joel’s effeminacy, or Randolph’s cross-dressing are never condemned. Instead, they are treated as natural and inherent parts of the characters.

The author does not focus on the negative aspects of being queer—the characters do not experience any punishment or ostracism nor do they feel any guilt and shame. Capote moves away from the gloomy reality into a world of understanding and possibilities (Mitchell-Peters 108). Capote’s approach to queer Gothic rejects the seemingly inescapable gloomy reality in favour of a safe haven where queer adolescents can explore their identity and be acknowledged without fear of violent backlash. As Mitchell-Peters (108) notes, this novel “marks the first modern representation of homosexuality where a character’s queerness does not lead down some version of the river Styx to a contemporary hell”. While Capote’s contemporaries focused on repression, oppression, and hopelessness that plague queer individuals, he instead uses gothic themes to create a cast of captivating, likeable, if eccentric, characters. “The destructive reality of homosexual panic” has no place in the universe centred around

Skully's Landing (Mitchell-Peters 109). Capote's Others are all visually different, bending gender norms: Idabel shares Joel's androgyny, being boyish in both appearance and behaviour, and Cousin Randolph is described as a decadent, Southern Oscar Wilde, flamboyant and eccentric. Yet they all come together in the slightly unreal world of the mansion, free to explore their identities and be true to their reflections.

### **Demons of Homophobia**

*A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) by Randall Kenan is a Southern Gothic novel that tells the story of a gay, African American teenager, Horace Cross, coming to terms with his sexuality. He is forced to do so in difficult circumstances—his family and himself are devout Christians. Moreover, the community he grows up in forces traditional gender norms on children as they grow up, punishing any deviation from the perceived norm with ostracism. Kenan's novel utilises typical American Gothic motifs while, simultaneously, subverting many of the genre's conventions—the church is oppressive and offers no help to the suffering protagonist, the dilapidated house is a safe haven for the pair of gay lovers, and a demon speaks the truth (Wester 1035). *A Visitation of Spirits* explores the agony of having to live within a community that demonises homosexuality and defines itself by excluding all those who do not comply with its rules. Horace will never be accepted fully and must hide that part of himself that would prompt rejection and expulsion from the community. Thus, he is forced to hide his identity, to shatter it, as a part of him has already been rejected. The inner turmoil he experiences, caused by the unsolvable conflict between the enforced, heteronormative identity and his homosexuality, is overwhelming and deeply harmful, leading the boy away from the rational and into the darkness of the irrational, the uncanny, and the supernatural (Wester 1036).

As observed by Maisha Wester (1035), Kenan's Gothic demonstrates how patriarchal domination thrives and feeds itself on archetypal representations of

the racial, sexual, and gendered Other. It is shown that it is the community that creates the Other, but at the same time refuses to see how these constructions preserve the oppression within—in a community that built its identity on exclusion, instead of plurality, the boy can never show his full identity (Wester 1035). Instead, he is forced to shatter himself and only show one sliver of himself at a time—no matter to whom he turns, whether it is his family, his white friends or people he works with at the theatre, there is always an aspect of him that remains hidden, and he continues as the other (Tettenborn 252). In other words, he always hides some aspect of himself, a part of him always marks him as the Other—and he cannot reconcile those parts of himself.

Horace's family is deeply homophobic, and any behaviour that diverges from the perceived norm is a slippery slope to becoming the ultimate deviant—a homosexual. He must be constantly on guard, as his behaviour is constantly observed and judged. When Horace pierces his ear, one of his aunts comments on the offence: "[h]e just pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts. (...) No big deal? Don't you see? Zeke, you got to put a stop to this now. Who knows what them boys will have this fool doing next. Having him out stealing. Wind up in jail" (Kenan 208–209). Horace is neither the first nor the only family member treated as a burgeoning, dangerous Other. It is a well-established custom to expel relatives who start to exhibit transgressive, disorderly urges. This fate befell many of the family members—including the fathers of both Horace and Jimmy (the second narrator of the novel, Horace's cousin and a local preacher), as well as Horace's mother. It would seem that there is a curse on the Cross family—as one of Horace's aunts, Ruth, says to his grandfather, the patriarch: "You'll see yourself one day, Ezekiel Cross. See what you and your family, your evil family have wrought. And it won't just be on Jethro. It's on Lester. It's on this boy here. It was on your grandboy. You all is something else" (Kenan 223). This "something else" is what the family so persistently is trying to eradicate, the Cross family curse, which may be understood as destabilised sexual and gender norms or, in more general terms,

queerness, which inexorably attacks and destroys the feeling of solid patriarchy in the family. The curse itself is executed by males who reject Tims Creek's heteronormative and racially essentialist conceptions of masculinity, and by women who refuse to define themselves as subordinates within the patriarchy (Wester 1043).

Horace's otherness becomes personified at least twice in the novel: once as the Demon and again as the Doppelgänger, Horace's mirror reflection, in the true paranoid Gothic manner. By the end of the night, he visits the community theatre, and there it waits:

As Horace looked into the mirror, the face appeared more and more familiar, though it was becoming obscured by milky white greasepaint. He realized. Saw clearly. It was him. Horace. Sitting before the mirror, applying makeup. Of all the things he had seen this night, all the memories he had confronted, all the ghouls and ghosts and specters, this shook him the most. Stunned, confused, bewildered, he could only stare at his reflection, seeing him and him and him. (Kenan 247-248)

Being forced by the community to present in a certain way (even though, as previously mentioned, Horace does rebel against those norms) resulted in a strange case of a double. The mask Horace had created became the norm, whereas his true self was reduced to the repressed mirror reflection. Ultimately, it is this meeting, standing face to face with his nature, that is more horrifying to Horace than the processes of othering and homophobic environment. While the oppression comes from without, the paranoid fear of being found out and the inability to accept oneself comes from within. The double forces Horace to make a white mark on his face, symbolically branding him as a traitor—presumably of himself. His reflection once again urges him to accept his true nature, but he is unable to respond to the beckoning of the other Horace:

His reflection stood there, his hand extended. I'm your way, he said. (...) Horace looked at his hand. His hand. Never had he felt such self-loathing, and by and by, his depression became anger as he glared at the spirit. (...)

In such a rage he could barely see, Horace raised his gun and fired. (...) He looked at his hand, covered in blood, and Horace looked up at Horace, his eyes full of horror, but in recognition too, as if to say: You meant it, didn't you? You actually hate me? (Kenan 265–266)

In his inability to accept who he truly is, Horace lashes out at his Doppelgänger and, in doing so, at himself, committing a metaphorical suicide, disguised as a murder. This internalised hatred will soon kill him, as, by eliminating one aspect of his identity, he renders himself incomplete, foreshadowing fate that awaits him at the end of the nightmarish road (Tettenborn 262).

Another poignant scene happens in the community's church, where the ghostly preacher delivers a sermon about the sin of homosexuality, one full of hatred, hellfire and brimstone—a traumatising address that young Horace must have heard some years prior. He hears the preacher say about queer people: “[b]rothers and sisters, there is no time but now, and now I am telling you: It's unclean. You heard what Paul wrote to the Romans: Unclean. (...). That's right. Unclean. That's what it is. Unclean. And you knows it” (Kenan 87). The boy's meeting with his personal history in the church ends in a chorus of voices of his family and neighbours that shun him, yell that he should be ashamed of himself, and hurl slurs and insults at him (Tettenborn 257). This particular scene is at least partially a figment of Horace's imagination, yet it gives the reader an insight into his troubled psyche, clearly portraying his biggest fear—being outed and cast out by his community. Among the ghosts, Horace asks himself: “[h]ere, amid these singing, fanning, breathing beings were his folk, his kin. Did he know them? Had they known him? It was from them he was running. Why?” (Kenan 83). Horace knows he is forced to hide and run away from the people with whom he should feel the safest. But he is considered one of them only as long as they do not know about his sexual orientation. The whole scene echoes the paranoid Gothic and the excruciating fear of a queer individual, a fear of being found out by the hostile environment and punished for the presumed transgressions.

As Paulina Palmer (157) notices, “Horace is connected with concepts of metamorphosis and doubling, both psychological and physical, from the start of the narrative”. The community, and thus the protagonist as well, treats homosexuality like a foreign body, a monster within. Maisha Wester writes that:

Horace acts much like a typical villain and/or monster in his inability to fit within their stable identities; his transgression of recognized categories threatens to destabilize the hierarchies and boundaries that order the world of Tims Creek as much as any vampire or ominous rogue could. (1040)

By enclosing Horace in gothic motifs of otherness, lunacy, and haunting, the fundamentalist, separatist group deforms him and ultimately leads him to his death (Wester 1036). However, his tragic death suggests that it is not his queerness that is the horror from which he must run. The narrative continuously emphasises the idea that it is the repressive heteronormative constraints that create the demonic Other. As Kenan puts it, bluntly, using cold, scientific language:

[w]hether or not the malevolent spirit existed is irrelevant, in the end. For whether he caused it or not, the boy died. This is a fact. The bullet did break the skin of his forehead, pierce the cranium, slice through the cortex and cerebellum, irreparably bruising the cerebrum and medulla oblongata, and emerge from the back of the skull, all with a wet and lightning crack. This did happen.” (284–285)

The demonic, magical veneer of his journey is insignificant—it is his arbitral casting as the Other and his tragic end that are notable and truly real—only death matters.

## Conclusion

In *Other Voices, Other Rooms* Capote takes the horror both out of the genre and out of being queer. Instead of focusing on the hardships of being non-heteronormative, he presents the reader with an almost carnivalesque parade of characters. He incites sympathy for his actors, choosing to portray them as

visually different, but kind-hearted eccentrics and misfits. It is not them who do not fit in with the world—it is the world that is hesitant to embrace them. But safe enclaves, such as Skully's Landing, exist—places where one can be their true self, free from fear and shame (Mitchell-Peters 109). It would seem that, for the author, it is only natural to accept whatever weirdness hides in one's reflection. For Capote, otherness is something that comes from within, and no one should feel ashamed of who they are (Mitchell-Peters 112–113). The outside world may be oppressive and hostile, but within a circle of close friends and confidantes (in the novel embodied by Randolph and Idabel), it is safe to explore and grow into one's true self.

Randall Kenan's approach to the topic is fundamentally different. Whereas Joel has to seek his identity, Horace knows perfectly well who he is—it is this self-knowledge that is a burden for him. He is aware that he cannot come out to his family and community, for the reaction would be one of incomprehension and coldness at best, or, at worst, of outright hostility, maybe even violence. The community he lives in is built on exclusion and unceasingly forces him to hide aspects of his identity. It is unable and unwilling to fully accept him, and know him for who he is. It leads to considerable mental anguish for Horace, ultimately ending in his nightmarish Way of the Cross around the town and through the pivotal moments of his life, the last of the stations being the boy's suicide. Kenan mercilessly details the mechanisms of homophobia and their consequences. Unlike in Capote's book, in this novel the otherness is ascribed by the society—it is the community that creates the other, and it is the other that has to pay the price for it.

Both novels echo the paranoid Gothic fiction, baring the mechanisms of homophobia, describing the incessant feeling of being watched and scrutinised, being recognised as the other and coming to terms with it. However, Capote's vision is, ultimately, rather optimistic. His characters do not experience guilt or shame over their identities and seem to find a way and a place for themselves in the confusing world. Kenan does not provide his readers with final respite,

refusing to end his gruesome tale on a hopeful note, showing what happens when one is left without support in a hostile community. Both writers subvert the genre, but whereas Capote's intent seemingly was to tame the queerness and put soothing brightness into the Gothic, Kenan revisits the genre and overturns its basic assumptions—the other comes from within the community, not from the outside, the demon speaks the truth, brutal as it may be. The true horror is in reality, the evil forces come from people's hearts, not from the depths of hell.

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### Abstract

Otherness is the Gothic motif that has become a metaphor for all kinds of oppression and discrimination—its signification went from showing a threat and emphasising the dangerousness of one that is beyond society to pondering the feelings and experiences of the outcast. As such, it became the important mode of describing the internal struggles of queer people, their self-doubt, and the fear of the reaction they might receive should they ever come out. This paper undertakes an analysis of Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989)—two Southern Gothic novels, both of which are describing the struggles of queer characters, adolescent boys who have been cast as the other by their environment. The article examines how both novels portray otherness and the communities’ reactions to this difference. Truman Capote in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) connects the struggle of finding one’s identity to finding one’s reflection in others. He uses the Gothic atmosphere to indicate the protagonist’s fear of abandonment and to portray a difficult journey of discovering one’s identity and growing into it—in his depiction, otherness is something inherent that is meant to be discovered and embraced. The author creates a rather optimistic tale of the other finding his identity, his place and people in the confusing world. His others do not experience any guilt or shame over their identities—instead, they accept them. In contrast, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) by Randall Kenan focuses on the idea that otherness is ascribed, and not inherent. The author describes a hermetic, exclusionist community that mercilessly punishes any deviation from the heteronormative norm. He shows how the other is created, and the internal costs of the threat of exclusion.