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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2891 words.

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# On subculture as a creative force

Writer Leila Taylor on exploring the cultural ties between goth culture and Black culture, what it means to write about largely unexplored histories, and finding your own unique way for getting work done.

**We met when you gave a talk about the history of Afrogoth at a TCI event. Now you're deep in the writing of a book on the subject. How is that process going?**

Things are good. My manuscript deadline is coming up frighteningly fast. I think for my purposes, if I can just cut it down and hand it in, then I can relax a little bit. Well no, actually, I won't relax because I'll be terrified waiting for edits, but at least I will be taking a pause from the writing for a little bit.

**You have a full-time library job at the moment. How does that work parallel your writing life?**

I've always had some side hustle or something going on. I've always written. I've always made art. I used to work in a very, very, very corporate environment doing annual reports for pharmaceutical companies and investment banks—that level of corporate—so I desperately needed to counterbalance that with something creative. I've always had this dual life going on simultaneously, but I have to say that the library is the first time where it doesn't feel like it's a duel. I'm not writing about the library, there's nothing in terms of my topic that is the same, but in terms of the environment, it's still like I'm in the same world and the same path, because I'm writing a book and I'm surrounded by books and my job is to make people want to read books.

**Your book, as I understand it, is a deep dive into the idea and culture of Afrogoth, which is where Black culture and goth culture intersect. What drew you to this topic?**

A while ago I started going to a lot of events hosted by Morbid Anatomy. I would say I sort of reclaimed my inner angsty goth kid in the process. I would go to these gothy events and I'd be the only Black person there, or I'd go to these other gothy things where I'd be one of two Black people in the room. It got me thinking about the idea of being twice marginalized, of being, as I say, the only raisin in the oatmeal. I was thinking about that specifically when it came to goth kids, because that's what I was. I guess I eventually became a goth adult. I knew that one of my closest friends is really into heavy metal, and she's focused on Black women in metal. I was like, "I had no idea there was such a thing."

I know Black people go to Burning Man and Black people go to renaissance fairs in very small numbers, but they are there. That was the start of my thinking—why is it that Black people don't think these things are for them? I don't think there's many people at renaissance fairs that are saying Black people aren't allowed, but I think it's more that there's something in a lot of these specific cultures that make us feel like we're not wanted in those spaces, or that those spaces aren't intended for us. That's how I started looking at the culture of goth and Black kids in goth culture.

But then, honestly, it was kind of boring. There's always going to be Black kids in subcultures where they are the minority and that's nothing new at all. What I got more interested in was: what is goth about Blackness? What is the African-American gothic? Because historically the truly "gothic" is British. Its origins are in England and Europe, primarily in England, and all of the original core aesthetics around goth culture are very Victorian, this very appropriated British mourning gear kind of thing. The origins are not particularly African-American or African or Caribbean or anything, it's all coming from Europe.

I was asking myself things like, "Why am I wearing a black Victorian corset when this has nothing to do with me?" You know what I mean? I started looking at things that are innate in Black culture that are also gothic and advancing the notion that you don't have to have white skin to be goth. The project just grew from there... and grew and grew as I started to explore more ideas about melancholy and mourning and things like that.

**Over the past couple of years the idea of Afrogoth has popped up more and more in the cultural discourse, but it still feels like a fairly new area of study, or like a unique culture unto itself.**

It's a small culture. People have talked about the gothic in African-American culture for a really long time, but people have a lot of varying ideas about it. Perhaps they're looking specifically at literature, or they're looking specifically at funeral customs, or they're looking at these "gothic" things in Black culture. I think an artist like M Lamar is the first person I saw who really summed this idea of a

systemic permanent state of melancholy that is a result of the transatlantic slave trade and of the continuous subjugation.

Seeing him perform I remember feeling like, "That is exactly what I need." Looking at what the gothic is, and what is it in our culture specifically that emanates from that, became really fascinating to me. I went to the International Gothic Association Conference in Manchester not too long ago, and there were three of us there—three Black women—and we met and sat together. There was one woman whose focus was on literature, specifically on the diaspora and Caribbean literature, and there was a Black girl who was just starting a Masters program in Manchester. We were like, "We all got to get together and help each other." It was very encouraging because we're all kind of spread out around the world, but we're all talking about the same things. There are a few blogs here and there but there's no *Encyclopedia of Black Goth* to go through.

**Within goth culture at large there's so much about the fetishization of suffering, or the fetishization of mourning, but that becomes a very different thing when you view it as a commentary on real suffering. It's not this idealized, romanticized suffering, but is instead coming from a deep, cultural suffering. It takes it into another whole frame of reference.**

Exactly. I like to think about goth as being about the aesthetics of melancholy, or maybe aestheticised melancholy. That's the tricky part when talking about the Afro-Gothic or Black culture in the gothic. When you think about horror or any kind of other gothic literature—*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, etc—they're all sort of metaphors for some kind of social anxiety, whether it's fear of immigrants or fear of technology or the industrial revolution or science or something. These monsters are generally symbols for something else.

But for Black people horror isn't metaphoric. It's not symbolic. It's actually very real anxiety, fear, and trauma. I'm thinking of Ann Radcliffe, the woman who wrote *The Italian*. She has this great definition of the difference between horror and terror—horror is essentially seeing the body of the person who has been stabbed and their guts are hanging out, all of that kind of visceral stuff, and terror is the unknown, the fear and dread, the anticipation of something happening. If you are living your life on a day-to-day basis with actual horror—with the reality of actually seeing your child, your brother, your sister, your friend shot in the street by the police, by the people who are supposed to protect you, it is an actual visceral *real* horror that is embedded in the core of your system. You are biologically affected by these things.

I'm interested in how terror and fear and anxiety is metamorphosed into something else—into art, into music, into literature. How do you take all this real trauma and turn it into something else? How is it expressed? What does it look like when it comes seeping through the walls?

And my own personal definition, when I talk about melancholy, has to do with mourning—the look of mourning, the practice of mourning. I'm interested in mourning as a process during which you heal, you go through something, and the idea that this thing you lost was replaced by something else, that it is taken care of or tended to and it becomes lessened.

But this becomes more complicated, if not impossible, when you have the history of slavery, which never really ended because it was never really acknowledged, it was never really tended to. It's just this open wound. As a result you have a sustained state of mourning, which is melancholia. It's sadness with no subject. It's mourning with no subject. It's mourning with no beginning or end. It's there constantly, because there's nothing to replace it, because the thing that was lost was too ethereal, too innocent to hold onto. It's a loss of history and language and culture and security and all of these intangible things that you can't actually replace with anything.

So, if Black Americans are still in this sustained state of melancholia and goth is the aesthetics of melancholy, what does that look like? Because America is built on black and brown bodies is it that old trauma as it seeps out of the walls to become what the American gothic is? In a lot of ways, I don't even like calling it Afro Goth. I really think it's the American Gothic, because it's not just about how Black people have materialized this trauma; it's how we as a culture and as a country hide the trauma, or repress it, or how we all feel it, so you can't really separate that damage from all of America. It's just the way the American Gothic is. That is expressly our culture now.

**When you're writing about something that is still thought of as relatively new, or a kind of a cultural thought that hasn't really been defined yet, how do you approach it?**

Well, I hate academic writing. I have no plans on getting into academia. I don't care about academic journals. My starting point for all of this was myself, so a lot of it is this combination of memoir, history, and then looking at current cultural studies and current cultural artifacts. I wasn't going at it the way one might approach the typical research project, because honestly, I've never done that before.

My background is in art and graphic design, so I don't really know how you're supposed to write a book. It's essentially a deep dive into what I'm interested in, and if I don't like it or I don't care then I just don't put it in. It's hard because at the beginning I was like, "Oh, I don't know enough about the blues, I don't know enough about X-Y-Z," and it took a while to realize that was fine because I'm writing about myself and myself says, "Hey, I don't know a lot about this stuff."

**When you decided to approach writing a book about this, how did you start? Did you first write a book proposal?**

I wish I had! I didn't write a book proposal. When I found out about this book deal, I was actually Googling, "How to write a book proposal." I had an outline, which was based on something else I'd written, so I had these categories I wanted to explore, but the bigger thing I needed to figure out for myself was what is the overarching thing that ties all these other things together? What is my main point in all of this? That wasn't really clear in the beginning. I had all of the ingredients already there, but I had to look at it all and have all these things fit together. It was hard.

There was a period there where I was like, "This is all over the place. Nothing ties together." Writing my book was a long process of relaxing and letting the content speak for itself. That was the biggest challenge for me-taking what I had already and tightening it up, giving it a broader and bigger theme, so to speak. Once I had that broader theme down, then it became much easier to fill in those blanks and tie things together. A lot of it was looking at something I had written and realizing, "This doesn't fit anymore. I just gotta take out this entire 10,000-word section." That was not so great.

**As someone who has a full-time day job and is also writing a book on a deadline, how do you balance the two? Do you work in the morning before you go to work? Do you come home at night and try to work a little bit every day? Did you have a system in place that kept you from going crazy?**

No, it just made me go crazy. In all honesty, I write wherever and whenever I can. I talk to writers I know and they'll have this very specific ritual-like with their desk set-up, and their tea here, and they're facing a window, and they have this space that's specifically for them, and a time that's specifically for writing. I just don't have that luxury, so I write everywhere. Thanks to Google Docs, I write on the subway or on the bus to work. I'll write at work if I have a spare minute. I write in transit a lot. I'll write when I get home. I'm usually also reading something while I'm doing all this. I know that I have this specific time to actually get the real stuff done, so I go home and I'll read and then I'll eat something and then it's writing time. I try to do that every night, but I can't always because I'll go nuts. So there are times where I don't write for a day, and then I feel super guilty.

I have figured out my own personal ritual for working and that has helped a lot. It involves sitting on a very specific place on my couch. I'm relaxed. I'm watching a movie or something on TV. I have a Coke Zero. I either have to work in absolute dead silence, which is impossible in New York, or I need a little something on in the background. I can't do music because I get too hooked into music, so my key has been to have something on TV, like a mediocre television show that I don't really care about. I don't hate it, so I don't get angry or annoyed by it, but I don't like it enough to get sucked in-it's just this odd stimulus that is just there. Then I write. For some reason that's become the thing that works for me.

**As someone who has both lived the culture and written about it extensively, what is it about goth culture that makes it so timeless? There will always be young kids getting into goth. It's a culture that just seems to endlessly regenerate.**

It really sustains. And it really allows for so many variations. I was talking to some kids in their 20s and their whole idea of goth was that it was very angry and violent. I was like, "Really?" My version of goth was all about guys pretending that they were Byron or some other dead poet. It was all about swooning and melodrama.

I think once any kind of subculture becomes too commodified or generic, it's inevitable that it breaks off into these little sub-stratas. Then you have rockabilly goths, and you have Victorian goths, and you have the fetish goths, and on and on and on. It's about always maintaining some kind of "otherness" in the face of commodification, essentially. If you're a goth kid and Hot Topic comes around and people are calling anyone who dresses in black goth, it makes sense that you're like, "No, I'm not that. I'm weirder than that. I'm different. I'm a '50s rockabilly chick who is goth. I'm totally different." That's just how it works. Even within a subculture, the thing is always reacting against itself.

**This is an interesting time for us to talk because you're currently in the home stretch of actually finishing the writing of your book. It will be amazing to see how many people this reaches and the kinds of responses you get.**

It's been really great to give these little talks on the topic and see how many people actually come up to me later and say how much they appreciate it. So often you write stuff and think, "I don't know if anyone cares. Am I just talking to myself? Is this just navel gazing?" Seeing other people that can identify with what I'm talking about has been really rewarding. I have to think that if I find this stuff interesting, surely there are other people that will too. That helps keep me going.

Leila Taylor Recommends:

Green-Wood Cemetery

Russian Ark, directed by Alexander Sokurov

Alexander McQueen (1995-2010)

Library of Congress digital collection

Atlas Obscura

Name

Leila Taylor

Vocation


Writer


Fact

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