3. The Shining

People are squeamish about art about violence and suffering that remains art-sy. Art about disasters should be transparent; to foreground the art, the pageantry is somehow offensive. You are accused of "aestheticizing" suffering, violence, torture etc. — as if that is an inherently negative thing, as if that makes it flippant, as if that is not pious enough. As if the art itself is a crime.

— Johannes Göransson, “’Why Is the Poem Such an Insult to This Evil Life?’ On Sandy Hook, Blake Butler, Aase Berg, and Disaster Aesthetics”

Stephen King’s *The Shining* and Stanley Kubrick’s later film adaptation of the novel limn Colorado as a crime scene in a powerful and cohesive way. These texts, but most particularly Kubrick’s film version, have excited a range of critical, theoretical, and audience responses that far exceed their statuses as works of fiction. *The Shining* evidently taps into deep cultural anxieties around the state of Colorado specifically and the territory of the United States generally. In turn, *The Shining* is an important intertext, or even ur-text, for Du Plessis’s *Memoirs*. This particular palimpsest of Colorado fictions can be excavated with luminol theory, its glow illuminating the heads of the terrorized protagonists — children with luminous white hair.

There are three versions of *The Shining*: Stephen King’s 1977 novel, Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 film, and Stephen King’s 1997 miniseries, created by him in an attempt to wrest back control over a project that had transcended its origins to become a phenomenal cult classic in the hands of Kubrick. This eventual reputation was slow in developing, and in the year that the film

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version was released, several serious film critics were scathing of the transformative work that Kubrick had performed, taking King’s straightforwardly supernatural ghost story and turning it into a work of psychological terror that defied categorization. Stephen King “conducted a press campaign against Kubrick’s adaptation. ‘You know what?’ King asked. ‘I think he wants to hurt people with this movie. I think he really wants to make a movie that will hurt people.’ In *Danse Macabre*, his 1981 critical reflections on horror, King called the film ‘maddening, perverse, and disappointing.’”41 Though the miniseries remains part of the palimpsestic text of *The Shining*, it is of less interest in this chapter, and I will primarily be referring to the novel and the film.

*The Shining*, in each instantiation, tells the story of Jack Torrance (played by Jack Nicholson in the film), a failed writer, failed teacher, and failed husband who recovers from his alcoholism and despair long enough to agree to a job caretaking the Overlook Hotel in the Rocky Mountains over a brutal winter season. Cabin fever gradually sets in and his mind disintegrates, he returns to drinking, and he decides to kill his wife, Wendy (Shelley Duvall), and Danny (Danny Lloyd), their toddler son. During the course of the winter both Jack and Danny see traces of previous horror in the abandoned hotel, with Danny’s gift of “the shining” allowing him direct access to the Real. Blood and corpses surface in the empty rooms as Danny’s ability to “shine” acts as a highly effective form of luminol.

However, as Mark Fisher notes in his article “You Have Always Been the Caretaker: The Spectral Spaces of the Overlook Hotel,” the Overlook is a “leisure hive built on top of an Indian Burial Ground (this detail was added by Kubrick); a potent image of a culture founded upon (the repression of) the genocide of the native peoples.”42 Mark Fisher reads the two *Shining* texts (the film and the novel, but not the miniseries) as “one intercon-
nected textual labyrinth,” yet he finds this distinction in Kubrick’s version important enough to comment on, as it shows “what haunts America” according to Roger Luckhurst, which “is a violent history — the settlers who systematically murdered the Native Americans, built wealth on the backs of African slaves, and suffered the parricidal guilt of a rebellious colony that shook off the colonial father to become an independent republic in the War of Independence.” Even if we accept that Kubrick seeks to bring _The Shining_ into closer proximity with its genocidal histories, he still perpetuates the racist myth of the “magical negro’ in his direction of Scatman Crothers as Dick Halloran, the hotel’s chef. Hallorann, an African American character, exists merely to save the white characters.

On the day the family arrives at the Overlook, Hallorann is about to leave for Florida for the winter months. He tells Danny, “What you got, son, I call it shinin’ on, the Bible calls it having visions, and there’s scientists that call it precognition. I’ve read up on it, son. I’ve studied on it. They all mean seeing the future. Do you understand that?” Here he is also explaining the supernatural phenomenon to the reader. “Shining” refers to an ability to pick up on atmospheres, moods, and the thoughts of the people around those who have the gift, as well as an ability to read the future through visions or hallucinations. In the novel, the gift is almost exclusively confined to revealing what is dangerous and deadly: blood streaming from the elevators into the lobby, twin girls chopped into gory pieces, the word _redrum_ (murder) scrawled on a mirror. The metaphor of shining as a means to excavate hidden crime narratives is a microcosmic example of the function of luminol theory. Luminol theory allows the careful

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44 Luckhurst, _The Shining_, 43.
46 King, _The Shining_, 61.
reader to piece together multiple hidden narratives within *The Shining*. For example, to train Danny’s “shine” on occulted crime narratives, the reader can trace luminol through the novel. Early in the story, while Danny is still residing in Boulder, he has a premonition of the final scenes at the Overlook, when his father attacks Danny and Wendy with an axe: “Now the snow was covering the shingles. It was covering everything. A green witchlight glowed into being on the front of the building, flickered, and became a giant, grinning skull over two crossed bones.”

The green glow of the “witchlight” is overlaid upon the scene to warn Danny that he is in severe danger. The future and present collide, a palimpsest rendered legible through the application of a glow eerily reminiscent of luminol.

Before his departure, Hallorann shows the Torrances how to survive the winter in practical terms, by giving them a tour of the kitchen and showing them the provisions he has left for them, and metaphysically, by alerting Danny to a supernatural means of calling for Dick’s help by “shining.” This scene coalesces around the vast hotel kitchen. It is no accident that both practical and supernatural advice is dispensed as the group wanders around the pantry and the walk in-freezer, and finally arrives at the gas burner: “I love gas,’ [Hallorann] said, and turned on

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47 Ibid., 23.
48 Elissa Marder, a psychoanalytic scholar, writes about a case in which a mother was found to have hidden her dead babies in the family freezer. This action, Marder argues, was the mother’s attempt to safeguard rather than destroy the children that she was psychologically unable to deal with. This case can be read against later scenes in *The Shining* where Jack Torrance freezes to death, kept safe from hurting himself or others. In psychoanalytic terms, “[a] freezer is, after all, itself a particular kind of a case — a technologically enhanced object designed for holding, containing, or preserving something (normally food) against the ravages of time. A freezer is designed to keep something safe, protected and near. In this sense it is the opposite of a disposal site; it retains, contains, and safeguards the objects that are confined in it. It is also the opposite of an oven. Following this association, dead babies in the freezer might be read as a reversal of the common image of the pregnant woman who has ‘buns in the oven.’” Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 25.
one of the burners. Blue flame popped into life and he adjusted it down to a faint glow with a delicate touch. ‘I like to be able to see the flame you’re cookin’ with. You see where all the surface burner switches are?’”49 In offering practical advice, Halloran also uses a blue glow, in this case that of the gas burner, to invoke warmth, security, and comfort and to remind Danny of his own ongoing protective presence. Finally, toward the end of the novel, Danny is alerted to a glow in his father’s eyes in an acute, desperate moment: “It was Jack and yet not Jack. His eyes were lit with a vacant, murderous glow; his familiar mouth now wore a quivering, joyless grin.”50 The green glow of the witchlight and the blue glow of the gas have become “vacant” and “murderous” in his father’s eyes, alerting Danny to the fact that Jack is no longer there and that he must escape his murderous intent.

Fisher applies a hauntological reading to The Shining, uncovering archaeological meaning through the layers of repression built into the text. He specifically mentions spectrality and haunting, saying, “Haunting happens when a space is invaded or otherwise disrupted by a time that is out-of-joint, a dyschronia,” and stating that The Shining is “fundamentally concerned with the question of repetition.”51 This repetition in a minor sense relates to the microcosmic murder of the family—first when Mr. Grady (Philip Stone), an erstwhile caretaker of the Overlook, kills his wife and daughters, and then Jack’s attempt to recreate that murder. In a wider sense, the repetition relates to the violence and terror that recur at the site of the Overlook Hotel, including organized crime, murders, suicides, and even mass killings.

Perhaps the most interesting application of the hauntological is in Fisher’s reading of Jack, who represents “an appalling structural fatality, a spectral determinism. To have ‘always been the caretaker’ is never to have been a subject in his own right. Jack has only ever stood in for the Symbolic and the homicidal

49 King, The Shining, 51.
50 Ibid., 301.
51 Ibid.
violence which is the Symbolic’s obscene underside.”52 Jack has “always been the caretaker,” and he has always lived in Colorado. He was involved in its genealogy of brutalities, from the Sand Creek massacre of 1864 to the murder of Grady’s daughters. If he has always been the caretaker, the obscene father, the structural, patriarchal, colonial enforcer, then who has been his perennial victim? When we witness Danny, an innocent blond child, trapped in a family home, in the snow, with his potential murderer, perhaps there is more than a spectral foreshadowing of Christmas Day, 1996, but as well as the later attempted murders of his own family, we also see that the Overlook is populated entirely by ghosts, ghosts who emerged around the turn of the century when the Overlook was built. When discussing the Ahwahnee Hotel, features of which were used by Kubrick in designing the Overlook, Roger Luckhurst says of the great hall:

We are invited to read the cues of the room historically, and clearly in relation to the violent history of the American frontier and the destruction of the Native Americans. The Overlook was built between 1907 and 1909, Ullman explains in another tracking shot along the exterior of the hotel, “and I believe they actually had to repel a few Indian attacks as they were building it.” (The Ahwahnee Hotel was built on the site of an indigenous Miwok village, rudely incorporating the designs of the culture it effaced.)53

This indexical connection between real violence perpetrated against the Miwok village, and the American Gothic trope of “gloomy wrong”54 produced by proximity to colonial and genocidal histories are brought together in this room. There is a scene of unaccountable and sudden violence between Jack and Wendy in this room, a violence that foreshadows an escalation of horrors and that ends in near-annihilation for the hotel and

52 Ibid.
53 Luckhurst, The Shining, 43.
54 Mighall, “Gothic Cities,” 58.
its inhabitants. It may be a stretch to suggest that Kubrick might have been “specifically aware of the growing Native American activism of the 1970s,” but it feels valid to suggest that “If there is a deliberate semiotic echo of these events in The Shining, Kubrick does it obliquely, in the deep space of the design, rather than exploiting the melodrama of undead vengeance of Native spirits.”

Jack’s role as caretaker is nothing more than a pretext for oppression and rage; his chaotic and unpredictable rule a microcosm of colonial, patriarchal enforcement, the room a material reminder of genocide and imperialism.

Kubrick takes King’s Gothic novel, and brings it into closer proximity with the true American Gothic, the story of indigenous genocide and stolen land. Du Plessis, in his later Colorado Gothic novel Memoirs, demonstrated that he was aware of Colorado histories, and of his intertexts, including Kathy Acker’s “Dead Doll Humility,” The Shining, and another King-authored novel set in Boulder, The Stand, in the writing of Memoirs. Du Plessis clearly takes serious issue with King’s version of The Shining, as evidenced in the harangue delivered by Kathy Acker (discussed below). Though never directly referencing his preference for Kubrick’s version, blond, magical Danny and the bloody-velvet-dress–wearing twins of the Overlook become reference points for the blond, magical, prettily dressed, and undead JonBenét. She haunts the novel, she haunts Boulder, and she haunts our imaginations. Perhaps we could consider Fisher’s formulation of Jack as the caretaker who stands in for homicidal violence and cast JonBenêt — real, mythical, and imagined — as someone who has always been the victim, the corollary to Colorado’s “dark side.” Yet in Memoirs, Du Plessis reclaims JonBenêt from this role. Yes, she repeats, and yes, she is the token of the return of the repressed, but she is given autonomy, a voice, and a young adulthood, and she transcends her status as beautiful dead doll, as white, blond corpse.

In Memoirs, Du Plessis explicitly ties the two murder narratives together. An entire chapter consists of the character Kathy

55 Luckhurst, The Shining, 45–46.
Acker offering a disquisition on a writer named Stephen King, who, like her and the protagonist of *Memoirs*, JonBenêt, is a fictional version of the real figure of the same name. There is an obvious link between Du Plessis’s book, which is described as an “overblown break-up novel about Boulder that uses [JonBenêt] as a metaphor”\(^{56}\) and King’s novel and Kubrick’s film, which are really about Colorado. The two versions of *The Shining* are murder mysteries that focus on genocide, the Depression, and gendered violence through the psychological horror story of a single family. Danny, Wendy, and Jack are the metaphor; Colorado is the subject.

In the introduction to *Memoirs*, Peggy Kamuf focuses on chapter 9, “Why Stephen King Writes Such Bad Novels.” In this chapter the character of Kathy Acker gives a lecture at “the university” and faces resistance from a group of Boulder locals who support King as an ex-resident. Kathy Acker inflames the crowd, saying, “Stephen King isn’t just a bad novelist, crappy, derivative, moralistic, unimaginative, limited. He’s a bad writer, an evil one,”\(^{57}\) and, “Stephen King is evil like Boulder and Boulder is evil like Stephen King! Don’t think I haven’t seen through the little understanding the two of you have going on.” Her speech builds hysterically, and her conspiracy theory about King becomes extreme. All other American authors are mere pseudonyms for King; Boulder is “nothing but a debased solar cult that uses King’s works to transmute and transmit everything into Boulder,”\(^{58}\) and finally, “All of Stephen King’s works make up a secret psychogeography of Boulder.”\(^{59}\) This is an intentionally bizarre and over-the-top scene it is at the end of it that Acker’s character is revealed to be a twelve-inch-tall doll\(^{60}\) and Du Plessis uses it to contextualize and to some extent parody the conspiracy theories, critical inquiries, and psychoanalytic

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\(^{57}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 75.
readings that proliferate around *The Shining*, both the novel and the Kubrick film. Kamuf writes:

The scene of this haranguing lecture, which is titled with a nod to Nietzsche “Why Stephen King Writes Such Bad Novels,” could feed the reader’s speculation about one of the impulses channelling the terrific energy of *Memoirs*. Whoever has done time in the university under the charge of professing literature can no doubt recognise the urge to unleash a similar broadside attack on illusions cherished among a public of students force-fed their idea of “literature” by the bestseller industry.61

Kamuf allows that the distaste Acker shows in this scene can be appreciated, and even shared by the reader and potentially by Kamuf herself. However, Kamuf is instrumentally responsible for a broader interest in *The Shining* within critical theory — both in Kubrick’s film, which could be considered art, and in King’s novel, which, presumably, is in the dubious category of “best-seller.” Her translation of *Specters of Marx* by Jacques Derrida popularized Derrida’s term *hauntology*, a pun on “haunting” and “ontology”— the latter sounds almost indistinguishable from “hauntology” in Derrida’s native French. The critical concept of *hauntology* was in turn instrumental to Fisher’s 2007 reading of *The Shining*, a reading that rekindled interest in the text as a rich site for critical investigation. The title *Specters of Marx* comes from Marx’s statement that “a spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism.”62 Derrida takes this as his starting point and shows how risky it is to disavow the figure of the specter. There is a belief among those who uphold capitalist society, he writes, that “communism is finished since the collapse of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost.”

But those who believe this “do more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back.” The figure of the specter, according to Derrida, is more powerful than a living figure. He goes on to describe the practices that entire societies enact to disavow, repress, and specifically conjure or exorcise a malignant force. As Kamuf eloquently translates:

In the occult society of those who have sworn together [des conjures], certain subjects, either individual or collective, represent forces and ally themselves together in the name of common interests to combat a dreaded political adversary, that is, also to conjure it away. For to conjure means also to exorcise: to attempt to both destroy and to disavow a malignant, demonised, diabolised force, most often an evil-doing spirit, a spectre, a kind of ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back post mortem. Exorcism conjures away the evil in ways that are also irrational, using magical, mysterious, even mystifying practices.

Though this analysis relates to aggression against a political adversary, it can also quite usefully describe any supernatural or evil force, conspiracy, or cabal.

Conspiracy theories figure large in Rodney Ascher’s 2012 documentary, Room 237. The film deals with super-fans of The Shining and their fairly wild theories. Bill Blakemore, a writer and actor, puts forward the thesis that the film version of The Shining is a story about Native American genocide, a highly relevant hidden narrative for the Colorado-based story. His theory rests on the prop of Calumet baking soda cans that recur throughout the film. The cans are decorated with an image of a stereotypical Native American chief, and they are positioned

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64 Ibid., 59.
at crucial moments in the film in ways that suggest an attempt to offer a narrative gloss. For example, in one scene where Jack is talking to the (un)dead Mr. Grady, the baking powder tin is directly behind Jack’s head with the image of the peace pipe obscured, indicating that Native Americans’ peace has been shattered. The opening scene of the documentary shows the poster for the 1981 UK release of *The Shining*, which states that the film is “the wave of terror that swept across America.” Though this could be considered a typically hyperbolic presentation of a horror film, Blakemore argues in voice-over that there is also a hidden message in the poster: it speaks to the American imperial drive and the slaughter on which the new empire was founded. This narrowly focused claim does not address the multivalence of the text, but it does chime with my argument that the guilt of genocide haunts Colorado, going back to the Sand Creek massacre. Blakemore considers Grady’s real, and Jack’s attempted, murder of their families to be microcosmic versions of the Colorado genocide. Other contributors put forward various theories and readings. Perhaps the wildest claim in *Room 237* comes from Jay Weidner, who believes that the entire film serves only as a confession by Kubrick that the director staged the moon landings.65 A more careful reading comes from Juli Kearns, who maps the impossible space of the Overlook to show how Kubrick intentionally uses camera tricks to mislead and disorient the viewer.66 John Fell Ryan says of the practical cinematography: “They use the camera to create an emotional architecture in your mind, but at the same time [show] you that it is false. The set is so completely plastic that its contradictions pile up in your subconscious.”67 This is particularly relevant, as it

65 For more on this claim, see Jay Weidner, “Kubrick’s Odessey” [sic], http://www.jayweidner.com/category/kubricks-odessey/


contextualizes *The Shining* as plastic, malleable, and dangerous. The documentary reminds us that Kubrick sent a research team to Colorado for three months to uncover the real history of the state. There is no doubt that this was of serious interest to Kubrick and filtered into his version of King’s story. In *The Shining*, no trace of Colorado history disappears.
This ghostly trace leaks from the basement, saturating the air, the house, and the deadly landscape. Luminol theory scratches straight through the palimpsest of history to reveal the accreted narratives below, from the basement where JonBenét was discovered to the originary genocide of the state of Colorado, where the Ramsey house rests uneasily on stolen and colonized land.