

# **Dr. Heidi Backes**

## **Judith Enyeart Reynolds College of Arts and Letters Research Symposium**

### **Time and Date of Talk:**

February 17, 2023, 12:15-1:15 p.m., Sicheluff Hall 126

### **Title of Talk:**

Spectral Spain: Haunting Traces of the Fascist Past in Contemporary Spanish Gothic Fiction

### **Speaker Biography:**

Dr. Heidi Backes is an Associate Professor of Spanish specializing in contemporary Spanish literature, focusing her latest research on the neo-Gothic movement in Spain. She is an active member of the International Gothic Association and the Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia, and has presented her research at international Gothic Studies conferences in Mexico, England, Ireland, Australia, Japan and the United States. Her most recent publications have appeared in journals published by Liverpool University and Queen's University Belfast, and her book on haunting in post-Franco Gothic fiction is currently under contract with the University of Wales Press.

### **Abstract of Talk:**

In 1945, as the world celebrated the Allied victory in World War II and the defeat of fascism in northern Europe, Spain entered its sixth year of the Francisco Franco dictatorship. Isolated from the mainland on the other side of the Pyrenees, where time seemingly stood still

and people suffered from post-civil war hunger and disease, Spain was the glaring exception to the rejuvenation of democracy in the west. For the families of the victims of Franco's regime—among whom some 100,000 still remain buried in mass graves dotting the countryside—the culture of violence and fear led to widespread silence about the trauma experienced over the nearly four decades of Franco's rule. In the years after his death in 1975, Spanish cultural and political historians repeatedly pointed to the questionable state of the new democracy that was structured around many of the same institutions and people who were key figures in the fascist regime. Spanish authors in the post-Franco era found that the Gothic genre—with its ghosts and silences—was an especially apt mode to express notions of trauma, historical memory and the fractured self in the years after the dictatorship. In Spanish Gothic literature, haunting became a symptom of not just the past trauma of the civil war and resulting dictatorship continuing to work its way into the present, but also of the disenchantment of a large part of the population who saw that the transition to democracy did not erase the injustices of the recent past. Some of these authors focus directly on the civil war and the immediate post-war era; others take on broader contexts of haunting and its implications in an array of socio-political issues, especially emphasizing gender, class and race; still others use haunting as a trope to comment on the loss of cultural tradition in the remote Spanish countryside, where the advent of modern technology and the contemporary urban-centered lifestyle have left scores of ghost towns, whose dilapidated structures have transformed into symbolic cemeteries in memory of traditional ways of life that will never return.

In this presentation, I will give an overview of the main concepts of my book, *Spectral Spain*, focusing on the ways in which contemporary Spanish Gothic literature serves as not only popular entertainment with all the trappings of the genre, but also as a marker of memory in post-Franco Spain; the Gothic, in this historical moment, is a tool that is perfectly conditioned to

address notions of trauma, loss and mourning, gender roles, race, class, regional identity politics and more in a period defined by sociopolitical anxiety and a fear of the return of the not-so-distant past (as the Spanish neo-fascist movement continues to gain ground in current regional and national politics). Spectrality in all its forms is inevitably a defining feature of post-Franco Spanish cultural production, and these Gothic texts urge us to acknowledge the ghosts of the past.

**Interdisciplinarity:**

This talk covers aspects of Spanish history, politics, and culture through the study of Gothic literature. It is geared toward anyone who is interested in learning more about 20th-century fascism and the current neo-fascist movements, representations of trauma and memory in literature, the role of women in the National Catholic regime, haunting as a trope in contemporary culture, and for people broadly interested in Spanish culture and history. There are multiple intersections between my work and that of other literary scholars, historians, sociologists, political scientists, gender studies scholars, and religious studies scholars, as I cite work from each of these areas in my research.