

An Interview with Laura Westengard, Author of *Gothic Queer Culture*

by Leigh Dara Gold

Laura Westengard (she/they) is a professor of English at New York City College of Technology, CUNY. She serves on the board of directors at CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies and as Coordinator and inaugural faculty member of the Advanced Certificate in LGBTQ Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. Laura sits on the advisory board for *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, on the editorial board for the Peter Lang book series *Vampire Studies: New Perspectives on the Undead*, and is the co-editor of the Fall/Winter 2024 special issue of *WSQ* on "Unbearable Being(s)." Her book *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019) shows how queer culture adopts gothicism to challenge heteronormative and racialized systems and practices and to acknowledge the effects of microaggression and insidious trauma on queer communities. Contact: LWestengard@citytech.cuny.edu

Leigh Dara Gold (she/her) is a Doctoral Lecturer in the English Department at New York City College of Technology, CUNY where she teaches composition, literature classes, and women's studies. Leigh completed her PhD from NYU's German Department in 2011, writing on mourning in the work of the German Jewish author Else Lasker Schöler. She recently published an essay on Judith Merrill in *Jewish Women Science Fiction Writers Create Future Females: Gender, Temporality—and Yentas*, an anthology on Jewish women science fiction writers, edited by Marleen S. Barr (Lexington Books, 2025). Leigh has been one of the organizers of the annual Science Fiction Symposia at City Tech over the past eight years. Her current work focuses on trauma, mourning, and women authors of the 20th Century. She is also interested in the intersections of philosophy, poetry, nature, and the body, and is currently a Co-Chair of the English Department's Literature Committee at City Tech. Contact: LGold@citytech.cuny.edu

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Abstract: This interview between Leigh Dara Gold and Laura Westengard, both from the English department at New York City College of Technology, CUNY, was conducted in 2024 via email. The conversation shows Westengard to be a trailblazer as revealed by her unique interdisciplinary and intersectional approach to scholarship and teaching, especially through connections to gender studies and gothic studies.

Keywords: interview, literature, gothic literature, queer theory, gender studies, teaching

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Introduction

Laura Westengard (she/they) is a Professor of English at New York City College of Technology, CUNY. She serves on the Board of CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies, the first university-based LGBTQ research center in the United States, and she was awarded a \$40,000 grant for City Tech's LGBTQIA+ Collective in 2022. Her 2019 book *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*, connects many of her research and pedagogical interests. Her name is now synonymous with LGBTQIA+ initiatives and study, gender studies, and Gothic studies; she even has been given the title of vampire expert by *Vanity Fair*. This interview explores her trailblazing work and what inspires it.

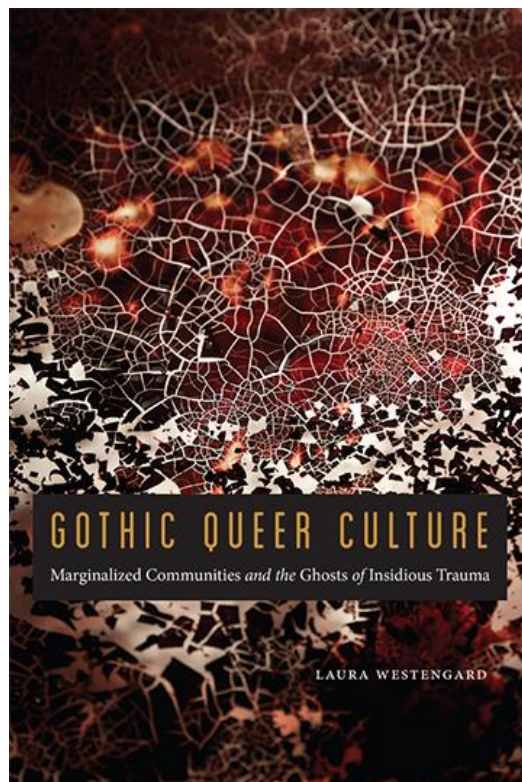
Leigh Dara Gold: You are a well-known scholar of the Gothic. Can you share with readers why you chose to work in this area?

Laura Westengard: The Gothic chose me! Toward the end of graduate school, I sat down to articulate my dissertation and reviewed all of the course work I had done and realized that all of my research had some kind of Gothic and queer element from sadomasochism in the literature of Victorian masculinities to ghostliness and monstrosity in contemporary queer visual art and poetry. Over and over again, I gravitated toward these dark and

morbid subjects as resonant theoretical frameworks for the analysis of culture, gender, and sexuality.

I have always been interested in the Gothic tropes of decaying grandeur, misunderstood outsiders, melancholy, and gloom. When I was a child, my favorite movie was Billy Wilder's 1950 noir film, *Sunset Boulevard*. There was something beautiful and romantic about Norma Desmond's desperate loneliness, her toxic power over ex-husband/servant, Max, and her unwillingness to accept the passing of Hollywood's (and her own) glory days. She was also glorious as a kind of queer camp idol—over the top, excessively glamorous, slightly pathetic, and more than a little scary. When I was ten years old, I dressed up as Norma Desmond for Halloween! In other words, Gothic queerness always held a deep appeal to me even before I understood the theoretical function of the Gothic or my own queerness.

LDG: Your book *Gothic Queer Culture* connects the gothic to your work with LGBTQIA+ communities. Can you say a bit more about how the amazing work that you are doing with the LGBTQIA+ community (including here at City Tech) is tied to the Gothic, and the history of the Gothic?



LW: In *Gothic Queer Culture*, I argue that the Gothic (the literature, the metaphors, the subculture) is inherently queer and that, in turn, queerness is inherently Gothic. To me these two elements are always integrated in really complex ways, and in the book, I explore the social, historical, and psychological reasons for this convergence. These two elements--Gothic and queer--are also central to my work in the classroom and in the community at

City Tech. When I was first hired, I worked with my colleagues—Sean Scanlan and Robert Lestón—to develop a course in the English department on “Gothic Literature and Visual Culture.” I also serve as the Coordinator of the Gender & Sexuality Studies Minor, a program originally developed by Monique Ferrell, and I am the Chair of the college-wide LGBTQIA+ Collective. These developments allow me to continue to work at the intersection of queerness and the Gothic while bringing these popular and important topics to the students at City Tech.

LDG: I am very interested in trauma and theories of trauma. Can you talk more about how trauma is a part of your work, including your teaching, and, further, how trauma is tied to how you view yourself as an educator?

LW: My argument in *Gothic Queer Culture* is that queer folks turn to the Gothic because it helps navigate the accumulated long term traumatic experience of surviving as a member of a marginalized group. As I explain in the book, for me the “fascinating part of gothic narrative appears in the interstices that convey normalized, daily trauma rather than in its punctuated moments of shocking spectacle. To focus on the crannies and crevices of the gothic is to take a new approach to trauma, for so much discussion of trauma focuses on its horrific events without examining the accumulated daily assaults arising from systemic refusals and invalidations” (2-3). This experience of “overwhelmingness of existence in a heteronormative, homophobic society in which marginalization and oppression are compounded by other intersecting aspects of social location” (5) is what I call “insidious trauma.” Gothic queer culture, then, is any kind of aesthetic or creative production in which gothicism is used as a strategy for expressing the ongoing, accumulated traumatic experiences of queer existence.

This engagement with trauma, both acute and insidious, means that I do my best to bring a trauma-aware pedagogy into my classrooms. It is not possible to always create a “safe space” in the classroom, but it is central to my pedagogy to both challenge students and support them when experience is difficult. Recognizing that students have a complex life both before and after my encounter with them--and being vulnerable enough to show my own humanity--is so important to treating them as complete humans in the classroom community. As bell hooks explains in *Teaching to Transgress*, “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (13). I think that an attention to traumatic experience is essential to respecting and caring for students.

LDG: What would you want readers to know about you as a scholar, professor, and human being?

LW: In the last few years, I have been having a great time being a more public-facing representative of the Gothic, which has allowed me to build community outside of the academy and really come into myself as “goth.” Some of the highlights have been

appearing as a “vampire expert” for Vanity Fair’s *VF Reviews* episode on [“Vampires in Movies & TV.”](#) It was such a thrill to talk about vampire depictions from *Nosferatu* to *Morbius* and to compare them to literary classics like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. I also recently had the opportunity to host a “Summer Goth Book Club” on vampires with [Morbid Anatomy](#), a cultural organization dedicated to “surveying the interstices of art and medicine, death and culture.” The book club involved hosting monthly film screenings, running meetings to discuss a different vampire novel each month (with special attention to queer and Gothic elements), offering reflection/discussion questions to guide the conversation, moderating an ongoing group chat, and providing a list of resources for further reading on the topic. It was so much fun to bring my passion about the Gothic to an audience outside of higher education and to help them find community with each other.

LDG: You have such a huge impact on City Tech, at the student level with student initiatives such as the incredible funding for the CUNY-wide [LGBTQIA+ Consortium](#), your previous role as Coordinator of the [Gender and Sexuality Studies Program](#), and your role as Chair of [City Tech’s LGBTQIA+ Collective](#), your teaching, the way that you are an amazing supporter of your colleagues, and the list goes on! How are you able to achieve all of this, to be a leader in teaching and education as well as a truly accomplished scholar? What gives you the drive, focus, and even inspiration for all of your work?

LW: There certainly are times when I feel like I don’t have enough energy for all of it! However, I do my very best to make conscious decisions about what I say “yes” to in life. It is so important for me to invest my time in activities that feel deeply meaningful to me and politely decline those that don’t. There is a downside to this strategy though. I don’t always have the time or capacity to do my best at all the activities that I would like to participate in, but when everything is meaningful then I want to show up as my best 100% of the time! I often remind myself that this is really a lovely problem to have, and I have learned to rely more and more on my community of amazing colleagues who are also driven, focused, and inspired.

LDG: What is a suggestion that you might give to others trying to navigate their academic careers? Is there an approach to teaching, writing, and scholarship that has especially helped you throughout your career thus far?

LW: Find your passions, protect your time, and stay focused on the students. A classroom rooted in reciprocity will ensure that everyone has the opportunity to grow!

LDG: Thank you so much for this! I and many future readers will be grateful for your having taken the time and energy to share your thoughts with us for this interview.