Introduction: The Gothic—Old and New, White and Black

I happened upon this project accidentally one day as I sat enduring the long process of getting my hair styled. I was working, as usual, when my stylist inquired what book I was reading.

“Beloved. I’m teaching it to my class next week,” I stated, assuming that would suffice. To my surprise, however, she paused in her work, exclaiming “Good lord, how can you read that? I couldn’t even make it past the first five minutes of the movie.”

Since at that time I had taken Toni Morrison as my personal goddess, I reacted with both confusion and shock. How could anyone dismiss Morrison so easily?

After I spent a few minutes explaining the theoretical importance of the text, she finally interrupted me, noting, “Well, sure, but the beginning was just so scary. That ghost was awful. I had to shut it off.”

“But the whole movie isn’t like that. In fact, the ghost becomes a person soon after the beginning. It really isn’t that frightening,” I concluded. After all, I’d been reading Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King and watching horror flicks since I was nine, so I should know, right?

“Oh, yes it is,” another stylist chirped in. “Those scenes of black folk getting beaten, and hung, and raped—I had to turn it off, too. I didn’t want to let any of that into my house.”

Only then did it strike me that they were right; Beloved is, in fact, a horror story as terrifying as any zombie movie. The text is probably more terrifying because it contains haunted houses and houses that haunt. But the horror in Beloved is different—it comes from reality—and so, is that much more threatening and terrifying. For those black women, the monsters and ghosts that make up the text’s (hi)story could intrude upon their lives in ways other gothic ghosts never could or would. The conversation led me to the startling discovery that there are far more African American writers of gothic fiction than critics typically recognize, and these writers make critical interventions into the genre. Further, they rarely mimic traditional gothic conventions, which present various problems and threats for the black writer. Rather, black authors appropriate and revise the genre’s tropes in unique ways to both speak back to the
African American Gothic examines the manner in which African American texts go beyond merely inverting the color scheme of the gothic trope—blackened evil that torments and is defeated by good whiteness—to destabilizing the entire notion of categories and boundaries. In revising the genre, African American writers also critique and complicate the identities white gothic writers imposed upon them. Black Gothic, as a “multipolar reflecting reflection,” reveals the archetypal depictions of racial, sexual, and gendered others as constructions useful in the production of white patriarchal dominance. These authors also destabilize and defy any singular projections of their own identity as it inevitably shifts and changes among the various interacting social categories and hierarchies.

The gothic is fairly familiar to most people; anyone who has seen a horror film or read a Stephen King novel is familiar with some of the genre’s tropes: dark villains who never tire of chasing hapless maidens through a seeming maze of forests, halls, or shadows; supernatural monsters made all the more horrible by stray marks of (disfigured) humanity; heroes who are sometimes weak, sometimes wicked, but rarely successful saviors; twisted, yet uncannily familiar, landscapes; victims spied upon, raped, tortured, mutilated, and occasionally cannibalized; the list goes on. Yet, the gothic is more than a long list of tropes deployed to tantalize and terrify. In his landmark study on race in the British Gothic tradition, H. L. Malchow declares that in order to fully understand the mechanisms and meanings of the genre’s tropes, one must (re)locate the tradition and its text amid its pertinent historical contexts. The gothic extends beyond its typical reference point as fiction written within a fixed, relatively short span of years; more than a mere genre, the gothic is “a language of panic, of unreasoning anxiety, blind revulsion, and distancing sensationalism . . . this language of terror was no monopoly of the novelist, but can be found throughout the discourse on racial difference” (Malchow 4–5). Malchow thus contends that the gothic is a discourse rather than just a fixed novelistic mode; the gothic is a series of tropes and themes used to meditate upon a culture’s various anxieties, particularly through discourses of Otherness.

Notably, the gothic is mutable, shifting to accommodate the changing ideals and questions of its culture. Furthermore, its Other, in all of its monstrous disguises, is rarely singular and never stable; rather the gothic Other typically condenses various cultural and national threats. If Jerrold Hogle is correct in claiming that the genre’s British revival at the end of the nineteenth century stems from “a pervasive cultural drive to ‘condense various racial and sexual threats to nation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie [all] in one body’ ” during a period “of potentially collapsing tradition’s originators and to make it a capable and useful vehicle for expressing the terrors and complexities of black existence in America.