

Justin D. Edwards. *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. xxxiii + 145 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87745-824-1.



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Gothic Discourse Meets Hybridity in the United States

In the past decade, gothic studies have produced a number of new readers, research handbooks, and student guides, and launched a new scholarly journal, *Gothic Studies*, developments which have, among other things, consolidated and somewhat stabilized the field (if one can speak of stability in the context of the gothic).[1] At the same time, however, the question of what "gothic" really means routinely comes up for fundamental scrutiny and reevaluation in scholarly debates--which the above-mentioned guides also gleefully participate in. This is a good moment, therefore, to be moving in new directions with well-tried problems: the field provides solid theoretical and methodological grounding, yet the new definitional openness of the "gothic" also allows explorations of unfamiliar "gothicisms" and "gothicizations."

Justin Edwards's *Gothic Passages* makes use of precisely this possibility by intersecting two established fields, the scholarly exploration of the American Gothic and the analysis of passing and

racial ambiguity in American literature and culture. Thoroughly researched and well argued, the book identifies the "gothicization of race" and the "racialization of the gothic" as two interrelated phenomena throughout the nineteenth century. Edwards's intersection of scholarly concerns suggests that recent reconsiderations of the "gothic" may require further complication, particularly in the study of the *American* literary and cultural gothic.

This approach in *Gothic Passages* also enables new readings of well-known antebellum and postbellum (or, more accurately, post-Reconstruction) texts that have distinct affiliations with the American gothic. The book's major readings consider the following primary texts, which also determine chapter organization: the first section of the book, dealing with the antebellum period, covers Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855), and Ellen and William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860); the second section turns to postbellum gothic discourse and includes readings of Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola*

Leroy (1892), William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty* (1892), and Charles W. Chesnutt's *House behind the Cedars* (1900).

Following Leslie Fiedler, Edwards regards the American gothic as distinct from the British gothic tradition, based primarily on its rootedness in a specifically American racism produced by the institution of slavery. However, in contrast to such a clear-cut distinction, Edwards also points out significant affinities between the two traditions. Furthermore, while the focus of the study is clearly on literary texts, Edwards works with a broad definition of "the gothic" as a discursive practice that runs through a wide range of different genres, including newspaper articles and ethnological studies, and that spans the political spectrum from radical abolitionism to white supremacy. The author's aim then, is not to pinpoint a single definition for the American gothic, "but to provide a context in which alternative patterns of gothic production in the United States can be compared" (p. xxxii). Racial ambiguity, rather than race as such, is central to Edwards's understanding of this gothic production.

The first two chapters, perhaps the strongest in the book, develop an interpretive template based on a suggestive and, I think, original application of the theory of the uncanny that recurs in subsequent chapters. In the first chapter, Edwards reads Poe's *Pym* as both a response to popular ethnological racism and an anticipation of psychoanalytical notions of the uncanny as well as of Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. "*Pym* reproduces the typical gothic conflict between defenseless victims and abusive tyrants within a racialized framework, endeavoring to capture American anxieties concerning racial uprisings as it deconstructs racial patterns through the exploration of a space between blackness and whiteness" (pp. 3-4). Edwards importantly applies the idea of "hybridity" as relevant on many textual levels, but the term, as he uses it, appears somewhat stretched between antebellum theories of racial

hybridity as cornerstone of ethnological white supremacy and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial notion of hybridity as "epistemological splitting."

Similarly, Edwards's second chapter reads *Benito Cereno* as "gothic travel narrative" in terms of its relation to the uncanny and in the context of ethnological discourses around race. Even though the novel, Edwards argues, deploys "hybridity" on different textual levels, undermining clear racial distinctions, it ultimately ends on a "reactionary move" (p. 32). While I go along with and enjoy the major line of Edwards's argument in this chapter, at this latter point I part company. I disagree not so much with the content of this assessment, but with the need to make it at all and thus subject a text that precisely resists such stability to the dichotomy of either-or. Babo's ultimate silencing and death, as a result of his acknowledged authorship of the slave rebellion, remains, to the end, *both* a grave injustice perpetrated by a sinful legal system that deprives black people of their humanity *and* the just punishment for unspeakable brutalities. The question of whether *Benito Cereno* is ultimately a racist or an anti-racist text remains unanswerable and beside the point. It seems to me that a "gothic" reading of the text would be able to live with such unsettling ambiguity. The chapter sets out with an interpretation that does leave this ambiguity open: "I suggest that *Benito Cereno* moves in both directions, fluctuating between a condemnation of racial hierarchies and a reinscription of the very racism that it denounces" (p. 19). It is all the more surprising, then, that such a reading seems to require a closure that *Benito Cereno*, I believe, does not support.

In his reading of William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), Edwards comes back to the by now familiar patterns of reading, performance, the uncanny, and the text "speaking against itself." The parallels reside in the multiple meanings of passing and racial ambivalence in the text. "[O]n the one hand, it is the conduit to freedom and self-determina-

tion, their [the Crafts'] passport to selfhood; on the other hand, it supplies a glimpse into the abyss of abjection and identifacatory uncertainty that inspires William Craft's fear and trembling" (p. 35). What makes this reading particularly suggestive is that it is able to demonstrate the interrelations between the narrative's claim of authenticity and its use of gothic imagery and diction--two seemingly contradictory textual moves. As in the other texts examined by Edwards, then, passing and racial ambiguity both participate in and undermine American racial dichotomies and are implicated in malleable gothic discourses that served both sides of the debate around racial difference.

The dread of a disintegrating color line is also central to Edwards's reading of Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), which he examines alongside George Washington Cable's "Salome Mueller, the White Slave" (1889) in chapter 4. According to Edwards, in using this dread, Harper's novel takes the conventions of sentimentalism and turns them into gothic horror. Finally, in the last two chapters, Edwards also identifies the gothic in the realist fiction of William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt. These two chapters demonstrate how both writers responded very differently to late-nineteenth-century racist ethnology, which appropriated social Darwinism to shore up the supposed superiority of whiteness and began to racialize non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants such as the Irish as "alien" threats to American citizenship.

Edwards argues convincingly that Chesnutt, rather than using blackness as the site of the gothic, develops the horrors of whiteness in postbellum American culture. As in the antebellum narratives, it is the biracial or racially ambiguous character and the idea of passing that triggers or enables the gothic moment in the text.

I have two caveats regarding this otherwise inspiring and original book, one concerning its chronological structure and the other its use of the term "hybridity." The book's organization

around the major texts in chronological order infelicitously returns the argument--motivated as it is by analytical questions rather than a strong historical narrative--to the same basic claims over and over again. In a way, *Gothic Passages* analyzes its primary texts almost as if they were published at the same time, relying on existing antebellum-postbellum historical paradigms as a contextual given.

While Edwards does, for example, refer to the well-known shift that the theory of evolution caused in American ethnology, he does not fully develop similar transformations in his textual analysis. The study thus misses the chance of intervening in existing literary-historical narratives through new readings of familiar texts. While it is perhaps precisely the point of such a "gothic" reading to resist imposing explanatory historical narratives, *Gothic Passages* does not go so far as to make that resistance felt. What the structural repetition reveals is that, in its actual readings, the focus of *Gothic Passages* rests primarily on the racialized gothic and its productivity across literary genres and periods, not on the historical development of "gothicized" racism, which is in conflict with the book's promise to do both.

The other problem I have with *Gothic Passages* concerns Edwards's frequent and perhaps indiscriminate use of the term "hybridity," one of the central concepts of the study. The term was used in nineteenth-century racist ethnology to shore up its notion of a separate generation and emerges in a totally different form in twentieth-century postcolonial and literary theory. In *Gothic Passages*, hybrid textual practices (p. xix) and hybrid bodies (p. 4) point to a postcolonial notion of hybridity that is no doubt related to the polygenesists' "terror of hybridity" (p. 7), but not in a simple, straightforward way. I would have wished, at times, for a more thorough examination of this relationship, which is central to the core claims made by this study.

On the whole, however, *Gothic Passages* undoubtedly makes an important contribution to gothic studies and to the study of racial ambiguity in the United States that will also help to change the way in which its primary texts are read, even if some terminological rough edges may need some further debate. The book contains many suggestive readings of its major primary texts; it is inspiring in how it crosses theoretical boundaries and wholly convincing in its claim that the American gothic hinges upon the dread of racial (national, class, and gender) ambiguity.

Note

[1]. For example, see Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996); Marie Mulvey-Roberts, *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Emma J. Clery and Robert Miles, *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook, 1700-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); David Stevens, *The Gothic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and David Punter, ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (London: Blackwell, 2001).

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