About halfway through his autobiography, Black Boy, Richard Wright describes his first job selling newspapers. The young Wright takes the job in order to make money and to read the newspaper's magazine supplement, which contains tales such as Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage and "thrilling horror stories" of mad scientists who electricify their victims in the basement (144). Hungry not only for money to buy food but also for knowledge, Wright uses these stories of "outlandish men in far-away, outlandish cities" as his "gateway to the world" (142). Before long, Wright learns from one of his black customers that the newspaper he is selling endorses the doctrines of the Ku Klux Klan. When he reads the news sections of the paper for the first time, Wright breaks out in goose pimples at the uncanny images of racism and the "brutally anti-Negro" articles that the paper espouses; its stereotypical cartoons of black men and its call for the defense of white womanhood "all seemed so strange and yet familiar" (146, 145). Wright responds to the accusation that he is supporting white supremacist doctrine by arguing that he was unaware of the connection between the magazine and the content of the newspaper: "I read the maga-
azine, but I never read the paper,” he defensively repeats three times in the scene (145). Looking back on his mistake, the older Wright states: “The way I had erred was simple but utterly unbelievable. I had been so enthralled by reading the serial stories in the magazine supplement that I had not read a single issue of the newspaper” (146). Rather than completely own up to his unwitting dissemination of white supremacist doctrine, the young Wright stops selling the newspaper, claiming he no longer has time. His shame silences him. It is the older Wright who resurrects the episode and voices its importance in his own literary evolution.

This episode in Black Boy tells us much about readings of gothic literature—those thrilling tales of horror that seemingly have no relationship to reality. Instead of being gateways to other, distant worlds of fantasy, the example of Wright suggests, gothic stories are intimately connected to the culture that produces them. Actually folded within the pages of the newspaper, the gothic tales of Wright’s magazine insert should not be read separately from their historical and, specifically, their racial contexts. Thus situated, the gothic tales act as the conduit for Wright’s new knowledge of racial politics instead of as an escapist retreat from it. Moreover, in revealing the connection between the gothic and history, Wright implies that gothic tales are enacted in the everyday terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan and that accounts of those terrors can evoke in the reader a response similar to that provoked by a gothic tale (hence, the young Wright’s goose bumps on reading the anti-Negro paper). Wright, then, articulates a multivalent relationship between the newspaper and its magazine insert of gothic stories. First, the gothic, like all discourses, needs to be historicized; to read it out of cultural context is to misread it. Second, the gothic can remain continuous with official narratives, even when it apparently contradicts them. The gothic may unveil the ideology of official discourse, but its transformative power can be limited; in Wright’s narrative the gothic magazine insert enables the dissemination of the paper’s politics. Just as Wright covers over his reasons for quitting the paper, the gothic’s effect can simply be repressed. Finally, if the gothic is informed by its historical context, the horrors of history are also articulated through gothic discourse. The brutal and uncanny images of the newspaper signify how history can be coded in gothic terms.

Throughout this study, I will argue for a reading of the gothic as an integral part of a network of historical representation. Claiming that the gothic is intensely engaged with historical concerns, this study contests traditional assessments that classify it as an escapist form. Instead of fleeing reality, the gothic registers its culture’s contradictions, presenting a distorted, not a disengaged, version of reality. While this study addresses a number of sites of historical horror—revolution, Indian massacre, the transformation of the marketplace—it is especially concerned with how slavery haunts the American gothic. Instead of making the same mistake as the young Wright, who becomes so enthralled by the thrilling tale that he misses its connection to his culture, Gothic America remains mindful of history’s horrors and attentive to reading practices that would disavow them.

**Defining the American Gothic**

The Gothic code is difficult to define, but easy to classify.

—Robert Hemenway, “Gothic Sociology”

The question “How do you define gothic?” has been the necessary starting point for most conversations about this project; the inquiry has less to do, I suspect, with a need for generic precision than with a genuine bafflement about what might constitute the American gothic. When modified by American, the gothic loses its usual referents. The second most-asked question about this project—“How do you differentiate between the American and the British gothic?”—supports this theory: the canonical British gothic serves as the reference point for readers attempting to locate the less identifiable American version. As a critical category, the American gothic lacks the self-evident validity of its British counterpart.

Several factors contribute to the uncertain status of the American gothic. Unlike the British gothic, which developed during a definable time period (usually marked as beginning with Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* [1764] and continuing through the 1820s) and has a recognized coterie of authors (Walpole, Radcliffe, Monk Lewis, Godwin, Hogg, Maturin, Mary Shelley), the American gothic, one of several forms that played a role in the development of the early American novel, is less easily specified in terms of a particular time period or group of authors. There was no founding period of gothic literature in America, and given the critical preference for the term romance, few authors were designated as gothicists. Even when authors such as Edgar Allan Poe or periods such as the twentieth-century Southern Renaissance are associated with the gothic, they reveal the difficulty of defining the genre in national terms: the American gothic is most recognizable as a regional form. Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation’s “other,” becoming the repository
for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself.\(^1\) The enlightened South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot. America's self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony directly contradicts the gothic's most basic impulses. The American gothic, as Leslie Fiedler points out, is "a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (29).

If the American gothic is difficult to understand due to its seemingly antagonistic relationship to America's national identity, it is equally difficult to classify in generic terms. Just as gothic unsettles the idea of America, the modifier American destabilizes understandings of the gothic. Once imported to America, the gothic's key elements were translated into American terms, and its formulas were also unfixed. As Charles Brockden Brown, one of America's first novelists to use the gothic, argues in his preface to *Edgar Huntly* (1799), "the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe" (3). "Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras" might be the materials usually employed in this genre, Brown continues, but the "incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology" (3). To be sure, some authors, such as Isaac Mitchell in *The Asylum; or, Alonso and Melissa* (1811), imported castles to America, but most American authors transformed and hence dislocated British models of the gothic. Combined with other literary forms and adapted to native themes, the American gothic consists of a less coherent set of conventions. Its more flexible form challenges the critically unified gothic genre and demands a reassessment of the gothic's parameters. As a result, a definition of the American gothic depends less on the particular set of conventions it establishes than on those it disrupts. Any attempt to define it without showing how the terms "American" and "gothic" complicate and critique each other curtails the challenge to both terms.\(^4\)

Even the British gothic, against which the American gothic is defined, has proven oddly elusive. From early works such as Edith Birkhead's *The Tide of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* (1921), to more recent studies such as Eve Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), an effort to demarcate the conventions of this genre has been at the heart of criticism of the gothic.\(^3\) The debate between Robert Hume and Robert Platzner in *PMLA* highlights the critical need to define the "essence" of the gothic and the difficulty of doing so. While the two disagree on the central traits, they are "agreed that the 'generic character' of the Gothic novel is hard to deal with" (Hume and Platzner 1971:268). Despite its formulaic and conventional nature, despite its easily listed elements and effects—haunted houses, evil villains, ghosts, gloomy landscapes, madness, terror, suspense, horror—the gothic's parameters and "essence" remain unclear. While easy classification seems to imply a definitional stability, the gothic genre is extremely mutable. Cobbled together of many different forms and obsessed with transgressing boundaries, it represents itself not as stable but as generically impure. As Maggie Kilgour writes, "one of the factors that makes the gothic so shadowy and nebulous a genre, as difficult to define as any gothic ghost, is that it cannot be seen in abstraction from the other literary forms from whose gravels it arises . . . . The form is thus itself a Frankenstein's monster, assembled out of the bits and pieces of the past" (3–4).\(^4\)

Though the gothic foregrounds its generic instability, critics still insist on categorizing it. The tendency toward "generic essentializing" in criticism on the gothic has to do with where this genre ranks in the canon's hierarchy. The drive to order and identify the gothic stems less from a critical desire to discover its particular essence than from a need to differentiate it from other, "higher" literary forms. As Jacques Derrida suggests in his essay "The Law of Genre," the critical desire for generic classification and clarity signals a fear of contagion: the law of genre depends upon the principle of impurity. Categorical generic distinctions aim to ensure the purity of certain individual works or the stature of related genres. Associated with the hackneyed, the feminine, and the popular, the gothic lacks respectability and hence must be quarantined from other literary forms.\(^6\) Elizabeth Napier, for instance, would "delimit the genre with greater strictness," arguing that it is essential to make such distinctions in the case of the Gothic because of its peculiar likeness to many of the more searching works that it in part inspired. The Gothic does, in fact, exhibit many of the procedures of fragmentation and disjunction that the romantics . . . would elevate to art, but they seldom at this early stage lead to the profound realizations about human consciousness that some critics have asserted that they do. It is with this systematic failure that the present study is concerned. (xiii; 7)

Seeing the gothic as a systematic failure and arguing that it is a cruder anticipation of Romanticism and hence easily distinguishable from it, Napier polices the difference between the two forms. Ironically, the likeness between the gothic and the romantic necessitates that the gothic's boundaries be located and limited. Whether establishing a distinction between
is restored to the darkness of American literature, the gothic reappears as a viable category. In Playing in the Dark (1992), Toni Morrison not only insists upon restoring race to the blackness of American literature, but also reconstructs the American literary canon in terms of the gothic romance. Remarking on "how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is," Morrison argues that one of the words we have for this haunting is gothic (35, 36). Looking at disturbances within the American romance, Morrison reveals how race haunts American literature. Once specified in historical rather than symbolic terms, darkness emblematizes the gothic's disruptive potential instead of replacing the term as a more palatable modifier.

By resurrecting the gothic as a critical term in American literary studies, Gothic America contributes to the destabilization of traditional readings of the American literary canon, defamiliarizing readings that the romance has ensconced. By insisting on the gothic's intimate relation to the romance, this book views American literature as infiltrated by the popular, the disturbing, and the hauntings of history. Embracing the gothic's generic instability, this study examines how the gothic seeps into other genres and appears in unlikely places. It recognizes that American literature's most cherished children's author, Louisa May Alcott, wrote sensation stories; that one of America's earliest literary critics, John Neal, theorized an uniquely American literature based on the gothic's emotive effects; that gothic moments occur in texts ranging from St. John de Crèvecoeur's Enlightenment fable, Letters from an American Farmer, to the realist texts of the slave narrative. It also shows how the gothic infiltrates and informs the canon of American literature: male and female, high and low, supernatural stories and actual histories. Gothic America is not genre criticism; rather, it is an exploration of how genre enables and constrains critical readings and canon formation. In response to the question "How do you define gothic?" this study asks other questions: Whose interests and what readings are served by particular definitions of the American gothic? How are traditional readings of American literature unsettled by allowing the gothic to reappear as a viable, if not easily definable, literary category?

Historicizing the American Gothic

While the English Gothic had dealt with physical terror and social horror, the American Gothic would concentrate on mental terror and moral horror.

—Frederick Frank, Introduction to Through the Pale Door

When Cathy Davidson poses the question, "Does America have enough of a history to sustain the Gothic's generic challenge to history, its rewriting and unwriting of history?" she exposes the American gothic's problematic status: it is an historical mode operating in what appears to be an historical vacuum (231). The gothic's connection to American history is difficult to identify precisely because of the national and critical myths that America and its literature have no history. As exemplified in Frederick Frank's assessment, views of the American gothic rely upon the traditional misreading of American literature as representing, in Richard Poirier's term, "a world elsewhere." Through critical readings of the romance as otherworldly, American literature's exceptionality came to be located in its ahistoricism. As Nina Baym points out, "[m]ost specialists in American literature have accepted the idea that in the absence of history (or a sense of history) as well as a social field, our literature has consistently taken an ahistorical, mythical shape for which the term 'romance' is formally and historically appropriate" (1984:427). Despite the significant body of criticism that situates the British gothic within its cultural context, critics of the American gothic continue to resist historical readings. If the British gothic is read in social terms, the American gothic is viewed within psychological and ideological rubrics. Because of America's seeming lack of history and its Puritan heritage, the American gothic, it has been argued, takes a turn inward, away from society and toward the psyche and the hidden blackness of the American soul. As Joseph Bodziack asserts, "the American gothic replaced the social struggle of the European with a Manichean struggle between the moral forces of personal and communal order and the howling wilderness of chaos and moral depravity" (33). Leslie Fiedler, the first critic to discuss the American gothic's peculiarity and to recognize its social impulse, sees the American gothic as "a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption" (160). For Fiedler, as for many others, the American gothic remains first and foremost an expression of psychological states.

Cathy Davidson and Lawrence Buell are two notable exceptions to this rule. Both argue that the American gothic has a social referent: Davidson sees the early American gothic as a critique of individualism and Buell notes in his study of the "provincial gothic" the "potential inherent in gothic, from the start, to give this irrationalist vision a social ground" (352). Moreover, Karen Halttunan's work on how the "cult of horror" emerged during the late eighteenth century in America and how nineteenth-century gothic literature illuminates redefinitions of pain provides historical frameworks in
which to view the development of the American gothic and suggests that it responded to and reinforced certain historical movements. Haltunen's historicizing of the American gothic also reflects a movement toward reading the American gothic in social, not psychological, terms.

Arguing that America does have enough history to sustain the gothic's challenge, this study situates the American gothic within specific sites of historical haunting, most notably slavery. American gothic literature criticizes America's national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality. Showing how these contradictions contest and constitute national identity even as they are denied, the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it.

Throughout this study, I use the term "abject" to signify these historical horrors. The nation's narratives—its foundational fictions and self-mythologizations—are created through a process of displacement: their coherence depends on exclusion. By repressing what these narratives repress, the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America's self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity. However, while the gothic reveals what haunts the nation's narratives, it can also work to coalesce those narratives. Like the abject, the gothic serves as the ghost that both helps to run the machine of national identity and disrupts it. The gothic can strengthen as well as critique an idealized national identity.

Arguing that the American gothic exposes the cultural contradictions of national myth, this study attends to the specific effects of this unveiling rather than make essentializing claims about it. Although the gothic is not the only form that articulates abjection, it serves as a primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature. Many texts that are not predominantly gothic use gothic effects at key moments to register cultural contradictions. Further, the critical history of the gothic as it is constructed within American literature makes it particularly salient for exposing the alignment of America's literary histories with the nation's idealized myths. This study, then, is concerned with how the gothic challenges the critical narratives of American literary history and with how it unsettles the nation's cultural identity.

While each chapter takes up a specific site of cultural contradiction—the intrusion of slavery into the Enlightenment narrative or the pastoral set-

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**Notes**


2. The American gothic's challenge to the truisms of American identity as well as to the coherence of gothic conventions explains its critical neglect. Only three book-length studies have been published on the American gothic since Leslie Fiedler's groundbreaking work, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960): Irving Malin's *New American Gothic* (1962), a psychological reading of nineteenth-century American gothic; Donald Ringe's *American Gothic: Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1982), a literary history of the gothic in America from Brown to Hawthorne; and Louis Gross's *From Wieland to the Day of the Dead: Redefining the American Gothic* (1989), a critical reassessment of the American gothic as an alternative vision of America. When the American gothic is discussed within general works on the gothic (which occurs infrequently), it is either examined as a derivative of the British gothic or segregated from the tradition altogether. For instance, David Punter writes that the "American Gothic seems to be a refraction of English Gothic in that it can only attempt to transplant the English themes into American soil" (*The Literature of*
Terror, 212). Even Eugenia DeLamotte, who does a fine job of examining the American gothic in relation to the broader gothic tradition (Perils of the Night), finds it necessary to distinguish the American gothic from the gothic's classic models by invoking a notion of primary, secondary, and tertiary gothic. Whether the American gothic is subsumed into the British, excised from the tradition, or relegated to a subsidiary role, the British paradigm remains securely in place. By marginalizing the American gothic, both American and gothic studies limit its challenge to critical consensus.


4. See also Jay Clayton's "Pure Poetry/Impure Fiction" in Romantic Vision and the Novel for a discussion of the "genre's theoretical preoccupation with impurity" (51).

5. This is Francis Hart's term; see his "Limits of the Gothic: The Scottish Example" and Frederick Garber's "Meaning and Mode in Gothic Fiction" for excellent discussions of how the gothic gets defined in essentialist terms. Both argue that the gothic, like all genres, needs to be historicized and its diversity recognized. In Kinds of Literature, Alastair Fowler argues that all genres, not just the gothic, become transmuted; hence, instead of creating essentialized definitions of genres, we should historically situate them. In "On the Dangers of Defining 'Gothic'" (Art of Darkness, 12-24), Anne Williams suggests that the definition of the gothic is so troubling precisely because it "challenges almost everything we thought we knew about genre as a critical concept" (15).

6. As Morris Dickstein writes, "gothic novels...are among the bastard children of literature" ("Popular Fiction and Critical Values," 60). Eve Sedgwick also points to the "unrespectable" nature of studying the gothic when she argues that she wants to "make it easier for the reader of respectable nineteenth-century novels to write 'Gothic' in the margin next to certain especially interesting passages" (The Coherence of Gothic Conventions, 4). David Reynolds's use of gothic metaphors to demonize the popular ("the monster of popular culture" [567]) in his study Beneath the American Renaissance reveals how the gothic and the popular are often conflated.

7. See Robert Hume, "Gothic versus Romantic," and James Keech, "The Survival of the Gothic Response," for further examples of the critical preoccupation with differentiating the romantic from the gothic. Anne Williams counters the critical premise that the two forms are distinct, arguing that "'Gothic' and 'Romantic' are not two but one" (Art of Darkness, 1).

8. For example, Harper's magazine (July 1857) uses the term "romance" to describe the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe (Baym 1984:437). See Baym's "Concepts of the Romance in Hawthorne's America" for a critique of Chase's deployment of the term "romance." See also John McWilliams's "The Rationale for 'The American Romance'" for an overview of the romance's reign in American critical discourse.


10. David Puner was one of the first critics to call for the gothic to be historicized. Others who argue that the gothic should be read in social terms include Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror; William Patrick Day, In the Circles of Fear and Desire; Eugenia DeLamotte, Perils of the Night; Joseph Gribisi, Terrors of Uncertainty; Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion; Ronald Paulson, "Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution"; and Martin Tropp, Images of Fear. Many of these studies outline the gothic's historical dimensions in broad strokes, but localized and sustained readings of the gothic's cultural engagements are still needed.

11. See also Martha Banta's "The Ghostly Gothic of Wharton's Everyday World" for a reading of Wharton's ghost stories within the cultural context of ethnography.

12. My understanding of the abject has been informed by Julia Kristeva's discussion in Powers of Horror. While Kristeva's concept of the abject stresses the psychosymbolic economy, a "horror of being," it is also useful for a sociohistorical understanding of horror.

13. As I was completing this project, two studies appeared that complement my reading of the gothic in relation to national narratives: Priscilla Wald's Constituting Americans (1995) and Russ Castronovo's Fathering the Nation (1995). Both works discuss how the national narrative is unsettled by "untold stories" (Wald 4) or "bastard histories" (Castronovo 4); both focus on narrative disruptions and incoherence as well as on how race and slavery serve as crucial contradictions in the nation's official narratives.