Corinna Lenhardt

SAVAGE
HORRORS

The Intrinsic Raciality
of the American Gothic

From:

The American Gothic novel has been deeply shaped by issues of race and raciality from its origins in British Romanticism to the American Gothic novel in the twenty-first century. Savage Horrors delineates an intrinsic raciality that is discursively sedimented in the Gothic's uniquely binary structure. Corinna Lenhardt uncovers the destructive and lasting impact of the Gothic's anti-Black racism on the cultural discourses in the United States. At the same time, Savage Horrors traces the unflinching Black resistance back to the Gothic's intrinsic raciality. The African American Gothic, however, does not originate there but in the Black Atlantic – roughly a decade before the first Gothic novel was ever written on American soil.

Corinna Lenhardt, born 1982, received her PhD in American studies from Universität Münster, Germany. Her research and teaching interests include African American and ethnic studies, race, gender, and popular culture.

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Introduction

> "You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be." (Toni Morrison, A Mercy 155)

In his 1992 text-based painting *Study for Frankenstein #1*,[1] African American artist Glenn Ligon combined into one artwork, measuring 30 1/8 x 20 in., the complex, interwoven history of race and racialization[2] in the Gothic writing tradition, past and present, European and North American, Black and white. The present study requires roughly 300 pages to do the same. *Study for Frankenstein #1* consists of one sentence from Mary Shelly's world-famous 1818 Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, which is repeated four times. The stenciled black letters on white canvas become increasingly blurry until they cease to be legible, creating a thick black smear: "Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again." Ligon is well-known for frequently drawing from the writings of African American authors, leaders, and activists,[3] and he has quoted a few texts by white authors

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1 The title of the painting is intentionally misleading. It implies that this version is not only a study and an incomplete version of Ligon's "Frankenstein" but also that this is the first in a series of studies. However, expanding on the notion of a Frankensteinian monster as a loose assembly of parts, Ligon has composed numerous versions of this painting, differing mainly in size and line breaks, under the exact same title (*Study for Frankenstein #1*). I am referring to the 30 1/8 x 22 in. version of the painting, which is currently owned by the Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri.

2 When speaking of "race," I want to evoke "the now wide understanding that race is an arbitrary social construct, a shifting and contradictory category that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed, and that is far from an 'innate' or 'natural' biological fact" (Henry and Tator 118). My understanding of "racialization" is based on Robert Miles' conceptualization of the term as "a process of categorization, a representational process of defining an Other (usually, but not exclusively) somatically" (75). In line with Didier Fassin, I believe that racialization conceptualizes "how to do races with bodies" (421).

3 His text-based paintings include quotes from Zora Neal Hurston ("I feel the most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background"), Ralph Ellison ("I am an invisible man"), James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Richard Pryor.

that are explicitly concerned with race and racism (e.g., Jean Genet's 1959 play *The Blacks* and Richard Dyer's 1988 watershed essay "White"). At first glance, *Study for Frankenstein #1* "seems to be his only use of a text by a white author that does not manifestly address racial themes" (Young 221). Yet, by choosing *Frankenstein*, Ligon "draws Shelly into the orbit of these authors, white and black, who write explicitly about race" (ibid.), and, in doing so, he uncovers the thematic undercurrents of race and racialization generally and of Blackness more specifically at the heart of the iconic Gothic novel.

Figure 1 Study for Frankenstein #1

Glenn Ligon, *Study for Frankenstein #1*. 1992. Oil stick and gesso on canvas, 30 1/8 x 22 in. Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A.

Frankenstein's monster has been described and discussed by numerous scholars as a heavily racialized character, most comprehensively in Elizabeth Young's

book-length study *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor.* Although yellow-skinned, black-haired, and black-lipped in Shelly's novel, the monster "was painted blue in nineteenth-century stage incarnations, and tinted green in twentieth-century cinematic ones, [but] the monster's color nonetheless signifies symbolically, on the domestic American scene, as black" (Young 5). The long cultural afterlife of Frankenstein's monster in the United States can thus be understood as one instantiation of what Toni Morrison referred to as "American Africanism," the discursively fabricated "brew of darkness" and of "rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" (*Playing* 44). *Study for Frankenstein #1* forcefully evokes this "brew of darkness" and dyes Frankenstein B/black. That is, Frankenstein's monstrosity is rendered a matter of racial Blackness by the extensive use of a black-colored oil stick. The letters discursively blend racial Blackness and black color-coding (B/blackness)[4], becoming increasingly smudged and difficult to contain in the stencils' faintly visible outlines, until, reflecting the ending of *Frankenstein*, both the text and the monster are "lost in darkness" (Shelly 324) and in impenetrable B/blackness. Thus, Ligon renders visible both the racialized discourse out of which *Frankenstein* (the novel and the icon) was created and the racialization that *Frankenstein* has initiated (and continues to initiate) itself.

By making race and racialization visible in the discursive materiality of Shelly's novel, Ligon's (re-)creation of Frankenstein's monster, as an instantiation of anti-Black racial discourse, integrates the Gothic novel into the longstanding history of discursive construction, visually (including literarily) depicting Black men as monstrous threats that must be policed, battled, overcome, and punished (beaten, incarcerated, tortured, lynched) by white men. Adopting a broad perspective, he engages with the history of anti-Black racism, by showing how the white discursive gaze creates "*the Nigger* [as] possessing only the nature of a savage *thing*, driven almost solely by his animal intuitions and lust for violence," until the Black man is completely stripped of the "sociological, historical, or economic causes for his behavior" (Curry 197, original emphasis). That Ligon created his version of a visibly B/blackened Frankenstein in 1992, the year of the Rodney King riots in Los

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4   In my study, I refer to people of African descent as "Black" and "African American." However, "African American" implies residence in the U.S., while "Black" functions as an umbrella term for all individuals who are part of the Black Atlantic and African diaspora. Especially in the context of early Black writing and slave narratives, the term "Black" helps capture the fluidity and movement of Black identities and texts throughout the Black Atlantic. The capitalization of "Black" is not a political decision but a pragmatic one; in a study dealing with Gothic fiction, a clear differentiation between references to the color black and Black peoples ensures comprehension.

Angeles,[5] implies both the actuality and continuity of the racist discourse of the Frankensteinian Black male as a "savage *thing*" (Curry 197).

Yet, Ligon's Frankenstein does more than visualize white discursive violence. Located narratively on the brink of the monster's rebellion against his creator, the painting's blackness must also be read as conquering the white canvas, representing the survival and triumph of B/blackness over whiteness and the normative order of clear-cut and white-framed discursive stencils. Thus, Ligon's painting achieves to voice what Shelly's monster cannot: its "own sensations in [its] own mode." This mode consists chiefly of Shelly's (racialized) Frankenstein as a basis on which political dimension and actuality can be balanced with a unique aesthetic in a powerful painting. Joining the large group of writers, filmmakers, artists, and musicians who have adapted and/or worked with Frankensteinian material, Ligon created a new, discourse-strategic version of the monster that self-reflexively and critically highlights and functionalizes its history of racialization and anti-Black racism as part of the visual legacy of the Gothic icon. Once we have encountered Ligon's *Study for Frankenstein #1* and connected it to the iconic Gothic novel, we can no longer dismiss the monster's discursively inscribed Blackness. In other words, we cannot think of *Frankenstein* outside its racialized box. In this respect, Ligon has created a contemporary African American portrait of Frankenstein, by "studying" its racialized (and racializing) textual origins in nineteenth-century British Gothic fiction.

My interpretation of Ligon's painting sheds light on one important aspect of his artwork: his quotation and deconstructive reworking of a Gothic icon to depict the hateful racialized discourse underlying the construction of the monstrous Black male body. Other possible contexts, such as Ligon's engagement with homosexuality and homophobia (Young 225) and the discussion on the possibilities and limitations of what he calls a "post-black" aesthetic (Golden 14), have been excluded from my argument. I do, however, argue that highlighting Ligon's creative engagement with the Gothic vis-à-vis race and raciality is essential to better understand not only *Study for Frankenstein #1* but also the Gothic. Indeed, the underlying strategy—Ligon's complex creative unpacking and deconstructive reworking of the Gothic icon's racialization—is archetypal of a branch of literature and art we call "African American Gothic" and what we tend to consider under the umbrella notion of "the American Gothic."

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5   Triggered by the legal acquittal of four officers of the Los Angeles Police Department for usage of excessive force in the arrest and beating of Rodney King, widespread violent unrest began on April 29, 1992 in South Central Los Angeles, a region with a majority population of African American and Hispanic peoples. The Rodney King case received national media coverage, primarily because the excessive violence of the police force was videotaped by a witness.

In this study, I inquire into and extensively survey the relation of the American Gothic—both White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) and African American in origin—to race and raciality, from its origins in eighteenth-century Britain to the American Gothic novel in the twenty-first century. As many African American artists and writers, such as Toni Morrison, Colson Whitehead, and Glenn Ligon, have repeatedly and successfully drawn attention to the problematic relation of the (American) Gothic to race and raciality, my study is far from the first to adopt a critical perspective on this relation.[6] However, it differs significantly from preceding studies in terms of scope and consequences. By focusing on race and raciality in a range of Gothic texts and socio-cultural contexts, I delineate the intrinsic raciality that is discursively sedimented and conventionally encoded in the Gothic's uniquely binary structure. This finding remarkably contrasts the traditional approach to race in Gothic fiction, which is summarized by Bienstock Anolik and Howard as

> [an] examin[ation of] texts in which Gothic fear is relocated onto the figure of the racial and social Other, the Other who replaces the supernatural ghost or grotesque monster as the code for mystery and danger, becoming, ultimately, as horrifying, threatening and unknowable as the typical Gothic manifestation. (2)

I argue that there is no typical Gothic manifestation that is not already racialized or racializing. Whether a ghost, monster, or undefined lurking presence, the entities that are employed to create Gothic atmospheres and hauntings in fiction are intrinsically connected to discursive racialization. Additionally, based on my discussion of the earliest Gothic texts, I create two divisions of racialization: the Gothic other and the Gothicized Black abject. Arguing that we must account for a crucial discursive shift from one type of Gothicized savagery to the other—that is, from the Native American Savage Villain to the Africanist Savage Villain as the thingified Black abject—I employ Sabine Broeck's notion of white abjectorship to discuss the Gothic. The abject Gothicized Black presence in WASP American Gothic literature must be understood as having a destructive and lasting impact on

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6   Works that focus on the Gothic's discursive strategies of racial othering include Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, which attributes the preference of Gothic authors for monstrous otherness to race, class, gender, and sexuality; Howard L. Malchow's *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, which explores racialized Gothic tropes in the context of European nationalism and imperialism; Kathleen Brogan's *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*; Edward H. Jacobs' *Accidental Migrations: An Archaeology of Gothic Discourse*; Dani Cavallaro's *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear*; Andrew Smith, William Hughes, and Jonathan Taylor's *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of the Genre*; and Ruth Bienstock Anolik's *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination* and *Demons of the Body and Mind: Essays on Disability in Gothic Literature*.

the cultural discourse in the United States. Yet, as Ligon's *Study for Frankenstein #1* makes abundantly clear, this is only one aspect of the Gothic.

The Gothic, I argue, must be understood as an ultra-adaptable, discursively active writing strategy whose racialized (and racializing) quality can also be employed creatively and critically by historically and culturally marginalized groups and individuals. More precisely, I claim that consistent and thorough inclusion and visualization of race and raciality are required in discussions of (American) Gothic texts—and the "brew of darkness" that Ligon draws upon and carves into the white (intertextual) background—to fully understand the potentials and limitations of one of the most consistently popular types of fiction (and art). A focus on race and raciality, which arguably predetermine and predefine other categories of (external and self-)identification, such as gender and class, requires rethinking of the (American) Gothic as the appropriate genre for the excluded, marginalized, and silenced. However, such a focus all too often entails including, centering upon, and voicing only the needs and stories of WASP protagonists that are presumed to be underprivileged.[7] In other words, a substantive working definition of the (American) Gothic must include the subversive, and even deconstructive, strategies of an artist such as Glenn Ligon, who strategically uses the Gothic as a reference and point of departure to claim his voice in the art scene, political discourse, and hybrid historiography of the United States.

It is for this purpose that I introduce the notion of the "Gotheme." "Gotheme" is a neologism loosely based on Roland Barthes's semiological notion of "myth" and is directly derived from Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of "mythemes" (Lévi-Strauss 206ff.). It describes an irreducible, unchanging unit of signification that always consists of a dichotomy, of which the destructive element is foregrounded against the foil of its only potentially corrective counterpart. In my study, the concept of

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7   The American Gothic in scholarship is commonly understood as the internalized and psychologically sophisticated evolution of its generic British parent, which is defined solely by its settings and props. The American Gothic is thought to have translated the British Gothic's weariness "of Enlightenment values" (Sage 8) and critical inversion of rationality (see Morrow and McGrath xiii) to meet the needs of the North American readership. On American soil, and thus in a culture of self-proclaimed reason and rational realism, adapted conventions of the Gothic flourished, as Leslie Fiedler, Teresa A. Goddu, Alan Lloyd-Smith, and others have argued extensively, because the American myth does not reward everyone who pursues happiness and success with riches. To depict the terror-inspiring underside of the American Dream—the racism, sexism, and capitalism that keeps anyone who does not fulfill the ideal (WASP) man, who achieves success with hard work and self-reliance, American writers have turned to the Gothic. This apparent need for adaptation and re-mythologization also means that the American Gothic is both perceived as distinct from the British Gothic—and thus no longer understood as a literature-specific concept or literary genre—and as being open to other forms of cultural production, including the visual arts. In Part I of my study, I will critically engage this perspective on the (American) Gothic.

the Gotheme replaces the so-called "laundry list definitions" of the Gothic, which synchronically and diachronically describe the stereotypical props, settings, and characters (e.g., items as diverse as a haunted castle, the pitch-black interior of a spaceship, trap doors, an evil monk, Frankenstein, Edward Cullen, an innocent maiden, and Marilyn Manson) as they appear in texts that are deemed "Gothic." Similarly, Gothemes describe recurring plots, scenes, props, character types, and locales at the core of ultra-adaptable Gothic imagery, as dichotomies of contrasting elements; the horror of being incarcerated needs the foil of freedom, chaos needs harmony, and the dark villain needs a fair hero. It is in this binary construction of the Gothic that its explosive potential lies: Gothemes are sedimented discursive patterns as well as interpellated messages that need to be "appropriated" (Barthes 119), thus allowing the discourse to be changed. I will not employ (or defend) a structuralist approach to literature. Rather, my understanding of the specifically structural conventionality of Gothic novels implies careful dissection of repetitive and constantly replicating structural elements.

This study will closely analyze the (re-)iteration[8] of a central Gotheme and its implications, which are unique to American culture: the Savage Villain/Civil Hero (SV/CH) Gotheme. It originates in the early British Gothic, in which the essential gulf between hero and villain is composed of colonialist imagery with visual racial underpinnings;[9] against the hero's highlighted whiteness and chivalrous nature, the villain stands out as "the terrible and fearsome 'other' who symbolizes the dark self of the colonizer and assures him of his own moral integrity and identity" (Althans 69). The reader of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British Gothic fiction expected (and continues to expect) a violent clash between two larger-than-life characters and between civil values and savage anarchy. Gothic texts

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8   The terms "iteration" and "reiteration" are derived from Jacques Derrida's notion of "iterability." In his essay "Signature Event Context," iterability is introduced in the context of a linguistic sign that has to be repeatable in order for us to recognize it as such, but every repetition is different. Judith Butler synthesizes Derrida's concept with Foucault's concept of discourse and her notion of performance, arguing that we act through the utterances we make, not due to the intention or will of an individual speaker but the effect of sedimentary historic conventions and meanings (discourses), which are (unintentionally) quoted and repeated in every act of speech. This ongoing practice of quotation and reiteration is open to resistance, resignification, and change. By consciously altering the quoted discourse, that is, by consciously influencing the process of reiteration, the subject can leave its passively quoting position and become a discourse-altering agent. For clarity's sake, I distinguish between "iteration," intentional or unintentional quotation of a discourse (e.g., in Gothemes) in a new context, without an effort to critically alter it, and "reiteration," or intentional quotation of a discourse (e.g., in Gothemes) in a new context that alters the discourse (see also Chapter 2).

9   This writing strategy has been discussed in relation to the notion of "Imperial Gothic." Patrick Brantlinger suggests confining the Imperial Gothic to the period between 1880 and 1914, which roughly represents the heyday of the British Empire.

written during this time use an interesting device: The climactic moment in which the villain loses both his morality and the fear of God is marked by a change in the vocabulary used to describe the villain. As the angry, loathsome man betrays his humanity, his brow darkens, his eyes blacken, and his skin turns deep red, until he resembles a "savage, inhuman monster" (Walpole, *Castle* 108; see also Walpole, *Castle* 22, 94).

Early North American writers, most famously Charles Brockden Brown in the first fully-fledged American Gothic novel *Edgar Huntly; or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), imported the Gothic mainly from England, keeping the motif of savagery to depict the loss of civilized and pious human qualities within the Gothic villain. However, instead of just acting and looking *like* a savage, due to his uncivil immorality and blasphemy, the villain was blended with eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America's personification of absolute wilderness: the ignoble "Indian" savage. The motif rose in popularity, due in part to the ongoing success of the now unique American Gothic, and the evil or ignoble savage was increasingly adapted and Gothicized, until it encompassed African and African American peoples as well, producing a perfectly horrid image of darkness: the Africanist Savage Villain.[10] This shift from one type of Gothicized savagery to another must be understood as a monumental shift from Gothic otherness to the Gothicized Black abject. Sabine Broeck explained the discursive process of white abjectorship in this ontological repositioning of the Black body as a savage thing:

> To come into being, the European subject needed its underside, as it were: the crucially integral but invisible part of the human has been his/her *abject*, created in the European mind by way of racialized thingification: the African enslaved, an unhumaned species tied by property rights to the emerging subject so tightly that they could—structurally speaking—never occupy the position of the dialectical Heglian object as other, has thus remained therefore outside the dynamics of the human. ("Legacies" 118, emphasis in the original)

The alteration of the Gotheme in early American Gothic writing doubtlessly led to the creation of many thrilling texts for a fast-growing and almost exclusively WASP readership. While the white Civil Hero offers room for identification and condensed enactment of the contemporaneous ideology of WASP Americanness, the semantic extension of the Savage Villain has been narrowed so far as to exclude the entire WASP readership; to WASP Americans, villainous savagery is entertaining because it is not only "easily avoidable" (Balchin 254) but also racially and ontologically impossible. As I will show in great detail, a stereotypical motif as successful

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10   The first part of the concept, "Africanist," goes back to Toni Morrison's watershed exposure of the "Africanist presence" in the fiction of seminal white American writers, as well as in American culture (Morrison, *Playing* 6). For more on this, see Chapter 4.

and problematic as the SV/CH Gotheme is open to criticism, creative rewriting, revision, and deconstruction by those it denigrates as being evil and thingified savages.

To undertake such a vast, interdisciplinary project, I mainly offer a starting point for better comprehension of the Gothic's (often highly problematic) relation to race and racialization, by carefully dissecting the WASP American Gothic tradition before delineating the Black/African American Gothic. My focus on the African American Gothic must not be mistaken as only a pragmatic choice; rather, as I describe in detail, the African American Gothic tradition not only offers the opportunity to trace the unique Gothic tradition born in 1789 in the Black Atlantic, outside of the WASP American context, but it also consists of a stream of literature that actively, strategically, and continuously reacts to the WASP American Gothic tradition from the 1830s onward. Understanding that the rethinking of the (American) Gothic has direct impacts on the core concerns of Gothic Studies and American Studies (especially on current debates following the intervention of Afro-Pessimism[11]), I carefully consider the complexity (i.e., the historical and cultural diversity) of the concept(s) it involves.

To make sense of the contemporary cultural plurality and generic hybridity of the (American) Gothic and to critically dissect the notions of the Gothic and American Gothic, this study closely reads WASP and African American Gothic novels, written by male and female American authors, from the interconnected perspectives of New Historicism, Critical Race Theory, and Gender Studies. Special attention is paid to the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts that formed the texts under scrutiny, while the state and prospects of the U.S. literary market and its strategies for acquiring an audience/customers are questioned. Given my special interest in the (American) Gothic's relation to race and raciality, I evaluate the texts' constructions of race and raciality in particular, and, given the Gothic's highly gendered binaries (e.g., the male hero/villain and the damsel in distress), I trace its intersection with gender.

The notion of "text" underlying this study is that which is applied in poststructuralist American Studies, thus making it inclusive and open to the utmost extent. Derived from the semiological approach of Roland Barthes, "text" is a cultural praxis and is therefore not limited to literary works or even to written text. Since American culture can be understood as "those stories that Americans tell one another in order to make sense of their lives" (Mechling 4), text becomes the medium,

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11   I use the uppercase and hyphenated term "Afro-Pessimism" to differentiate between the critical intervention of Afro-Pessimists, writing from the perspective of Black Studies, such as Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Frank B. Wilderson III, and Jared Sexton, and the afropessimist approach to the postcolonial state and potential of the African continent, which was especially prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s.

ritual, and spatial vehicle for storytelling. Application of this open, holistic notion of text places strong emphasis on the interconnectedness and intertextuality of the texts and the stories they tell. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's key differentiation between monologic and dialogic works of literature, poststructuralist Julia Kristeva (*Desire*) emphasizes texts' intertextuality, which replaces traditional notions of intersubjectivity, thus relocating meaning from the author-produced text to the reader who is actively involved, not only with the text in question but also with the complex network of texts invoked in reading and writing processes. Although the implications of intertextuality are acknowledged, this study is limited to the discussion and comparison of intertexts and literary traditions explicitly suggested by the examined texts.

Despite its roughly sketched, radically open notion of "text," the main focus of this study is on a very narrow selection of literary texts: published print novels. This limitation might be surprising, but it is applied due to the unique character of the subject under study. The (American) Gothic has its origins in literature, specifically the English novel, and only over the course of the Gothic novel's success story have its leitmotifs evolved into the transmedial and transcultural conventional structures, motifs, and tropes with which we associate it today. I trace and analyze the Gothic's historical development and construct a working definition of the (American) Gothic to be examined, through the close reading and analysis of contemporary WASP American and African American Gothic novels. It is my hope that future research will take the next step and transfer this new notion of the literary American Gothic to contemporary American film, digital media, and so on, as well as to the many other ethnic variations of the contemporary American Gothic.[12]

I have divided this study into three parts, each of which has been further subdivided into various chapters. "Part I: The Gothic and the Savage Villain/Civil Hero Gotheme" establishes a working definition of the Gothic and, by tracing the fixation on race and racial otherness in early British Gothic traditions, situates race and raciality as a key convention of the Gothic. More specifically, Chapter 2, "What Is the Gothic?", analyzes the notion of the Gothic both diachronically (i.e., etymologically and with regard to its conceptual history) and synchronically (i.e., with regard to the multitude of explanations and definitions prevalent in the field of Gothic Studies today). Engaging with the heated debate surrounding the definition of the Gothic means entering and making sense of a rapidly growing field of study that all too often dwells on a difficult-to-decipher, overly ornate style and/or which dismisses not only the need for but also the possibility of defining its subject. As one

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12   In my own research, I have applied this theoretical framework to contemporary American Indian Gothic fiction and film as well as to the Gothic long poems of Asian–Canadian author Larissa Lai (see Lenhardt's articles "Wendigos," "Washington's Troops," and "As Bones").

is unable to comprehend the Gothic in terms of a "large, irregularly shaped figure" (Williams 23) and a "Frankensteinian process" that results in a "textual monster" (Kilgour 4), I develop a new discourse-strategic working definition of the Gothic that aligns with and extends recent scholars' work to renegotiate the (American) Gothic from a postcolonial perspective.[13] I then narrow down the vast continuum of dichotomic structures and motifs used in Gothic writing strategies to the key SV/CH Gotheme, thereby integrating it into my working definition.

Chapter 3, "British Origins of the Savage Villain/Civil Hero Gotheme," delineates the origins of the racialized and racializing Gotheme in early British Gothic literature. By examining classic early British Gothic literature (including but not limited to *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Monk*, and *Melmoth the Wanderer*), I link the early Gothic's fascination by juxtaposing racially overdrawn characters, in terms of either savagery or civilization, to two contradictory versions of the myth of the "savage" Goths. The early Gothic seems to originate in hierarchically and exclusionarily structured discourses of race, belonging, and nationality. The staging of dichotomous characters in racialized terms, of either their villainous savagery or their heroic, civil virtues, creates a visibly marked and genuinely politically active national narrative produced by a young British nation, deeming itself to be under multilateral attack. I conclude Part I by tracing how the success of nationalistically inspired racial stereotypes, especially the juxtaposition of the racialized savage villain and the civil hero on British soil, triggered the migration of the SV/CH Gotheme across the Atlantic. Here, the SV/CH Gotheme will be utilized within another national narrative that opposes the British Gothic endeavor.

In "Part II: The Savage Villain/Civil Hero Gotheme: WASP American Origins and Iterations," the process of migration, adaptation, and translation of the early British Gothic's intrinsic raciality (within the SV/CH Gotheme) in WASP American literature is examined. The driving force of this part of the study is a hypothesis derived from my analysis of early British Gothic texts: If the SV/CH Gotheme, and thus raciality, is a conventional constant in past and present American Gothic novels, then the American Gothic must be understood as intrinsically racialized and racializing. This is a potentially devastating result with far-reaching implications, particularly for current debates in American Studies triggered by the intervention of Afro-Pessimism.

Chapter 4, "Early WASP American Adaptations," provides a basis for a rather pessimistic outlook on nineteenth-century white Gothic literature. This chapter illustrates how the British Gothic's racial other was adapted and how there was a momentous cultural shift from the initial type of Native American Savage Villainy to the Africanist Savage Villain, as the Gothicized Black abject, which swallowed and

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13   See Cavallaro (2002), Theo D'Haen (1995), Edwards (2002), Hogle (2002), Jacobs (2000), Khair (2009), Lee (2009), and Smith et al. (2003).

replaced the Native American other, due to greater political, social, and cultural urgency and actuality. Eventually, WASP American Gothic literature focused solely on the Africanist SV, and the noble savage became the stock stand-in character used to depict the Native American other in WASP American literature.

In Chapter 5, "Contemporary WASP American Iterations," the transition to the contemporary WASP American Gothic is traced and used to analyze the continuous presence of the racialized and racializing SV/CH Gotheme in a number of recent WASP American Gothic novels. To increase the depth of this necessarily selective survey, I provide a close reading of two contemporary mainstream bestsellers that are heavily pervaded with Gothic motifs and, more importantly, climactically constructed around the SV/CH Gotheme: Stephen King's *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (1999) and Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* (2011). Both novels have Gothic undertones and focus on the coming-of-age of a female protagonist who is involuntarily left to her own devices in the North American wilderness. The fully iterated SV/CH Gotheme in these novels, as well as in the broader North American literary landscape, indicates the continuous consistency of conventional early WASP American Gothic writing strategies in WASP American fiction. Discussion of the way in which the continuity of race and racialization in WASP American Gothic texts—specifically, the dehumanized and Gothicized Black abject (i.e., the Africanist Savage Villain)—directly fuels the arguments of Afro-Pessimism and thus concludes this section of the study, thereby motivating my critical engagement with African American literature in the third section. There, I explore whether the racialized WASP American Gothic patterns—and, most importantly, the SV/CH Gotheme—are conventional, and therefore potentially changeable, or if they are essential and intrinsic to the Gothic and, much like the rules of chess, definitive and invariable.

"Part III: 'You say I am wilderness. I am'—Black Origins and African American Reiterations" continues the discussion of the Afro-Pessimistic implications of the previous section and examines the SV/CH Gotheme in Black Atlantic and African American texts from the nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. The underlying premise of the third section is that if African American Gothic texts are intrinsically racialized and racializing and if the central SV/CH Gotheme cannot be reiterated outside the boundaries of race—that is, if intra-discursive emergence of "unthought" is impossible or undesirable—then the core of the Gothic might indeed be race/raciality. Reflecting the structure of the previous chapter, I trace the SV/CH Gotheme in early Black/African American texts, before examining the Gothic in contemporary African American novels.

Chapter 6, "Innovation and Resistance: The SV/CH Gotheme in Black Writing, 1789 to 1861," argues against scholarship that theorizes the African American Gothic as a merely reactive "anti-gothic" (Smethurst 29) type of writing. Instead, I trace a uniquely Black Gothic tradition stemming from Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*. In doing so, I establish an alternative point of origin for the American

Gothic, beyond the cultural and geographic boundaries of WASP-dominated North America and within the Black Atlantic. In subsequent analyses of nineteenth-century and contemporary African American Gothic texts, I delineate the continuous presence of the SV/CH Gotheme in complex reiteration contexts and in terms of discourse-strategic efforts. I also identify the way in which it is strategically utilized, reiterated, and critically (re-)integrated into two writing traditions, self-reflexively and significantly complicating both the Gotheme and the Gothic writing strategies. In particular, Toni Morrison's gloomy recourse to seventeenth-century plantation life in *A Mercy* (2008) and Colson Whitehead's post-apocalyptic zombie wasteland in *Zone One* (2011) are analyzed in depth. These bestselling works coincide in their fictional discussion of Afro-Pessimistic assumptions and Black ontologies from within and vis-à-vis the Gothic writing strategy. In my analysis of Morrison's and Whitehead's creative and reiterative exploitation of the intrinsic raciality of the SV/CH Gotheme, I discuss the possibility of a discursive "unthought," that is, of the Gothic performed outside the conventional discursive boundaries of race and racialization.

Taken together, the three parts of *Savage Horrors: The Intrinsic Raciality of the American Gothic* establish and subsequently answer four consecutive questions:

What is the Gothic, and what is the core of the diverse texts categorized as American Gothic?

Is this core the racialized and racializing SV/CH Gotheme?

If so, how is the SV/CH Gotheme employed in Gothic novels by African American authors, who, according to WASP American Gothic conventions, belong in the racial category of the abject (i.e., the Africanist Savage Villain)?

Is creative and discursive "unthought" possible? In other words, is it possible that future Gothic texts will establish a binary of villainy and heroism, without instantaneously equating villainy with monstrous Blackness (that is, the Gothicized Black abject/the Africanist Savage Villain) and heroism with white civility (which is often directly conflated with white supremacy)?

All four questions reflect the central dilemma of contemporary Gothic scholarship: What do we talk about when we discuss *the Gothic*? Is the old umbrella term still helpful for summarizing the variety of reiterative efforts by non-WASP American writers and artists? Only by seeking to define the Gothic can we describe and analyze the core of all (American) Gothic works and either retain the umbrella term or permanently reject it due to irreconcilable differences. But what if this core also acts as a divisor? What if, at the core of the Gothic, a racialized and racializing structural convention has tainted Gothic texts with racialization, denigration, and white abjectorship since the eighteenth century? What would the "American" in American Gothic signify then?