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Monstrous Bodies of the American Gothic

Disordered bodies preoccupied early British gothic novels: bodies unable to control their appetites or their fear; bodies in pain; bodies undone by emotions, violence and invasive institutions. Similarly, in the United States the first gothic author, Charles Brockden Brown, wrote fitfully plotted novels full of strange and unruly bodies, such as the odd-looking victim-villain Carwin in *Wieland* (1798), the diabolical 'Indian' in *Edgar Huntley* (1799), and the pestilent bodies gripped by yellow fever in *Arthur Mervyn* (1799). Brown wrote for a young nation, rehearsing political ideas in literary fictions so convoluted that their implications could never be determined with any certainty, even as they clarified the main axes of a national preoccupation with racial hierarchy and other forms of somatic classification.

The American Gothic is full of monstrous bodies, terrifying and dangerous and frequently marked by some sort of deformity or injury. The range of monsters in these texts includes 'savages' (as Native Americans were often called), sadistic villains, cunning tyrants, sexual predators, and various kinds of unusual or 'unnatural' bodies, but the gothic genre has also posed difficult questions about monstrosity and its possible meanings. Operating within and against the binary fault lines of normative somatic categorisations in the United States – healthy and sick, white and Black, civilized and primitive, male and female, and, with the emergence of modern sexual categorisation, straight and queer – the American Gothic is a genre that both informs and often critiques our ideas of racial subjectivity and biopolitical hierarchy.

Starting from these observations, this chapter will make two sets of claims. First, it will show how American gothic fiction has always oscillated between more subversive and more conservative forms, producing in the nineteenth and twentieth century instances of gothic literature that stabilize cultural hierarchies as well as instances that trouble or refuse them. Second, it will show how the emergence of Black, Native, Latinx, and Asian American recuperations of the Gothic during the latter half of the twentieth century turned the genre's penchant for representing bodily permeability and

variability into a sign of hopeful instability, pointing to what Juana Maria Rodriguez terms 'a way to conjure and inhabit an alternative world in which other forms of identification and social relations become imaginable'.[1] By surveying the trope of corporeal instability across nineteenth- and twentieth-century gothic narratives, this chapter will situate both progressive and imperial gothic embodiment at the fulcrum of American understandings of race and white supremacy.

First, however, a brief overview of the origins of the American Gothic, as it arose from three broad sources that intermingled with the British gothic novel form in the late eighteenth century: hostile encounters between settler colonialists and Native Americans; Puritan repressions and distrust of the body; and the horror of the enslaved African's plight in American history.[2] All of these cultural roots of the American Gothic are predicated upon rigid and deterministic discourses of the body, especially the racially marked or gendered body.

In order to justify their morally and often legally unjustifiable actions, white settler colonists told themselves that Native Americans were savage, bestial, and possibly cannibalistic. The animalistic Indian is a trope that figures among the very first American gothic novels, such as *Edgar Huntley* by Charles Brockden Brown, which also features the related gothic device of the non-native narrator's 'need' to become like the Indian (i.e., savage, bestial) in order to survive in the wilderness he finds himself in. After the narrator of that novel discovers that a friend of his has been murdered by a Leni-Lenape Indian, he himself then murders five members of this tribe, collapsing the moral difference between them and him. In this way, *Edgar Huntley* is an early instance of how savagery, guilt, and confusion between self and 'other' are themes that haunt American gothic fiction whenever a Native American character appears.

A second important cultural source of American gothic writing is the history of the Puritans and especially the witchcraft trials they conducted in Salem. At the heart of Puritan horror is the strict control they attempted to impose over their bodies, turning repression and contempt for the physical world and bodily existence into a way of life. The gothic themes emanating from this material include religious madness and fanaticism, the persecution of unmarried or independent women, the use of torture to extract signs of guilt or innocence from accused (male or female) witches, and notoriously sadistic forms of punishment: live burnings, slow crushing by heavy stones, and public hangings. Such paranoid surveillance of the body for signs of forbidden desires or identities recurs in American culture and gothic writing throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Finally, the history of the enslaved African on North American soil is a tale of physical dispossession, control, and exploitation that required constant maintenance through ideological sleight-of-hand and physical torture. In reaction to a rising abolition movement in the nineteenth century, this ideological work increasingly relied on pseudo-scientific discourse to justify treating people as less-than-human. This discourse seized upon the darkness of African-descended people's skins but did not make exceptions for enslaved people who were able to pass as 'white'. The irrationality of race-based ideology and discourse, according to Karen and Barbara Fields, operates much like the Puritan concept of witchcraft, producing a belief that 'presents itself to the mind as a vivid truth' even if it is invisible and indeed non-existent.[3]

The American Gothic thus concerns (usually) human bodies and the injuries and constraints they bear, as well as the fears they can incite. Because the body is central also to the categories and hierarchies of American society under a capitalist economy and settler colonialism, the Gothic has inevitably been closely concerned with these issues as well. From the late eighteenth century to the present, monstrous bodies in gothic literature have allowed authors to explore the complexities of identity, power, privilege, safety, and freedom in the United States. Itself very much a baggy monster, the Gothic has not produced any simple patterns or formulas about the cultural work of monstrosity or bodily signification. Roughly speaking the Gothic has always worked both sides of the political divide, offering conservative authors ready-made forms for conflating difference with danger and progressive authors a means for questioning and unsettling normative categories and cultural certainties. Nevertheless, a cautious generalisation can be made in asserting that the twentieth century saw a significant expansion in the contributions of Black, Native American, Latinx, and Asian American authors. These authors brought a rich revitalisation and hybridity to the gothic genre, as well as a new sense of the genre's disruptive, anti-racist, and decolonial political possibility.

Given the importance of the body to the Gothic as a genre, it is not surprising that scholarship on the subject is growing. Jack Halberstam's *Skin Shows* (1995) focused on the cultural logic and construction of monstrosity, a project that has been developed more recently by Jeffrey Cohen in *Monster Theory* (1996) and *Monster Culture* (2007). Jack Morgan's *The Biology of Horror* (2002) also focused on physicality and embodiment in gothic literature and horror cinema, and Marie Mulvey's *Dangerous Bodies: Historicizing the Gothic Corporeal* (2015) is the most thorough recent examination of the body in gothic fiction, exploring themes of medical

Gothic, menstrual Gothic, and war Gothic, each of which has substantial scholarship around it as well. Yet there has been relatively little critical attention paid to the specific topic of the body in the American Gothic as such. The following sections will address this topic by focusing on three main themes: the sick or injured body, the racially marked body, and the gendered body.

The Sick or Injured Body

This sick, leaky, injured, or infirm body occupies a broad swath of the American Gothic. This section will focus on the contagious body and the literary sub-genre of plague fiction. Illness and injury are less 'classical' gothic tropes than other forms of monstrosity and violence but represent an important, perhaps the most important, human fear: that of death. The body gripped by disease is an object of intense anxiety in Anglo-European and North American culture, possibly because it represents the breakdown of an entire chain of values that white American liberalism holds dear: autonomy, individualism, self-mastery, and freedom of mobility. Sick people are quarantined, shunned, dependent upon others for food and care, and often untreatable and dying. For these reasons, perhaps, the contagious body and contagion itself lend themselves well to sometimes subtle and sometimes shrill political allegory.

One of the earliest American Gothic treatments of contagious disease is Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*, the first-person narrative of an ambiguous victim-villain who tells his self-justifying tale against the backdrop of the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, which killed roughly 10 percent of the city's population. Mervyn himself is ill as he begins his story, which involves much human greed, trickery, and predation even before the epidemic hits the narrative, in keeping with Brown's preoccupation with individualism and its potential ill-suitability for democracy. A radical in his youth, Brown ended his days as a staunch conservative, and the pessimism about a human propensity to act in self-interest that led him from one extreme to the other is perceptible in his anxious plots about ambiguous narrators dealing with even more dishonest and untrustworthy characters. The passages in the novel that describe a city undone by yellow fever are meant to simply exaggerate and distil the anti-social tendencies present at all times:

> Terror had exterminated all the sentiments of nature. Wives were deserted by husbands, and children by parents. Some had shut themselves in their houses, and debarred themselves from all communication with the rest of mankind . . .

> The chambers of disease were deserted, and the sick left to die of negligence. None could be found to remove the lifeless bodies. Their remains, suffered to decay by piecemeal, filled the air with deadly exhalations, and added tenfold to the devastation.[4]

We see here not just diseased bodies but a diseased body politic. The social bonds and 'sentiments of nature' that hold up society itself, as conceived by European political thought – namely, those of the family – are dissolved as 'wives were deserted by husbands, and children by parents.' The ill and the poor are shunned and allowed to die in the streets, their bodies left to rot. The healthy of means isolate themselves and cut off 'all communication' with their neighbours and fellow countrymen. In short, civil society completely breaks down as an extreme individualism seems to guide people's actions. Brown presents altruism, cooperation, care, and even love as flimsy social fictions adorning brute egotism and self-interest. The 'deadly exhalations' devastating the city are not only decaying human remains but the nauseating funk of human nature, as conceived by Brown, exposed by the plague.

Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842) revisits the theme of the sudden plague and the social breakdown it occasions. In this enigmatic and seemingly allegorical tale, a disease that causes 'profuse bleeding at the pores' ravages an unnamed country led by a prince with the ironic name of 'Prospero'. The narrator is unreliable, a faithful subject of the useless prince, and unable to recognize the abdication of responsibility and leadership apparent in the prince's decision to isolate himself and a small elite in a castle, making merry while the disease destroys his people. While the unrealistic style of the story invites allegorical readings, no clear allegory emerges besides the obvious fact that the silent guest who appears at the masked ball at the end dressed as a corpse is actually Death.

The story is elusive but raises a number of crucial themes that shape pandemic fiction to this day. First of all, the illness appears as a visible mark on the skin and therefore resonates with the issue of race and other skin-based identity markers as signs of the disease create social exclusion: 'The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men.'[5] The racial connotations of the disease are further reinforced by the emphasis on 'blood', which, in American racial discourse, has played a ghoulishly prominent role (one need only think of the 'one-drop' rule established in 1896 by the Supreme Court). Finally, the story can be read as a morality tale about the denial of death, as the prince distracts himself with feasts and entertainments while his subjects perish, but the mortality that he tries to keep out through wealth and distraction catches up to him in the end.

Since the Spanish flu devastated the world at the tail end of the First World War, plague fiction has been a minor but steady presence in the American Gothic. As in the nineteenth century, disease often reverberates in these stories in socially significant and even allegorical ways. For this last example, we return to the yellow fever of 1793, but retold by John Edgar Wideman in his short story 'Fever' (1989). Narrated by what Fritz Gysin calls a 'collage of communal voices and visions',[6] the story begins with an epigraph from Robert Morris, a wealthy merchant and signer of the Declaration of Independence, who describes the central place of Philadelphia to the new nation: 'Consider Philadelphia . . . to be to the United States what the heart is to the human body in circulating the blood.'[7] One of the main focalizers of the story is Richard Allen, a historical figure, co-founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who describes the advance of the epidemic on the city with a particular attention to the fate of African Americans. While there are descriptions of bodily fluids and other typical features of plague fiction, it is clear that Philadelphia is afflicted by more than just a disease. It is also sickened by racism and hypocrisy, as first the illness is blamed on African Americans and called 'Barbados Fever', and then later, when most doctors and nurses have fled, the pernicious myth that Black bodies are immune to the disease is propagated in order to justify pressing African Americans into service as caregivers to the sick and dying. Richard Allen denounces this twisting of truth by way of a return to the heart metaphor of the epigraph: 'How the knife was plunged in our hearts, then cruelly twisted . . . We were proclaimed carriers of the fever and treated as pariahs, but when it became expedient to command our services to nurse the sick and bury the dead, the previous allegations were no longer mentioned' (281). In short, the yellow fever epidemic revealed the metaphorical 'heart' of the sickness gripping the young republic: the ruthless exploitation of Black bodies according to shifting fictions of race, an ailment that continues to afflict the United States to this day, and which brings me to the next section.

The Racially Marked Body

Race occupies a central place in the American Gothic, and the racialized body constitutes a recurrent theme. As Eugenie de la Motte argues in *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*, the gothic genre arose at exactly the same historical moment that the fiction of race as a 'biological division' emerged.[8] While the biological myth of race has been scientifically discredited, it continues to haunt American society, as does the unresolved violence and collective trauma of slavery. As mentioned earlier, Fields and Fields attribute the enduring belief in race despite its

biological non-existence and its frequent phenotypical invisibility to a set of ideological practices that they call 'racecraft'. This term refers to the entangled cycle of imagining and acting upon the fiction of race, which creates its effects and testifies to the ongoing presence of racism.[9] Christina Sharpe has similarly argued that the post-slavery subject has been created by an ongoing process of subjectification that is 'readable and locatable still through the horrors enacted on the black body after slavery'.[10]

The racially marked bodies of the American Gothic can be approached in a number of ways. One is the overtly racist use of African (or other) race as a signifier of monstrosity, often linked to what Johan Höglund calls the Imperial Gothic, a reactionary strand of gothic fiction that uses gothic tropes to characterize the racially marked Others that threaten the white protagonists. Although H. P. Lovecraft is not usually considered a writer of empire, he definitely uses race in this manner in his fiction. For example, in 'Call of Cthulhu', the ancient monsters that the narrator discovers have become the object of a primitive cult observed by local non-white worshippers in a forest outside New Orleans. The description of these people – presumably African Americans and possibly Native Americans – during a ceremony (described by the narrator as a 'voodoo orgy') is a racist diatribe that equates the ceremony's participants with devils and wild beasts: 'Animal fury and orgiastic license here whipped themselves to dæmoniac heights by howls and squawking ecstasies that tore and reverberated through those nighted woods like pestilential tempests from the gulfs of hell.'[11] The rhetorical potpourri here combines bestiality, sexual promiscuity, devilishness, and disease ('pestilential') into a monstrosity described as all the more horrific for its racial mix: The 'indescribable horde of human abnormality' is a 'hybrid spawn' of 'mongrel celebrants' (179). The Imperial Gothic's fear of native and dark-skinned others is surpassed only by its fear of miscegenation and the confusion of racial groups, though here the hybridity seems almost to be between human and animal rather than between races: 'There are vocal qualities peculiar to men, and vocal qualities peculiar to beasts; and it is terrible to hear the one when the source should yield the other' (179). In any case, monstrosity is clearly linked to racial otherness, with the narrator noting that the forest area where the ritual takes place is 'substantially unknown and untraversed by white men' (179). This first strain of the race-inflected American Gothic is thus defined by an overt demonisation of the non-white body as monstrous.

A second kind of American Gothic concerned with race has focused on the violence inflicted upon the Black bodies of enslaved Africans and African Americans and their descendants. A common feature of abolitionist tracts and slave narratives, descriptions of the torture of African Americans include

the famous 'Letter IX' of Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), which has the narrator coming upon the horrific scene of an enslaved man hanging in a cage exposed to the elements to die.[12] In this strain of the racial Gothic, the slave's body is described as abjectly victimized, and his injuries are gruesomely detailed; but his race is not foregrounded as in the Imperial Gothic. Instead, we can observe how the narrator actually identifies with the humanity of this dehumanized body in a sort of mimetic sympathy – his own body is gripped by trembling and terror, as paralyzed (for a moment) as the enslaved man is immobilized in his cage.

In an even more gothic twist on the theme of racial torture, some stories show African American characters themselves becoming morally deformed through their experience of trauma. A striking example of this can be found in Victor Séjour's 'The Mulatto' (1836), a story that was published in Paris by a young Black man from New Orleans who went on to become a celebrated playwright in France. The story takes place in pre-Revolution Haiti and tells of a young enslaved man named Georges whose father is, unbeknownst to him, his own enslaver. Georges saves his father's life during an attempt on it, but his enslaver's brief gratitude does not prevent him from deciding to seduce/rape Georges's wife. Repulsing his advances, she causes him to fall and is condemned to hang for striking a white man. Georges pleads in vain for her life and then runs away to plot his revenge in the mountains after she is executed. He returns three years later and coolly poisons his master's new wife and decapitates him. However, in keeping with the gothic fascination with body parts and the macabre, the master's head continues speaking an instant after death, revealing that Georges has killed his own father. The despondent Georges shoots himself, adding his own body to those of his victims, thrusting home Séjour's point that slavery turns into monsters potentially everyone it touches, enslavers and enslaved alike twisted into cruelty either by power or by pain.

Another recurrent aspect of race examined by the American Gothic brings us back to the ideas of racecraft as a form of ideological witchcraft and of racial 'blood' as a macabre metaphor for racial identity. One of the uncanny specificities of how race operates in the United States is the way it can be invisible on people's bodies but still present 'inside' their bodies or genes. Notions of racial 'impurity' have been legally and discursively formalized, most notoriously in the 'one drop rule' established by *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* in the 1890s. One result of these conceptions has been an entire tradition of anxiety about somatic visibility and invisibility of racial markers such as skin colour, thick or fine hair, flat or thin noses, small or generous lips, among others. The situation of African Americans with few or no visible traces of their 'black blood' was so complex and uncomfortable for whites – for

instance, light-skinned enslaved women were highly prized for sexual relations, making their plight all the more wretched – that the term 'tragic mulatto' emerged during the course of the century.

One of the most poignant gothic stories about such a situation concerns a mixed-race character who is not aware that his mother is of African descent. In Kate Chopin's 'Désirée's Baby' (1893), Armand, a wealthy and temperamental slave owner marries a beautiful young woman and has a child with her. When the baby begins to show signs of 'darker' features, Armand accuses his wife of mixed ancestry and drives her out of their house with the child. While burning her and the baby's effects he discovers a letter from his mother to his father expressing thanks that their son will never know that she 'belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery'.[13] In other words, Armand himself is Black but has managed to escape its visible 'brand' upon his features. The physical signs of what in the United States is still called 'race' (based on the racist assumption that only non-white people possess race) had skipped a generation and stamped its seal upon his baby's body.

Writers in the twentieth century have used the Gothic to examine and challenge these perverse and ghoulish effects of racialism. For instance, Ralph Ellison invoked the trope of invisibility in his novel *The Invisible Man* (1952), suggesting that African Americans were as invisible to white Americans as ghosts:

> I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms . . . I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass.[14]

The narrator adopts a series of gothic tropes (the spook, the ectoplasm, the disembodied head) to describe the invisibility of African Americans as human beings to the white people around them, who see nothing more than the colour of their skin (or a racial type, if the person happens to be a phenotypically light-skinned African American).

The Gendered Body

The final category of somatic categorisation that has been essential for the American Gothic is gender, by which I mean both the male/female dichotomy and the straight/queer binarism that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Female bodies in particular have been haunting the American Gothic since the nineteenth century. The social ideology that divided

American bodies into strictly differentiated and even allegedly 'opposite' sexes created many tensions and contradictions that were imaginatively explored by gothic authors. Defined by the Separate Spheres doctrine as ethereal 'angels of the house' while their reproductive capacity was ruthlessly channelled and policed according to male needs, women often appeared in the Gothic as frail victims but also on occasion as unexpectedly resilient and resourceful agents. Their bodies oscillate between inspiring desire and fear, much like the often unstable, unnatural, and abjected bodies of queer subjects.

No discussion of women in the Gothic American can avoid a close look at the work of Edgar Allan Poe, whose pages are full of female bodies both as abject victims ('The Black Cat', 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 'Berenice') – whose skulls are bashed in with axes, whose heads are severed with razors, and whose teeth are pulled out of their still-living bodies – and as potentially monstrous women whose bodies refuse to stay dead or even stay the same. Besides the vaguely vampiric Ligeia – who seems to invade and appropriate the body of her successor – and the uncanny Morella – who likewise seems to return in the body of her own daughter – the cataleptic Madeline in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' presents a particularly interesting example of the unpredictability of the female body. Mere days after the arrival of the nameless narrator at Usher's house, his sister Madeline, who seems to float around the mansion in a ghostly and ethereal way – almost a parody of the Victorian 'angel in the house' stereotype – takes ill and dies. As it turns out, she is not dead but in a temporary coma from which she awakens in her tomb, at which point her wispiness gives way to an unprecedented physicality. Struggling for days with the heavy door of the tomb, she finally escapes and finds her brother, with 'blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame'.[15] Usher, it turns out, has been hearing her desperate struggles for days and ignoring them, too unnerved to help, but now even more terrified of her rightful anger. Upon seeing her gory appearance, he succumbs both to his own fears and to her very physical presence: 'For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low, moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse' (335). In a typically Poe-esque reversal, Madeline's angelic body has become monstrous: heavy, violent, and dangerous. In this way, Poe reminds us – with both anxiety and ambivalence – that women's bodies often cannot be contained within the corseted role of frail and obedient angel dictated by ante-bellum sexual ideology.

Louisa May Alcott goes even further than Poe in deconstructing the deadly double standards and double binds constraining women's place and agency in nineteenth-century society. Alcott's *Behind a Mask, Or, a Woman's Power* (1866) is an American Gothic twist on the British *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, developing upon the theme of the governess whose socially awkward status – as both servant and gentlewoman at once – magnified and made visible the paradoxical status of all middle-class women, who were expected to perform physical and emotional labour in the home around the clock while maintaining the appearance of polite ladies of leisure. Alcott takes Brontë's resourceful heroine and makes her into a con-woman, American-style, who lies and manipulates herself into wealth and a title by marrying the patriarch of the house. A consummate actress acutely aware of what is expected from a woman, Jean Muir plays everyone according to their particular prejudices, but the narrative makes clear that she ends up being a good and loyal wife to her older husband. The narrative also mentions that she had once been a sweet and trusting girl but became hardened through disappointment and awareness of the precariousness of a woman's position in Victorian society: An unmarried woman of a certain age not willing to do sexual work simply cannot survive. Her ruse in the story consists of passing – with the help of makeup, false teeth, and an expert performance of girlishness – as a nineteen-year-old ingenue when she is in fact 'a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least'.[16] While thirty might not seem so old now, Jean Muir is depicted as a monster: After her 'mobile features' settle into their natural expression, 'weary, hard, bitter', she drinks alcohol from a vial and uncovers 'her breast to eye with a terrible glance the scar of a newly healed wound' (142). Her body at thirty is described as worn out, hard, scarred, sexualized (the exposed breast), prone to drink, and so old that she needs to spend all her time when she is not alone hiding her face 'behind a mask'. The fact that she will be a kind and caring wife for her elderly husband gives the story a seemingly happy ending, as if even Alcott did not realize that Jean Muir's fate – of having to hide her true features and true self for the rest of her married life – is more of a life sentence to a permanent performance than a happily-ever-after.

Gender also runs through American gothic fiction in terms of sexuality and the question of queer bodies. This is the tacit subject of Herman Melville's great gothic novel, *Pierre* (1952), several of Henry James's short stories, Edith Wharton's ghost story 'The Eyes' (1910), Sherwood Anderson's uncanny 'Hands' (1919), and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), to name just a few. One of the most important examples is James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), which is an extended

American Gothic exploration of internalized homophobia and the cultural injunction to keeping queer bodies hidden or in the 'closet'. The first-person narrator is a young American man who has a passionate affair with a young Italian while living in Paris. When his girlfriend returns from a trip to Spain several months later, he leaves Giovanni, who slips into drug abuse and prostitution and finds himself awaiting execution for the murder of a wealthy patron-client.

The novel is a complex study of queer shame and the way that the narrator finds the desires of his body both uncontrollable and monstrous. It uses the Gothic to explore the fundamental mystery and uncanniness of desire: something that comes from within our bodies and deepest selves but that we may experience as alien and even horrifying when we live in a homophobic culture. This is what happens to the narrator after his first queer sexual experience as a teenager. Waking up in the morning and looking at his lover, he sees the body, which seemed so beautiful at first, change into a monstrosity as the social reality of homophobia overwhelms him: 'That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came.'[17] Later in the novel, in a Parisian bar frequented by a queer clientele, the narrator sees a gender-ambiguous person, and all the fear and anxiety of his own failure to perform manhood according to social rules erupt into a description of this person's body that is striking for its rhetoric of abjection:

> Now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie – this was the first, overwhelming impression – of something walking after it had been put to death. . . . It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness. . . It glittered in the dim light; the thin, black hair was violent with oil, combed forward, hanging in bangs; the eyelids gleamed with mascara, the mouth raged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless with some kind of foundation cream; it stank of powder and a gardenia-like perfume.[18]

Here the narrator's discomfort with his own gender issues takes the form of a projection of a series of dehumanising gothic tropes: a mummy, a zombie, an 'it'. We notice that the narrator focuses obsessively on parts of the body: toes, hips, hair, mouth, and eyelids, and finally odour. The passage is terrifying – not only for how scared the narrator is by this person, who turns out to be a kind of Cassandra figure in the narrative – but even more so for the violently dehumanising and monster-ising effect of this description. We can see here how the 'failure' of queer bodies to fit the existing somatic categories of sexual opposition generates both horror and abjection,

threatening in every instance to undo the humanity of queer subjects as well as women who fail to perform their nearly impossible social roles correctly.

Conclusion

The American Gothic offers a rich corpus through which to explore the complex dynamics of somatic categorisation and hierarchy in the United States. Able-ness, health, race, gender, and sexuality are all qualities that shape the fluctuating boundaries of normative versus monstrous embodiment. The historical antecedents of the American Gothic already demonstrated an intense preoccupation with racial hierarchy, discipline, and semiotics – looking to the body for signs of evil and sin, justification for slavery and genocide, and enforcement of normativity and exclusion. From the eighteenth century to the present, the gothic genre has worked both with and against the major fault lines of somatic classification in American culture, with non-white and women writers often appropriating the genre in order to trouble and subvert body-based determinisms and epidermal myths.

NOTES

1 Juana María Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures and other Latina Longings* (New York: NYU Press, 2014): 26.
2 This genealogy is even more interesting if we consider Nancy Armstrong's thesis that the English novel was itself strongly influenced by the American captivity narrative. In 'Captivity and Cultural Capital in the English Novel', she writes, 'nothing so much as the English variant provided the principle of continuity consolidating Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Brontë in a single literary tradition' (*Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 31, no. 1 [Summer 1998]: 373–398, 373).
3 Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 19.
4 Charles Brockden Brown, 'Arthur Mervyn, Or, Memoirs of the Year 1793', in *Three Gothic Novels* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 346.
5 Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Masque of the Red Death', in *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Library of America, 1984): 485–490, 485.
6 Fritz Gysin, 'John Edgar Wideman's "Fever"', *Callalloo* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 715–726, 715.
7 John Edgar Wideman, 'Fever', in *The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction*, ed. Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath (New York: Vintage Books, 1991): 269–300, 269.
8 Eugenia de LaMotte, 'White Terror, Black Dreams: Gothic Constructions of Race in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions*

in the Literary Imagination, ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004): 17–31, 17.

9 Fields and Fields, *Racecraft,* 19

10 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

11 H. P. Lovecraft, 'The Call of Cthulhu', in *H. P. Lovecraft: Tales*, ed. Peter Straub (New York: The Library of America, 2005): 167–196, 179.

12 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, 'Letter IX: Description of Charles-Town; Thoughts on Slavery; On Physical Evil; A Melancholy Scene', in *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays*, ed. Denis D. Moore (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2013), 129.

13 Kate Chopin, 'Désirée's Baby', in *American Gothic: An Anthology 1787–1916*, ed. Charles Crow (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 1999): 339–342, 342.

14 Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1952), 3.

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18 Ibid., 251.