

FURTHER READING

- Bentley, N. (2009). *Frantic panoramas: American literature and mass culture 1870–1920*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bentley's section on Chesnutt (in the chapter 'Black Bohemia and the African American Novel') situates his critique of realism within his awareness of the power of spectacle. While her focus is not on the Gothic, her argument that 'the real role for the black person in public' is 'to perform his own nonexistence as a black citizen' (199) aids gothic readings of dead black bodies, lynchings and minstrelsy, particularly the representation of such in mass culture.
- Clymer, J. A. (2013). *Family money: Property, race, and literature in the nineteenth century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clymer's chapter 'The Properties of Marriage in Chesnutt and Hopkins' shows how Chesnutt's fiction assesses the impact of anti-miscegenation law on the economic rights of African Americans, making inter-racial marriage a site through which to see the possibilities, and limits, of inheritance as a form of redress.

CHAPTER 23

Jim Crow Gothic: Richard Wright's Southern Nightmare

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet

African American author Richard Wright's interest in crime writing and hard-boiled pulp fiction is well known to readers and critics, as is his use of horror elements in his major novels, such as *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1960). However, by far the most gothic work he wrote is the collection of short stories set in the rural South of his youth, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). Wright, born and raised in Mississippi, published this volume just 2 years after Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), but painted a very different portrait of the American South. Instead of white plantations and colourful balls, he depicts a dark landscape shaped by fear, violence and moral monstrosity. Each story conveys an oppressive sense of dread that inevitably ends in a scene of violence, exposing the brutal reign of terror that enforced Jim Crow legislation in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Published in 1945, the autobiographical *Black Boy* provides another layer to this picture of the South as hell for blacks, corroborating and fleshing out some of the details in *Uncle Tom's Children*, but also complicating the narrative with anecdotes of Wright's ordeal as a child of poverty, including abandonment, lack of education, religiously fanatical female relatives, and a mother who is abusive and helpless by turns, instilling in him an intense ambivalence towards women that appears throughout his fiction. *Black Boy* also reveals how Wright's interest in literary gothicism began, with his electrifying early exposure to stories like *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* and later his fascination with horror pulp fiction. Together with the later *The Long Dream* (1958), these publications represent key texts of a strain of Southern Gothic that we could call Jim Crow Gothic, focused specifically on the South as a land permeated by racial fear and white violence against black selfhood.

A.S. Monnet (✉)

University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

Susanne B. Dietzel points out that critics have been slow to recognize the use of popular genre forms by African American writers (156). Nevertheless, critics have discussed the rather explicit gothic elements in Wright's later works (see for example Brodziok, Dow and Bryant). *Native Son* (1940) is structured into sections titled 'Fear', 'Flight' and 'Fate', while *The Outsider* (1960) has equally gothic-sounding chapters, such as 'Dread', 'Descent' and 'Despair'. William Dow observes that *The Outsider* is 'filled with allusions to what might be called the topoi or landmarks of the gothic: premonitions, curses, the subterranean, confinement, doubles, conspiracies, and premature burial' (142). A key incident in the novel is an underground train wreck that allows the protagonist to shed his identity and begin a new life without attachments (or so he thinks). In order to escape the burning train, he must step on the body of a young woman, his feet sinking into her chest as he does so. The novel is permeated by a sense of claustrophobia and horror as Cross finds himself again trapped in his new life, both by circumstances and his own crimes, just like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.

Generically, Wright's later work is characterized by a hybridity in which the darkness and violence of urban crime fiction are blended with the moral and epistemological complexities of the Gothic. The result is a sensational exploration of the nightmare world that is specific to African American experience of the mid-century metropolis as urban ghetto. Wright's influence on later African American urban crime fiction has been enormous – one can think of Chester Himes, Iceberg Slim and Walter Mosley – but his connections to the Southern Gothic have been less explored by scholars, even though his Southern childhood is indisputably at the origin of his attraction to the gothic mode. This chapter examines Wright's Southern writing in order to demonstrate that his work constitutes a crucial piece of the Southern Gothic puzzle. In contrast to the Southern Gothic of white authors that often approaches race obliquely, through minor characters, family secrets, haunted houses and ghostly reminders of past crimes, Wright's gothicized fiction reveals the terror and violence that lie at the heart of the Southern Gothic as a whole. His South is a landscape drenched in fear, the mutual fear of blacks and whites, and terror, or more specifically 'the white terror', which is another word for lynching and its variations. No survey of Southern Gothic could be complete without Wright's work, because no other writer exposes so clearly and so powerfully the racial violence that has shaped the American South.

UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN

The first and most important work in this regard is *Uncle Tom's Children*. Had Wright published nothing else after this collection of stories, his legacy as a Southern Gothic writer would still have been assured. The five short stories and one autobiographical sketch that constitute this powerful collection paint an indelible portrait of the South in the first decades of the twentieth century as a land so permeated by the threat of lynch-mob violence that even the white

houses and neat hedges of a white Arkansas suburb become an 'overarching symbol of fear' for the black narrator. The first piece, a sketch called 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow', shows the protagonist, ostensibly Wright himself as a young man, learning the strict and humiliating rules of Jim Crow-shaped interaction with Southern whites. In a series of vignettes, Wright describes his 'education' in the ways of subservience and self-effacement.

The sketch opens with a description of a childhood battle between a group of black boys and a group of white boys that ends with Wright hit on the cheek by a broken bottle. Instead of tending to his wounded face and pride, his mother reacts with fury, stripping the young Wright naked and beating him 'till I had a fever of one hundred and two' (*Uncle Tom's Children* 4). The subsequent illness is accompanied by delirious visions of 'monstrous white faces suspended from the ceiling, leering at me' (5). This incident serves as the reader's gateway into the often bewildering world of the Jim Crow South for the young Wright, and is charged with many layers of meaning. First of all, the incident is told very differently in Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, where the beating and subsequent illness are prompted by him setting his family home on fire. Here Wright transposes the beating to an incident that makes his mother's reaction seem not only disproportionate but perversely unjust, underscoring the fear that grips the black population, so distorting normal human emotions that a mother whips her son to teach him a potentially life-saving lesson rather than tend to his injuries, and also infusing the incident with a strange sexual charge. His mother strips him 'naked' to beat him, adding a layer of shame, which then expresses itself in the boy's feverish vision of being 'leered' at by the white faces hovering near the ceiling.

This mixing of sexuality and violence is typical of Wright's work, although it is fairly muted in the stories of this collection, appearing more forcefully in his later *Native Son* and *The Long Dream*. Why does he inject a sexual layer into this story of childhood in the Jim Crow South? The reasons become more apparent when reading these later novels and they go beyond the simple observation that social subordination exacts a symbolic castration of black men, although this is also true. For Wright, the fear that the Jim Crow legislation created produces a complex set of taboos that become perversely intertwined with sexual anxiety, shame and a desire to transgress, leading to situations that reveal the violence that gives the South its uniquely terrifying atmosphere.

In 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow', for example, the price for sexual transgression appears in vignette VII, the shortest of all, which tells of a bell-boy at the hotel where the narrator worked. Discovered in bed with a white prostitute, the young man is castrated and run out of town. This is presented to the other bell-boys and hall-boys as both a 'lucky' break (presumably because he is not killed) and a warning, since the hotel would not be responsible for the lives of other 'trouble-making niggers' (12). In this, the shortest of the anecdotes he recounts, Wright's narrator evokes the darkest kind of white violence against black men in the South: mutilation and murder for any hint of sexual contact, whether real or imagined, between black men and white

women. The reverse situation, white men sexually using and abusing black women, has not only been an open secret of Southern society since the earliest slave times, but is also represented as an ongoing source of danger to black men. The vignette that immediately follows the castration of the bell-boy is an incident in which a white man slaps a black maid on the backside in front of the narrator, who is ordered at gunpoint to say that he does not mind (12). The man is apparently known for having killed two black men. The narrator is not only forced to accept the humiliating harassment of the black woman in his presence – and he is too ‘ashamed to face her’ after the incident – but has to pretend that he approves, an assault on his dignity and manhood that leaves him feeling intensely violated.

‘The Ethics of Living Jim Crow’ also establishes another aspect of Wright’s gothicism that recurs throughout his work and is quite striking in its pointed revision of Southern Gothic code; namely, the reversal of the symbolic meaning of black and white. If the conventional use of blackness is to align it with fear and mystery, Wright consistently inverts this code, attributing both horror and uncanniness to the colour white. In the incident mentioned earlier, the narrator’s childhood illness is rendered terrifying not by black shadows in his room, but by the ‘monstrous white faces’ floating horribly above his bed. In *Black Boy*, the terms ‘the white terror’ and ‘the white-hot face of terror’ recur on a number of occasions, sealing the association between whiteness and fear in the young black boy’s mind (*Black Boy* 53, 52). In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, danger and horror are also repeatedly described in terms of whiteness. When a boy is hiding from a lynch mob in a kiln full of snakes, he imagines the snakes preparing to strike him with their ‘long white fangs’ (42, my emphasis). When he sees another boy being burned by the mob, the narrator repeatedly describes the tar-drenched body as a ‘writhing white mass’ and the feathers that have been brought to tar and feather the boy rise in a ‘widening spiral of white feathers into the night’ (49, my emphasis). Conversely, the kiln that protects the boy from the mob is described as ‘black’ and a bird that he watches from his hiding place and that calms him is ‘a spot of wheeling black against the sky’ (42).

In general, Wright’s use of colour is seeped in symbolic weight and takes on an almost expressionist intensity. The other important colour in *Uncle Tom’s Children* is red, often associated with fire and blood, both linked to the South in general. In a story titled ‘Fire and Cloud’, an African American preacher who has been beaten by whites tells his congregation that they live in a kind of hell: not a Puritan hell of brimstone burning away their sinfulness, but a modern hell of racial injustice requiring an act of collective resistance and civil disobedience:

Wes gotta git together. Ah know whut yo life is! Ah done felt its fire! It’s like the fire that burned me last night! Its sufferin! Its hell! Ah cant bear this fire erlone. Ah know now whut to do! Wes gotta git close t one another. (178)

In this passage, Wright paints a livid portrait of life in the South as defined by almost constant violence troped as hellfire. In ‘Long Black Song’, the fire is

literalized when a black man named Silas, who has shot a white man for sleeping with his wife, allows himself to be burned to death in his home, defiantly refusing to surrender to the ‘white terror’. Instead, he is consumed by the ‘eager plumes of red’ that devour his house and everything for which he has worked (128). In succumbing to the rage and death that are so often produced by encounters with white men, Silas is described as joining ‘that long river of blood’ that flows through the South, fed by the history of killing between blacks and whites. Red rivers of blood and red plumes of fire: this is the colour of the violence that erupts regularly from the monstrous white faces that haunt the black South.

BLACK BOY

With his autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945), Wright returns to the South of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, elaborating on his portrait of the white South and reflecting on it with the critical tools that would make him one of the great social analysts of the twentieth century. Like that of W. E. B. Du Bois or Franz Fanon, Wright’s work attempts to probe the painful recesses of Jim Crow and the psychology of social subordination. Heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis as well as the ambient misogyny of his time, like many modernists were, Wright often used sexualized metaphors for his experience of horror. A striking example is the return of the incident of beating and illness at the beginning of ‘The Ethics of Living Jim Crow’, which also opens *Black Boy* but with significant differences. As already mentioned, Wright is beaten for setting the house on fire instead of fighting with white boys, revealing that he had felt free to alter and exaggerate details of his childhood in *Uncle Tom’s Children* to make the violence of Jim Crow more explicit and striking. This recalls the words of another Southern Gothic writer, Flannery O’Connor, who explained that she used the Gothic and especially the grotesque in her fiction because writing for an audience that does not share the writer’s view of the world requires the use of hyperbole and heightened dramatization:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures. (34)

Similarly, in writing for an America of the 1930s where Jim Crow-style practices and laws, both explicit and implicit, existed in nearly every state, Wright had felt obliged to emphasize the excessive violence of his mother’s desire to inculcate these rules. Hence, the scene of his mother beating him unconscious for being injured in a fight is meant to shock the reader with the palpable injustice of the narrator’s experience. In *Black Boy*, on the other hand, published at the end of the Second World War – a war fought in order to eradicate

fascism from Europe and Asia – Wright feels freer to complicate the dynamics of race that he has established in the earlier work with details of his individual circumstances as a boy raised by strict and religious women, a problematic relationship to a remote and finally absent father, and a growing sense of alienation from his relatively illiterate community as a black teenager hungering for the pleasures of language and narrative. The incident remains securely rooted in a gothic vocabulary and framework, but its racial resonance is complemented by sexual and familial overtones.

As an example of how Wright revises and complicates the incident of the feverish illness haunted by 'monstrous white faces', in *Black Boy* the white faces are not described as faces at all, but as 'huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me' (5). The fear is still coloured white, although the material shape of the fearful object is no longer white faces but white 'udders', threatening to drench the child with 'some horrible liquid' (5). Since it is his mother who has beaten him to unconsciousness, it is his mother who becomes his first symbol of terror, before he is even aware of white people, and this is figured in the text with transparently feminine images. The boy's helplessness transforms the mother's face into a more remote and therefore acceptable object, a cow's udder, but the paragraph ends with his explicit naming of the mother as the source of fear when he writes that he felt 'chastened' for a long time, remembering that his 'mother had come close to killing him' (5).

The autobiography further explores the gothic dynamic of Wright's own typically Southern family – his sharecropper father and his deeply religious mother, aunt and grandmother – with an incident about a kitten that reveals how violence begins early and at home. Wright remembers his father as a forbidding and tyrannical presence, often tired from work and requiring silence from his children in order to rest. On one occasion, when Wright and his brother find a stray kitten and bring it home, the father orders them to keep the animal quiet, shouting at them to kill it. Although he understands that his father does not really mean what he says, Wright's hatred and resentment of his father lead him to apply the command literally, as a form of irreproachable rebuke to the verbal violence. He believes that he cannot be punished for following the letter of his father's command, even though he knows full well that he is wilfully misreading its real intent. His mother finds the strangled kitten and torments Wright with the 'moral horror' of what he has done, harassing him with 'calculated words which spawned in my mind a horde of invisible demons bent upon exacting revenge' (10). She orders him to go outside into the night and dig a grave for the kitten, further terrifying him, and eggs him on with an eerily 'floating' and 'disembodied voice' as he gropes towards the dead animal in the dark (12).

In this way, Wright prepares for his later discovery of the 'white terror' with an account of a Southern childhood already laced with violence and fear. O'Connor again offers a useful point of comparison, arguing in *Mystery and Manners* that childhood offers plenty of material for a lifetime of writing by virtue of its inherently unequal power structure and many opportunities for subtle

and overt violence (84). Wright's relationship with his mother provides an excellent example of this power dynamic and its equally troubling inversion. If children are initially overwhelmed by their parents' early power over them, this structure often proves to be reversible in later life, with children controlling and dominating their elderly and more and more helpless parents. O'Connor's work is full of such relationships – as is the Southern Gothic in general, since many generations often live together in the rural communities typical of the South. In *Black Boy*, Wright's mother, so powerful and terrifying in his early chapters, later suffers a stroke that leaves her incapacitated and ill, cared for by her religiously fanatical mother and sister, who also raise Wright. He frequently finds himself in conflict with his puritanical grandmother and occasionally discovers that his increasingly helpless mother approves of his defiance. When he wins an argument with his grandmother, his mother – now a powerless and grotesque figure in the household – 'hobbles' over to him 'on her paralytic legs' to kiss him (144). The woman who once beat him unconscious is now scarcely able to stand upright, an object of pity and guilt.

In addition to his troubled and tumultuous early years, Wright's autobiography offers two more sources for his lifelong fascination with the gothic genre. The first is his discovery of the pleasures of narrative fiction, at the hands of a schoolteacher who boards with his grandmother. The story that this woman 'whispers' to the child is that of *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*, and Wright's response is powerful and life altering. He is not only mesmerized but transformed by the tale: 'As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences' (37). He describes feeling 'an almost painful excitement' and his first experience of a 'total emotional response' (38). Wright describes his initial contact with fiction – in the form of a violent folktale, one of the most gothic modern fairy tales – almost like a sexual experience. The story produces in him a 'thirst for violence ... for intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders'; for more gothic narrative, in other words (38). 'No words or punishment' can make him doubt or abandon his craving for such stories, which he describes as 'life' itself for him from that moment on. At this point, Wright has not even had enough schooling to be able to read, but now he 'burned to read novels' and 'tortured his mother into telling me the meaning of every strange word I saw ... because it was a gateway to a forbidden and enchanting world' (39).

The anecdote is interesting for the great power that it attributes not only to storytelling in general, but specifically to dark and bloody stories, which awaken in the young Wright a lifelong thirst for sensational fiction. The particular tale that captures his imagination is also intriguing for its focus on violence against women, something to which Wright's fiction itself often gives great prominence, sometimes disturbingly so. The best example of this is the murder of Mary Dalton in *Native Son*, an accidental murder but one over which Bigger Thomas gloats proudly, and which Wright inscribes in a long tradition of gothic murders of women with several overt references to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Black Cat', except of course that the cat tormenting Bigger is white.

Wright's fondness for the Gothic, awakened by *Bluebeard*, is further fuelled by stories that he discovers as a teenager working as a delivery boy for a Chicago-based newspaper. Ill edited and cheap, the newspaper targets 'rural, white Protestant readers' and features a magazine supplement consisting of lurid pulp fiction and mystery stories. Once more, Wright finds himself completely seduced by this material, and spends all his time reading the magazine, hungering for 'the next instalment of a thrilling horror story' as he builds up a subscriber base among people who know him in the area (*Black Boy* 128–9). After several weeks, a man comes to ask him if he realizes what kind of magazine he has been convincing his African American neighbours to buy. Wright had been so absorbed by the magazine instalments that he had never even looked at the newspaper itself. He realizes to his horror that the magazine is a racist vehicle of Klu Klux Klan doctrines, including the advocacy of 'lynching' as a 'solution to the problem of the Negro' (131). When he reads the paper for the first time he discovers that it features articles 'so brutally anti-Negro that goose pimples broke out over my skin' (131). With brilliant conciseness and irony, the incident demonstrates that while the young Wright had been absorbed in the fictional horrors of the magazine supplement, the real horrors lay in the newspaper's racial politics. The 'goose pimples' that he gets while reading these articles allow him to understand at last that the reality of black life in the United States is far more terrifying than anything he can read in a fictional narrative.

As in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the underlying theme of Wright's story of his childhood is the threat of white violence – against him and against other black people – that determines social relations and shapes subjectivities in the South. When Wright is 9 years old, his uncle is shot by white people for running a business that was too successful, and Wright realizes that the 'white terror' can reach into any black home and pluck anyone from their family (53). By the time he is 10 he has developed a 'permanent dread of white people', whom he knows can 'violate my life at will' at any moment and he would be powerless to prevent it (71). This threat takes on a demonic life of its own in his imagination and fantasies and becomes an overwhelming force in his daily life: 'I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings' (72). He finds himself 'continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behaviour could not be predicted' (72). As Brian Massumi has argued about threat, 'fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistence, looming present as the *affective* fact of the matter' (Massumi 54). In other words, threat exists materially in the present as affect, and Wright's *Black Boy* is eloquent testimony to the power of threat as mental reality.

Later in the book, a friend of Wright's is lynched for sleeping with a white prostitute, probably the event that inspired the vignette about the bell-boy at the hotel in 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow' (*Black Boy* 172). In the earlier work, the only thing that is said is that nothing was said: 'We were silent'

(*Uncle Tom's Children* 12). In *Black Boy*, Wright describes his world 'crashing' and his body becoming 'heavy' as the anxiety and depression accompanying a threat take over (172). The result is a 'paralysis of will and impulse' and a kind of nervous breakdown, all the more terrible – and gothic – for concerning something imagined rather than personally experienced:

The actual experience would have let me see the realistic outlines of what was really happening, but as long as it remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment, I was compelled to give my entire imagination over to it, an act which blocked the springs of thought and feeling in me, creating a sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived. (173)

The crisis continues, and soon the young Wright feels his self crumbling under the weight: 'My personality was numb, reduced to a lumpish, loose, dissolved state. I was a non-man, something that knew vaguely it was human but felt that it was not' (196). In this manner, he documents with an extraordinary first-person narration the deadening and distorting effects of Jim Crow legislation on black subjectivity. He finds that just as his inner world collapses, he must keep performing the role of a mindless, unfeeling menial for the whites around him in order to survive. To do so, he presents to them what he calls a 'dead face' (240). This gothic strategy – wearing an expressionless mask instead of a human face – is his most important form of self-defence in the permanently hostile environment that is the Jim Crow South. The trouble is that he has come to feel dead inside as well and sees himself drifting towards crime or oblivion, suggesting that moral monstrosity is the natural outcome of life under such conditions, which the narrator describes as 'one long, quiet, continuously contained dream of terror, tension and anxiety' (255). This line comes nearly at the end of the book, just before Wright escapes from the South by getting on a train heading North.

THE LONG DREAM

The same year that *Black Boy* was published, Wright moved to Paris and settled in France, where he lived until his death in 1960. In 1958, after 13 years of French residence, he published one more work set entirely in the American South, a novel that took an image from the just-quoted line for its title: *The Long Dream* (1958). In fact, nothing in the novel explains the title as clearly and explicitly as this quotation from *Black Boy*. The 'long dream' is actually a nightmare of endless terror: life in the South before the reforms slowly brought on by the Civil Rights movement. Drawing on the insights articulated in *Black Boy*, *The Long Dream* focuses on the moral deformities that are produced by Jim Crow, on both whites and blacks. If white men become bloodthirsty monsters, then black men become corrupt and deceptive sycophants. The former transform slowly into fiends and the latter gradually sink into abjection. Just as

power corrupts, Wright's novel suggests, so does powerlessness. The result for both sides is a loss of humanity.

The focus of *The Long Dream* is a boy named Fishbelly and his father Tyree Tucker, a prominent mortician in a Southern town. Although the main arc is a coming-of-age story, concerned with Fishbelly's racial and sexual self-discovery, the novel is almost equally concerned with Tyree's complex negotiations of black manhood and fatherhood, as well as his ambiguous compromises with the white authorities in the town. Although Tyree's official business is undertaking, he also runs a brothel and pays bribes to the police chief. In exchange for being allowed to prosper as a brothel owner, on occasion Tyree renders services to the police chief, such as fixing lynch victims' bodies so that the violence of their death is camouflaged. Fishbelly's maturation is achieved through a series of discoveries, rejections, reconciliations and arrangements with his powerful yet occasionally abject father.

As in the earlier work, the Southern setting for this novel is a moral landscape dominated by mutual fear between whites and blacks. The fact that white people fear the African American population in their midst is made explicitly clear to Fishbelly by his father, who explains that 'white folks is scared to death of us!' (*Long Dream* 143) and that this is the reason why 'a white man always wants to see a black man either crying or grinning' (142). That the threat of lynching lies at the heart of this relationship is established by Wright early in the novel with an incident that is based on the same murder of a friend caught with a white prostitute that appears in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*. In *The Long Dream*, an older boy named Chris is tortured, killed and mutilated so savagely that 'not only had the whites taken Chris' life, but they had robbed him of the semblance of the human ... The mouth, lined with stumps of broken teeth, yawned gapingly, an irregular, black cavity bordered by shredded tissue that had once been lips' (75). The destruction of the boy's humanity focuses on his face, a conceit that recurs throughout the novel as Wright describes the way in which Tyree and other African Americans have to present an 'act' – like the 'mask' evoked in *Black Boy* – to white people to survive. At one point, Fishbelly watches with horror and loathing as 'a change engulf[s] his father's face and body' when he performs a perfect caricature of the abjectly obsequious Southern 'nigger' for the town mayor (126).

The deformation of African Americans by the terror of Jim Crow is a larger issue for which Chris's facial mutilation serves merely as synecdoche. Wright's novel develops the theme initiated in *Black Boy* of how terror and helplessness deform and mutilate Southern blacks psychologically, even if they escape actual lynching. Just as the younger Wright felt himself becoming dead and void inside, he shows Fishbelly slowly hardening as a result of his exposure to white cruelty. This process begins when Fishbelly is picked up by police and threatened with castration, which makes him faint, amusing his white tormenters so much that over and over again they jab at his crotch with a knife. If Chris is literally castrated and killed, the young Fishbelly is humiliated, symbolically castrated and made to efface himself in self-protection, repeatedly. He is so

frightened by this episode that he fails to help a wounded white man dying in a car wreck on the way home, because his terror of the police causes him to ignore the man's pleas. By the time he is a teenager, he has developed the kind of hatred for whites that makes him precisely the dangerous and gothic enemy in their midst that they fear.

In short, Wright uses the Gothic in *The Long Dream* as a way to underscore and exaggerate the mechanisms of psychological and social destruction that he sees in the South. A final example is the fire that burns down the brothel that Tyree runs, killing Fishbelly's girlfriend just after he has made plans to start a new life with her. The fire is the result of both white corruption and black neglect of fire regulations, complicating the issue of guilt, and it kills around 50 people. Wright's description of the fire is seeped in a gothic register that goes far beyond the needs of the plot in its gruesomeness and horror. The people in the bar are asphyxiated while those on the upper floors are trapped and *cooked*, producing a distinct smell of roasting flesh (221). They have stuck their black arms and legs through the wooden slats on the upper floor in an unsuccessful effort to escape, and onlookers are horrified to see that the charred limbs appear to be moving and still *alive* (218). Although the movement is just an illusion of the heat and flames, Wright's portrait of the African American victims of the fire as uncanny figures, abject, burned to death and reduced to their body parts – hovering in a space between life and death, humanity and thingness – alludes to the way in which African Americans become uncanny and terrifying in a context where their humanity is consistently denied, and resonates with the earlier tropes of the South as a hell where African Americans *burn*.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Wright's sustained engagement with the Gothic begins in his earliest childhood and permeates all his published work. Drawing on the codes of the genre to describe the process by which both whites and blacks become monstrous in the Jim Crow South, Wright explores the psychological damage that the reign of terror inflicted on everyone within its geographical and mental range. In *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), he explicitly writes the history of the African American in the United States as a gothic tale:

We black men and women in America today, as we look back upon scenes of rapine, sacrifice, and death, seem to be children of a devilish aberration, descendants of an interval of nightmare in history, fledglings of a period of amnesia on the part of men who once dreamed a great dream and forgot. (27)

Here Wright comments on American identity and myth by claiming that African American history is not a record of collective memory, but of national forgetting, and anticipates Malcolm X's reversal of King's image of a dream into an American nightmare (in speeches such as 'The Ballot or the Bullet'). Maisha L. Wester has suggested that 'Southern Gothic can be understood as a genre

that is aware of the impossibility of escaping racial haunting' (25). Wright's fiction certainly emerges from a sense of this impossibility, and therefore deserves a key place in our understanding and repertoire of the Southern Gothic. It is like a piece of the puzzle without which racial haunting remains truly spectral and undefined. However, precisely because Wright's work is not so much about haunting as about violence, mental and physical, cyclical and retributive, in the present of the narrative and not the past, it could also be called Jim Crow Gothic and be recognized as a specific subset of the Southern Gothic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brodziok, J. (1988). Richard Wright and Anglo-American gothic. In *Richard Wright: Myths and realities* (pp. 27–42). New York: Garland Publishing. Print.
- Bryant, C. G. (2005). "The soul has bandaged moments": Reading the African American gothic in Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home", Morrison's "Beloved", and Gomez's "Gilda". *African American Review*, 39(4), 541–553. Print.
- Dietzel, S. B. (1984). The African American novel and popular culture. In M. Graham (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to the African American novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dow, W. (2014). Pulp gothicism in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*. In W. E. Dow, A. Craven, & Y. Nakamura (Eds.), *Richard Wright in a post-racial imaginary* (pp. 141–160). London: Bloomsbury. Print.
- Massumi, B. (2010). The future birth of the affective fact: The political ontology of threat. In M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (Eds.), *The affects reader* (pp. 52–68). Duke University Press: Durham. Print.
- O'Connor, F. (1969). The fiction writer and his country. In *Mystery and manners: Occasional prose*. New York: Macmillan. Print.
- Wright, R. (1965). *Uncle Tom's children* (1936). New York: Harper and Rowe. Print.
- Wright, R. (2000a). *The long dream*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, (originally 1958). Print.
- Wright, R. (2000b). *Black Boy* (1945). London: Vintage. Print.
- Wright, R. (2008). *12 million black voices* (1941). New York: Basic Books. Print.
- Wester, M. L. (2012). *African American gothic: Screams from shadowed places*. New York: Palgrave. Print.

FURTHER READING

- Bain, J. G. *Disturbing signs: Southern gothic fiction from Poe to McCullers*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Arkansas. ProQuest. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/750371293>. Web.
- Hakutani, Y. (1996). Richard Wright's the long dream as racial and sexual discourse. *African American Review*, 30(2), 267–280.
- Walker, M. (1988). *Richard Wright: Daemoniac genius*. New York: Amistad Press.

CHAPTER 24

To Kill a Mockingbird and the Turn from the Gothic to Southern Liberalism

Michael L. Manson

I would like to leave some record of the kind of life that existed in a very small world. ... This is small-town middle-class southern life as opposed to the Gothic ... In other words, all I want to be is the Jane Austen of south Alabama. (Harper Lee, 1964)

It is hard to square Harper Lee's ambition to write Austen-like novels of manners with the Southern Gothic elements of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which features the 'malevolent phantom' Boo Radley, a town's collusion with the scandalous conviction of Tom Robinson for an impossible rape, a barely avoided lynching, a man's incest with his daughter, his later attempt to murder two children, and a morphine-addicted Confederate patriot who curses a man for defending African Americans and spends her final days reading *Ivanhoe*, which Mark Twain held indirectly responsible for the Civil War. And yet a reading attentive to genre reveals that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is governed less by the Gothic than by the *Bildungsroman*. It is a curiously shortened *Bildungsroman*, since Scout is only 9 when the novel concludes and since Lee makes a point at the end of how much more experience Scout needs. Still, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is first and foremost a *Bildungsroman*, depicting the education of two children, especially Scout, into a particular Southern and liberal worldview.¹ The Gothic is one phase of Scout's education, one that she must reject in order to grow in insight. From Atticus, Maudie, and Calpurnia, Scout learns the tenets of Southern liberal segregationism, but she also develops her own critical assessment of her society, discarding the racialism she has learned from Atticus and paving the way for the mature Jean Louise met in *Go Set a Watchman*, who believes in integration and can now turn a more critical eye on her father's politics.

M.L. Manson (✉)
American University, Washington, DC, USA