

Transatlantic Gothic and Race: Wordsworth, Poe, Hawthorne, and Chesnutt

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I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe.
Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*

In *Gothic America*, Teresa Goddu argues for reading race into Poe's writing by placing it in a national, rather than solely Southern, discourse. I would like to modify Goddu's approach by looking at the gothic's engagement with discourse about race not only on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, but also on both sides of the Atlantic. The writing that buttressed the slave trade was, like the trade itself, transatlantic: America's complicity was evinced by its participating in the transatlantic slave as well as book trade—by not only buying and selling humans, but also by importing and (re)printing books that defined and/or were informed by notions of racial otherness. Goddu's scholarship includes African American writers and—in attempting to portray the complex intertextuality and influence—is sensitive to “the dangers inherent in any project that attempts to reconstruct the interplay of black and white literary traditions” (188). Such relations are necessarily more complex when the endeavor requires looking at black and white literary traditions on both sides of the Atlantic. This paper takes its cue from Betsy Erkkila who argues for positioning blackness and Africanism in a ‘whole complex of personal and cultural phobias that and fetishes around the body, nature, women, race, the Orient, and the democratic masses that haunt and spook the American imaginary’, as well as ‘the complicated network of religious, cultural, historical, economic, and ultimately transnational relations in which they were involved’.¹

In tracing the influence of Wordsworth on American gothic, we must be informed by postcolonial theory, or transnational influence study runs the risk of repeating the imperial enterprise. It is impossible to examine Wordsworth's influence on American gothic without contextualizing gothic writers in transatlantic debates about race and the gothic's engagements and complicity with them. Any study that considers transatlantic gothic must consider the ways in which this genre is predicated upon European(-American)s' haunting guilt (of complicity in slavery and its literary, religious, pseudo-scientific, and philosophical constructs of racial otherness). Studies of the transatlantic gothic must also consider the ways African American writing of this time period, such as Charles Chesnutt's, “haunts back,” to use Goddu's phrase, by subverting and calling into question gothic's racial constructs.

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¹ Betsy Erkkila, ‘The Poetics of Whiteness: Poe and the Racial Imaginary’; in *Romancing the Shadow*, eds J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (Oxford UP, 2001), 44.