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Edwards, Justin D. *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. 145 pages. ISBN: 0877458243. \$34.95.

Justin D. Edwards is an associate professor of English at the University of Copenhagen where he teaches courses in Canadian and American literature, travel writing, and gender studies. He is the author of *Exotic Journeys: Exploring the Erotics of U.S. Travel Literature, 1840-1930* (2001), which focuses on the work of, among others, Melville, Hawthorne, London, Wharton, and Djuna Barnes; and he is the co-editor of *American Modernism across the Arts* (1999).

Edwards's latest book, *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* (2003), examines the prominence of what Edwards broadly terms "gothic discourse" in ante- and postbellum American literature that highlights issues of racial ambiguity and passing. Edwards's contention is that the American gothic literary tradition is "intimately tied to the history of racial conflict in the United States" (xvii) and that the "gothicization of race" in nineteenth-century literature provided a means for racists to articulate anxieties concerning racial amalgamation, as well as for more progressive voices to challenge such thinking by foregrounding the monstrous forces of slavery and segregation. In a series of close readings, Edwards attends to Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Melville's *Benito Cereno*, William and Ellen Craft's slave narrative *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*, and Charles W. Chesnut's *House behind the Cedars* and situates attitudes toward racial ambiguity in each in relation to contemporary "scientific" discourses of race. The rather modestly expressed objective of Edwards' analysis is to provide "a sustained analytic reading of racial ambiguity and its rhetorical effects within gothic discourse in order to identify previously unnoticed or ignored (but nonetheless important) dimensions of American gothic writing from 1830 to 1900" (xxxiii).

This intention of the monograph, however, seems at odds with Edwards's selection of texts. With the exception of Poe, none of the authors addressed is first identified as an author of gothic works. Indeed, there is little or no attention to recognized American authors who worked in the Gothic mode such as Charles Brockden Brown, George Lippard, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, or Harriet Prescott Spofford, or to less familiar figures such as John Neal, Isaac Mitchell, William Gilmore Simms, James Kirke Paulding, or Robert Montgomery Bird. It would be more accurate to say that what Edwards is attending to is gothic discourse within nineteenth-century American literature more generally, rather than making a specific intervention into the field of the American gothic. In addition, in consideration omissions, it's also curious that important critical work on the nineteenth-century American gothic, includi

ng that of Cathy Davidson and Donald Ringe, as well as analyses of the role of race in the American gothic, such as those by Toni Morrison and Teresa Goddu, are barely mentioned in the text, if at all.

What facilitates Edwards' rather mundane selection of generally-canonical authors and works is his extraordinarily broad definition of "gothic discourse." In essence, according to Edwards, anything related to terror, panic, anxiety, repulsion, disgust, depravity, secrecy, inheritance, or contamination is gothic. This may be true, but the utility of such a definition is questionable given that just about every fictional text likely deals on some level with, say, anxiety or secrecy. This said, *Gothic Passages* still performs interesting and cogent—albeit at times rather brief—close readings of its selected texts and, perhaps most valuably, contextualizes readings of these works with attention to the racial "science" of the period, demonstrating the ways in which the texts incorporate aspects of and respond to theories of race circulating in the culture.

After a brief preface and an introduction that seems unnecessarily defensive about the political embeddedness of the gothic—is there really anyone who still believes that gothic works have no connections to their socio-historical contexts?—*Gothic Passages* is divided into two parts, each composed of three chapters. Part one, "Creating a Self in the Antebellum Gothic Narratives," attends to the anxiety surrounding racial hybridity in Poe, Melville, and William and Ellen Craft. Part two, "Exploring Identity in Postbellum Gothic Discourse," analyses racial ambiguity in Harper, Howells, and Chesnutt. Edwards's general approach to his topic is exemplified in his first chapter, "Hybrid Bodies and Gothic Narratives in Poe's *Pym*," in which he makes the assertion that "*Pym* can be read as an investigation of the peculiar attitudes to racial difference and hierarchies within the context of contemporary discourses in the popular field of racial 'science'" (3). The real strength of Edwards's study is precisely this attention to the scientific ideas of the day. In exploring the ways in which Poe views racial hybridity with "gothic terror" (14), Edwards introduces the racist "science" of Samuel George Morton, Josiah Nott, and John Campbell who all argued that racial mixture was "unnatural." Because hybrid bodies resist binary classification of black and white, contends Edwards, they were viewed as constituting a potent threat to ideologies of race predicated upon visual policing of racial distinctions. As such, the prospect of hybridity emerged as a potent source of anxiety for those invested in theories of polygenesis—the idea that whites and blacks are separate species and do not share a common genetic ancestor.

This information is likely to be new, even to scholars of American literature, and this juxtaposition of antebellum "scientific" discourse with Poe opens up the text in significant ways. Indeed, one wishes that Edwards had elaborated on the "scientific" ideology more fully—perhaps even according it its own chapter—rather than introducing it piecemeal in passing in each chapter. Even so, Edwards's new historicist contextualization is revealing and greatly enriches a reading of *Pym*. The real weakness of this chapter—reflecting a general weakness of the text as a whole—is the striking absence of atten-

tion to the existing body of secondary literature. Although Edwards does reference (barely) John Carlos Rowe and Toni Morrison in passing, it's hard to believe that the University of Iowa Press readers let the book get by without requiring that Edwards demonstrate himself to be better versed in the secondary literature. As concerns *Pym*, for example, there is no attention to Terence Whalen's reading of *Pym* and general attention to Poe's "average racism" in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (1999), nor is there any reference to Joan Dayan, Betsy Erkkila, J. Gerald Kennedy, or any of the numerous commentators on Poe's representations of race.

In chapter two, "Gothic Travels in Melville's *Benito Cereno*," Edwards develops ideas first expressed in his *Exotic Journeys* manuscript and characterizes Melville's tale as a "gothic travel narrative" (18) that vacillates between condemning racism and reinscribing racist ideologies. As in chapter one, Edwards here introduces the theories of antebellum racial "scientists" in order to contextualize the ideas expressed within the text—in this case, Edwards reveals that Captain Delano relies upon the "language of speciesism" and the racial theories of polygenesis propounded by Josiah Nott and George Gliddon (23) in order to reassure himself and establish a sense of order. Most provocatively, Edwards characterizes the villainous Babo as a sort of minstrel who performs blackness in order to further his murderous designs but who, precisely through this performance, reveals the "absurdity of authentic racial categories" (28). Melville therefore, according to Edwards, "locates the power of horror—the power of the hybrid—in an ability to pass" (26). As in chapter one, a reading of this chapter would lead one to believe that there is no secondary literature on *Benito Cereno* or the representation of race in Melville more generally.

In chapter three, "Passing and Abjection in William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*," Edwards departs from his emphasis on canonical texts and authors and refocuses his attention on a lesser-known slave narrative. This is the only slave narrative addressed by Edwards and may well be the most problematic chapter in the book. Edwards presents the Crafts' account as "an African American intervention into the discourses of racial ambiguity" and proposes that, like Poe's and Melville's texts, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* presents passing and racial ambiguity as both a "conduit to freedom and self-determination" and as a means through which to "glimpse into the abyss of abjection and identificatory uncertainty" (35). The difficulty with this chapter is that there seems to be a qualitative difference between, say, Melville's indebtedness in *Benito Cereno* to the gothic attributes of travel narratives and the incorporation of gothic tropes into a slave narrative. While Edwards does mention quickly in passing that one "crucial difference" between the slave narrative and the gothic novel is that, in the former, "the scenery is not staged but real" (36), this "crucial difference" is never addressed and this omission is troubling. That slave narratives and gothic novels can be read in the same way and addressed as though basically the same at the very least needs to be established before proceeding.

In chapter four, "The Epistemology of the Body; or, Gothic Secrets in E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*," Edwards turns his attention to postbellum texts, but his approach remains the same: He examines the gothic rhetoric of racial amalgamation in light of social and scientific theories of race. In Edwards' reading of Harper's novel, Harper enacts a reversal of racist ideology in which she appropriates the gothic dread of racial amalgamation expressed in popular works of racial theory and suggests that hybridity arises not from abolition and intermixture but from slavery and segregation (65). The dread of passing is retained, even as Harper collapses racial binaries (71).

Chapter five, "Genetic Atavism and the Return of the Repressed in William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*," takes as its focus a less-read novel by a paradigmatic American realist and reads it in light of discussions in the 1880s and 1890s of genetic atavism (the reemergence of ancestral traits). In Howells's narrative of passing, the protagonist, Rhoda, has lived her life as a white woman until she discovers her African American heritage and, in Edwards's estimation, this revelation takes the form of a "gothic secret" (75). As with his reading of Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Edwards interprets *An Imperative Duty* as "fluctuating between a liberal position in the field of 'racial science' and a conservative stance" (80) and sees it as engaging with the general concern articulated in racial discourse of the day over the potential "return of hidden racial traits" (88).

In the last chapter, "The Haunted House behind the Cedars: Charles W. Chesnutt and the 'White Negro'," Edwards turns his attention to the least conflicted text within the purview of his study, Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars*. According to Edwards, Chesnutt responds to the theories of "racial scientists" of the 1890s and 1900s, such as Joseph Alexander Tillinghast and Thomas Dixon, by "outlining a racial theory in which amalgamation is the *solution* to America's race problem and the path to progress and civilization" (93). In addition, Chesnutt counters the anxieties expressed in anti-miscegenation tracts by "characterizing segregation as a form of degeneration, regression, and injustice that inspires his own fear" (93). Chesnutt thus appropriates the gothic discourse of race in order to challenge American racist ideologies (109). Following chapter six, Edwards' study concludes with a brief epilogue that attends to Stephen Crane's *The Monster* and looks ahead to the profusion of early twentieth-century narratives of passing by African American authors. The index is serviceable, if not overly detailed.

*Gothic Passages* clearly has its flaws—among them an absence of attention to nineteenth-century authors generally considered to be gothicists, an overly-broad definition of "gothic," and a surprising inattention to the secondary literature on the texts and authors Edwards decides to include. However, the text's attention to antebellum and postbellum theories of race is enlightening and enriches not only readings of the texts surveyed, but potentially other nineteenth-century American texts that engage with issues of race, racial ambiguity, and racial passing. If for no other reason, it therefore warrants attention from scholars of nineteenth-century American literature and

culture, as well as academics interested in the gothic novel and questions of racial representation.