

*Gothic
Images
of
Race
in*

Nineteenth-Century Britain

H. L. Malchow



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For Peter Cupchunas

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H.L.M.

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*. . . no longer take things at second or
third hand, nor look through the eyes
of the dead, nor feed on the spectres
in books*

— Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself'

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Introduction

This book searches an area that lies somewhere in the borderlands between literature and history, between "representation" and reality. It is a shadowy place, both Platonic cave and Cimmerian den, in which images of the ideal and the monstrous are intertwined. Shadowy, but not unexplored: it has been nearly 50 years since Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban* suggested that Europeans "project upon the colonial peoples the obscurities of their own unconscious—obscurities they would rather not penetrate."¹ And it has been 30 years since Philip Curtin's magisterial *Image of Africa* drew scholarly attention back from the "dark continent" itself to domestic European values, beliefs, and popular myths—to the hobgoblin element that shaped Western "knowledge" of the black. Since then, much has been written about how the West has "constructed" non-European peoples, as projections of its own anxieties and as rationalizations for and instruments in the extension of its economic and political power. The past two decades have seen important explorations of the ways in which Europeans came to grips with the "marvelous possessions," in Stephen Greenblatt's words, that their technology secured for them. This study is deeply indebted to the work of many who have seen in the prolific European literature on other cultures texts that reveal, between the lines and under the surface, more of the observer than the observed.

In the first place, no one writing on European images of race can avoid a debt to Edward Said and his provocative thesis that "Orientalism" was an insistent hegemonic discourse, that European-constructed knowledge of the culture of the colonized principally and powerfully served the purposes of domination and authority.² If Said's picture of the way

knowledge of the "Other" was produced and used now seems somewhat insensitive to the complex interaction of experience and mentality and to the ambiguities and conflicts within the texts he drew upon, nevertheless his study, and the deconstructionist assumptions upon which it rested, inaugurated a decade of reexamination of the texts by which Europeans have explained and manipulated the history and cultures of non-Europeans. The work, for instance, of Peter Hulme and Stephen Greenblatt on the Columbian Caribbean, or of Greg Denning on the South Pacific, draws us back into the European mind, to the limitations of understanding inherent in European culture—indeed, to the problem of language itself in revealing/concealing the reality of these alien worlds.³

Such domestication of foreign experience in the formation of a popular culture as well as a "science" of racial difference has also been explored by those who, in the wake of the structuralist revolution of the 1970's, have argued for a single field in which the images of race, sexuality, and class are interwoven systems that mutually confirm the hegemony of the European, heterosexual, bourgeois male. The efforts of Sander Gilman and G. L. Mosse have been important in drawing together these separate-seeming but intimately connected discourses of prejudice,⁴ and an ever-widening range of feminist and gay scholarship has also been increasingly sensitive to the similarities in racist and sexist discourse, to, in the words of Joanna De Groot, "the theme of domination/subordination central both to nineteenth-century masculine identities and to the western sense of superiority."⁵ This awareness of a nineteenth-century "reshaping and intensifying of a range of social boundaries and differences," of the parallel and homologous construction of "natural" inequalities of race and gender, importantly informs this study.

Nevertheless, the cultural historian apprehends a certain danger in too simple a duality of empowered male colonialist aggressor and subordinate female colonized victim. As with Said, one senses the need for more flexibility, for more dialogue between mentality and experience. "Race" was not simply a difference that, in the context of an expanding sphere of imperial power, could neatly and automatically be slotted into a system of prejudice prepared by domestic tradition. For one thing, those "traditions" themselves were neither unitary (among different social classes and regions) nor stable. For another, like all communication, the dialogue between European experience abroad and domestic culture required a language fit for the task. This study explores the creation of a popular vocabulary in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by which racial and cultural difference could be represented as unnatural—a "racial gothic" discourse that employed certain striking metaphoric images to filter and give meaning to a flood of experience and informa-

tion from abroad, but that also thereby recharged itself for an assault on domestic social and physical "pathology."⁶

Although an undertaking such as this must acknowledge the real contributions of critical theory, my chief interest does not lie in addressing that ever-growing, somewhat self-referential body of knowledge per se. Some may feel that, in consequence, this study is too empirical and opportunistic, employing concepts and approaches that might more cautiously, consistently, and exactly be used by those who have developed them for getting at a specifically interior logic of "the text." The need to explain change over time and to create a narrative, inevitably, however, draws the historian back to the larger world, to the surrounding environment, to biography, to the way texts serve both emotional and tangible interests. How texts are purposefully manipulated and employed—and how they are received—is of particular concern. That is, most historians are likely to assume the importance of "context" and have, of course, a natural affinity with what has been called "the new historicism" in literary studies.

This study tries to move back and forth between the imagined world of literature and the "real" world of historical experience, between fiction and romance on the one hand, and, on the other, what Sander Gilman has called the "parallel fictions" of the human sciences, of anthropology and biology,⁷ between popular representations of the "unnatural" at home and abroad, between a domestic environment and that of empire. "Race," it has become a commonplace to observe, is an inherently fluid idea, whose meaning, like those of class or nationality, shifts over time, and seems at once concrete and intangible. *Racism* required a "demonization" (I do not use the word casually here) of difference. The gothic genre of the late eighteenth century, and its various permutations thereafter, offered a language that could be appropriated, consciously or not, by racists in a powerful and obsessively reiterated evocation of terror, disgust, and alienation. But the gothic literary sensibility itself also evoked in the context of an expanding experience of cultural conflict, of the brutal progress of European nationalism and imperialism, and was in part a construct of that phenomenon. There was, as Margaret Hunt has argued with respect to eighteenth-century travel literature, not so much a learning of racism from such texts, as a cross-fertilization and mutual reinforcement of beliefs.⁸ This book explores both the gothicization of race and the racialization of the gothic as inseparable processes.

Important work continues to emerge on the social and cultural context of the idea of "race" in nineteenth-century science and social science. George Stocking's seminal studies of Victorian anthropological thought have been recently augmented by Christopher Herbert's reward-

ing exploration of the subjectivity of ethnological constructions of both domestic and foreign "savages" and Henrika Kuklick's presentation of what one may call the sociology of social science—that is, of the domestic social context of anthropologists as professionals and of their ideas.⁹ Illuminating as this work has been, the present study does not concern itself, at least directly, with the production of a particular field of Victorian knowledge, with ethnology per se, with scholarly debate in the universities and professional societies, with the ways in which cultural factors shaped specific scientific and social scientific theories, systems, and proofs. This book is, in other words, not a formal excursion into intellectual history, but rather a tentative sampling of a vast field of popular culture, a field in which an ephemeral novel or play, sensational for a season and then forgotten, can hold as much meaning as the familiar artifacts of the Victorian intelligentsia.

The ground has been well broken for such an enterprise, at least with regard to late-nineteenth-century fiction and its context of a general *fin de siècle* malaise over cultural and sexual identity, empire, race, and nation. In particular, Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness* and Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy*, from different perspectives, have fueled a general reexamination of a literature Brantlinger has christened "imperial gothic." These themes of anxiety over degeneracy and primitivism have found their way into explorations of the wider popular culture in this critical period as well—most notably in Judith Walkowitz's use of the gothicized Ripper sensation of the late 1880's to reveal an antifeminist politics of sexual danger.¹⁰ My debt to this scholarship will be obvious, particularly in the later sections of this book. The themes and texts I search here range, however, well beyond and beneath the "imperial gothic" fiction of Haggard, Kipling, and Stevenson, and the chronological limits of the *fin de siècle*. In fact, it may be that the excellence of a decade or so of scholarship on this period has somewhat overburdened it as *the* critical era of crisis. Racial gothic, if not imperial gothic, has an older and deeper provenance.

Although this study closely reexamines the two defining classics of gothic literature that frame the nineteenth century, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and has recourse to the themes and imagery of a number of lesser gothic pieces, it is not a study in literary criticism as such, and does not attempt an analysis of the gothic as a literary style. In establishing a "gothic" representation of racial difference as a powerful nineteenth-century phenomenon, I have followed a larger, no doubt looser and more popular, definition of gothic—as a language of panic, of unreasoning anxiety, blind revulsion, and distancing sensationalism, as well as a particular "literature of terror." Obviously,

this language of terror was no monopoly of the novelist, but can be found throughout the discourse on racial difference at whatever level—in both the popular and establishment press, in scientific writing, in missionary and imperialist memoirs, and in travel books. It is not my argument that this spreading realm of representation, this regarding of the colonized and savage Other as weirdly unnatural, was simply a by-product of the gothic form of literature that preceded it, although indeed it often seems to have drawn directly on such a source. Gothic fiction and racial discourse were indeed closely intertwined, but they mutually influenced each other; moreover, both were shaped in large part by the audience they had in common, by the social and sexual, as well as racial, apprehensions of the literate middle and lower middle classes.

The gothic as a literary genre may be defined by characteristics¹¹ that resonate strongly with important aspects of the nineteenth-century literature of racial prejudice, imperial exploration, and sensational anthropology: themes and images meant to shock and terrify, and a style grounded in techniques of suspense and threat. If the archaic settings of many early gothic romances do not seem to have much significance for the kinds of connection this study explores (although archaism may, of course, evoke primitivism), other elements, such as highly stereotyped characters and an insistence on readable signs of depravity and the demonic concealed in physiognomy, dress, and mannerism are strikingly apt. Both the gothic novel and racist discourse manipulate deeply buried anxieties, both dwell on the chaos beyond natural and rational boundaries and massage a deep, often unconscious and sexual, fear of contamination, both present the threatened destruction of the simple and pure by the poisonously exotic, by anarchic forces of passion and appetite, carnal lust and blood lust.

David Punter has drawn attention to the gothic's "connections with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed": "where the classics offered a set of cultural models to be followed, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and the uncivilised."¹² This language is significant. To describe the gothic genre with such vocabulary (*primitive, barbaric, uncivilised*) and with jargon (*taboo*) derived from nineteenth-century tales of the cannibal South Pacific suggests just the kind of intimate connection between the gothic literary sensibility and a popular culture of racial fantasy and fear that this study attempts to explore.

The structure of this book reflects its enterprise; that is, its parts alternate from the realm of gothic fiction, which was itself at some level a response to expanding knowledge of cultural and racial difference, to that of an explicit nineteenth-century racial and imperial discourse cov-

ertly informed by fictional, mythic, and folkloric—that is, essentially domestic—traditions. Thus Chapter 1, which argues that Frankenstein's Monster must be read in the context of Caribbean slave rebellions, is followed in Chapter 2 by an extended analysis of cannibalism, an important—perhaps the most important—element of nineteenth-century racial discourse, which nevertheless drew deeply on popular domestic European culture—that is, from the “white cannibalism” of the madman, the criminal, the mob, the sailor, and the harpylike female. Here the purpose is not to offer a judgment on the reality or otherwise of customary cannibalism in the Pacific, Africa, or South America, but rather to demonstrate how the representation of the presumed cannibal nature of the primitive nonwhite—by missionaries, explorers, and ethnologists—was itself a gothic discourse, a fearful and sensational imagining of the unnatural and the unseen.

Chapter 3 returns to the gothic genre to explore the social context of the popular revival in the late nineteenth century of gothic fiction, and of the vampire story in particular. An attempt is made to join a close examination of Bram Stoker's own life with a reading of *Dracula* that draws out a subtext shaped by contemporary fears of identity, of sexual-cum-racial pollution, of “homosexual panic” and anti-Semitism. Bad blood, the unnatural crossing of sexual and racial boundaries and the threat of a new and secret vampiric race leads directly in Chapter 4 to the image of the half-breed and the way that image was progressively gothicized in the course of the nineteenth century. As with cannibalism, the object here is not to engage the reality of mixed-race culture beyond Europe, but to examine the representation of the half-breed, half-caste, or mulatto in popular science, the press, and literature. Like “race” itself, the idea of *the* “half-breed” was a largely arbitrary construction of the imagination, which took on a deeply gothic coloring as the concepts of race and nationality themselves became progressively reified in the course of a century of imperial conflict and expansion.

Obsession in fin de siècle Britain over the threat of collapsing racial identity resonated strongly with similar fears of the transgression of the boundaries of sexuality, with an exactly contemporary popular preoccupation with the social and imperial threat of masculine women and feminine men. Both were preceded by a fixing—that is, an overdetermining—of “natural” identity. In an epilogue that reexamines the press-driven moral panic over interracial intimacy at the “Savage South Africa” Exhibition of 1899, racial discourse is drawn back to a domestic locus of misogyny and ethnic prejudice. Of central interest in this concluding essay is not the “real” story, well narrated by Ben Shephard,¹³ of