

Blood at the Root: Ida B. Wells's and Pauline E. Hopkins's Gothic Souths

Marco Petrelli

University of Pisa

ABSTRACT

In *Gothic Images of Race*, H. L. Malchow argues that during the 1800s the language of gothic fiction became deeply entwined with racial discourse. With its tropes of darkness and monstrosity, the gothic served as a vehicle for pseudoscientific ideologies that sought to dehumanize Black people. Yet these same tropes could also be weaponized against such radical othering. As Teresa Goddu and others have shown, abolitionist literature in the United States frequently drew on the grotesque and sensational aesthetics of the gothic to expose the horrors of slavery and render them viscerally visible. Gothic motifs persist as well in post-Reconstruction African American texts, where the American South is stripped of the chivalric aura crafted by the Lost Cause mythology and revealed instead as a landscape of terror and death. This is evident in Ida B. Wells's 1892 exposé *Southern Horrors*—and its 1895 sequel, *A Red Record*—as well as in Pauline E. Hopkins's 1900 novel *Contending Forces*. Despite the formal differences of their writings, both authors employ a literary aesthetic of fear not only to dismantle white supremacist narratives, but to articulate a social critique that maps the geographies of Southern racial terror. This essay draws on gothic theory to analyze Wells's and Hopkins's work, foregrounding how race and gender intersect in their representations of the late nineteenth-century American South.

Keywords

Gothic, American South, African American Literature, Lynching

“Black history is Black horror”
Tananarive Due, in *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror* (2019)

A bitter crop

The racial violence looming over African American history has often found expression in literature through the gothic, an aesthetic especially suited to rendering the terrors and horrors that haunt the Black experience.¹ If we approach the gothic not simply as a literary mode or a fixed genre, but as an evolving discourse structured around “particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs” (Punter and Byron 2004, xviii) that give narrative form to collective panic, anxiety, and revulsion bound to specific historical circumstances, then African American literature emerges as a fertile site for gothic expression.² To provide an entry point for my examination of the gothic as a language articulating the dread bound up with Black life in America, I turn to a compelling example from the Harlem Renaissance. “Portrait in Georgia,” from Jean Toomer's *Cane*, does not shy away from horrific imagery in its depiction of a lynched

Black body, interwoven with flashes of a beautiful white woman. The poem stages a powerful symbolic dialectic, revealing a one-sided, cannibalistic relationship in which whiteness feeds on Black death—a stark dramatization of the racial violence structuring the color line in the South. “Hair—braided chestnut, / coiled like a lyncher’s rope,” writes Toomer. “Lips—old scars or the first red blisters, [...] / And her slim body, white as the ash / of black flesh after flame” (Toomer 1967, 50). This symbolic entanglement of racial violence and Southern imagery finds a chilling echo in Billie Holiday’s rendition of Abel Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit,” an era-defining song that, like Toomer’s poem, turns the ideologically charged, bucolic landscape of the American South into a hellish terrain strewn with hanged Black corpses “swinging in the Southern breeze.” A “pastoral scene of the gallant South” that, on closer inspection, reveals “bulging eyes” and twisted mouths, where the “scent of magnolias sweet and fresh” cannot mask the “sudden smell of burning flesh” (Holiday 1939).

It is from the South—and from the plague of lynching—that I begin my analysis of the works of Ida B. Wells and Pauline E. Hopkins. What follows is a reading of *Southern Horrors* (1892), *A Red Record* (1895), and *Contending Forces* (1900): two journalistic exposés and a novel that, despite their formal and stylistic differences, arise from a shared sense of outrage at the conditions faced by African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South. My aim is to show how Wells and Hopkins consistently deploy a gothic aesthetic to render racist violence hyper-visible and raise awareness of the terrifying scale of white terrorism—so pervasive and unpunished that, some fifty years later, the Civil Rights Congress would present the newly formed United Nations with a petition pointedly titled *We Charge Genocide* (1951).

Wells writes as a reporter, with the clear intent of documenting and denouncing lynching. She defines *Southern Horrors* as “a contribution to truth, an array of facts, the perusal of which it is hoped will stimulate this great American Republic to demand that justice be done though the heavens fall” (Wells 1991a, 14). What interests me, however, is the presence of gothic-tinged passages within her journalistic prose. As I will show, these moments signal a conscious intertextual engagement with the tradition of abolitionist literature, offering compelling evidence that the language of terror is a powerful vehicle for articulating discourses on race in America. Hopkins, on the other hand, adopts the sentimental romance to tell her story of “lynching and concubinage” (Hopkins 1988, 15), likely motivated by what Richard Yarborough describes as a “desire to appeal to the minds and especially the hearts” of her readers (1988, xxxi). *Contending Forces* exhibits both the features and limitations of this form, but Hopkins’s determination to bend the romance toward social critique results in frequent incursions into the gothic—and even the supernatural—that once again underscore the tight rhetorical interweave of terror and Blackness.

Exposing the atrocities of the South through chronicle or fiction, Wells and Hopkins did more than highlight a regime of racial violence that was, at the time, still routinely dismissed or

even justified by preposterous claims about the supposed “bestiality” of African Americans—especially men, who were accused of harboring an uncontrollable, brutish desire for white women. Their work sought to infiltrate and ultimately dismantle the faux-pastoral image of Southern nobility—actively promoted by Lost Cause advocacy groups like the Southern Historical Society, the Ladies’ Memorial Associations, and, later, the United Daughters of the Confederacy—whose revisionist propaganda aimed to obscure the region’s slaveholding past and ongoing racial violence. Exposing the landscape of terror that lay beneath the Edenic veneer of historical negationist myths—much like Toomer, Holiday, and countless others would do in later years—Wells and Hopkins appropriated the gothic as a rhetorical strategy in the service of social activism and resistance. Crucially, they did so as Black women confronting the intersecting structures of racial and gendered oppression, articulating a critique that challenged the historical and social narrative shaped by white Southern patriarchal dominance from a Black feminist perspective.

Southern gentle lady, do not swoon

Central to the gothic’s discursive strategies is an irreducible dichotomy in which “the destructive element is foregrounded against the foil of its only potentially corrective counterpart” (Lenhardt 2020, 16). This fundamental unit of signification—what Corinna Lenhardt terms a “gotheme”—is articulated in the American gothic as a contrast between the “Savage Villain” and the “Civil Hero” (Lenhardt 2020, 17), or more broadly, between the orderly forces of civilization and progress and the formless, transgressive threat of barbarism. Lenhardt, Judith Halberstam (1995, 6), H. L. Malchow (1996),³ and others have shown that the classic gothic clash between structure and anarchy can—and, in the context of American literature of terror, should—be read as a dialectic that conflates monstrosity with racialization, casting the racial Other as the primary threat to democratic order.

African American literature has appropriated and inverted this gothic dichotomy to enunciate “the real terrors of racialized existence” and to expose “how the dynamics and ideologies of race produce horrific realities for black subjects” (Wester 2019, 53, 54). This is evident in the work of both Wells and Hopkins, who explicitly declare their intent to reveal how African Americans were burdened with a degrading stigma that rendered them monstrous in the eyes of the national public, and particularly the white Southern population. Wells writes that “the world has accepted the story that the Negro is a monster which the Southern white man has painted him,” affirming how her central purpose is to demonstrate that “[t]he Afro-American is not a bestial race” (Wells 1991b, 144; 1991a, 15). Similarly, Hopkins opens the preface to *Contending Forces* by stating: “I am not actuated by a desire for notoriety or for profit, but to do all that I can in an [sic] humble way to raise the stigma of degradation from my race” (Hopkins 1988, 13). This aim may initially appear commonplace, given that the impulse

to uplift the image of African Americans after centuries of dehumanizing enslavement and stereotypical representations pervades nineteenth-century Black literature. Yet, Wells and Hopkins articulate this impulse in direct response to the specific violence of Southern lynching, seeking to expose the foundational lie at its core: the myth of the Black rapist, long used to justify white supremacist terror in the post-Reconstruction South. In so doing—each in their distinct tone and chosen literary form—they do more than denounce lynching: they dismantle the Southern mythos itself.

W. J. Cash, who offered the first comprehensive analysis of what in 1941 he referred to as “the mind of the South” (namely, the mind of the white South), underscores that the region’s political imagination rested on a rigid social order—one that, unsurprisingly, entailed a strict racial hierarchy, rationalized as “humane” and “natural” (Cash 1991, 87). After the Civil War, the ruling classes clung even more desperately to this order, seeking stability amid the upheaval of Reconstruction. White anxieties about the political, social, and economic consequences of emancipation contributed to the assemblage of a blend of racial and sexual anxieties and fantasies. As a result, in the years that saw the overthrow of Reconstruction, “southern white men managed to flip the antebellum script of racial and sexual violence” (Feimster 2009, 4-5) by depicting whiteness—and white womanhood especially—as under siege from alleged Black aggression.

Building on this constructed narrative of threat, an overarching “fantasy of mastery” emerged, whose tenets were “inviolability and a (mythic) stable, patriarchal white power structure” (Hinrichsen 2015, 6)—the very backbone of the Lost Cause mythos. “Inviolability” is key here. As Cash had already observed in the 1940s, the Southern white woman became the linchpin of the South’s chivalric self-image; a symbolic condensation of its entire ideological edifice. Through what he calls a “downright gineolatry,” patriarchal power positioned the white woman as “center and circumference, diameter and periphery, sine, tangent and secant” of Southern society (Cash 1991, 86). The rhetorical foundation of the Southern political project hinged on her preservation—that is, on preservation of her racial and sexual purity.

From the perspective of genre conventions, this dynamic clearly reiterates the quintessential gothic motif of the damsel in distress, whose innocence is imperiled by a threat often embodied in a monstrous Other (such as the decadent, lecherous Catholic in Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk*, 1796, a classic example). As previously noted, in the mainstream American gothic tradition this monstrous Other almost invariably takes on racialized features, with Blackness constructed as a site of sexual menace and savagery. The desire of the racial monster for the white female body is depicted not merely as transgressive, but as violent and barbaric. One of the most iconic instances of this dynamic is offered by cinema: Flora Cameron plunging to her death to escape the emancipated slave Gus in D. W. Griffith’s 1915 *The Birth*

of a Nation, an especially revealing scene because, in having a white actor in blackface play the role of Gus, it reveals in its very casting the grotesque fabrication of the Black rapist myth.⁴

As a matter of fact, the symbolic conflation of the chimeric Black rapist with a feral beast is explicitly addressed by Ida B. Wells in her effort to dismantle the fabrications of what she calls the “malicious and untruthful white press” (Wells 1991a, 31). *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* are filled with excerpts from white Southern newspapers raving about the “bestial desires” and “brute passion” of African American men, but it is in the latter that she recounts the most horrific—and revealing—case. Reporting on the story of Henry Smith, a likely innocent Black man with an intellectual disability accused of the rape and murder of a police officer’s daughter, Wells notes how Atticus G. Haygood—a prominent Methodist bishop and lynching apologist—deliberately spread gross falsehoods about the case. According to Haygood, the murdered girl had been “[f]irst outraged with demonical cruelty and then taken by her heels and torn asunder in the mad wantonness of gorilla ferocity” (1991b, 163). In its coverage of Smith’s lynching, *The New York Sun* doubled down on this dehumanizing rhetoric, calling him “the most inhuman monster known in current history” (Wells 1991b, 166).

By exposing the monstrous transfiguration of Blackness as a ubiquitous strategy to uphold white supremacist terror, Wells strikes at the symbolic heart of the Southern mythos. She strips away its self-congratulatory façade of chivalry and nobility to reveal the rot of violence and barbarism at its core. Decades later, W. J. Cash would observe how crucial this gruesome dynamic was to the South’s self-preservation. He termed it the “savage ideal”: “the determination of white society to preserve with much male truculence” its “traditions, customs, and routines of mind” (Cash 1991, xvii). According to Cash, this ethos was more deeply rooted in Southern imagination and social praxis “than it had been established in any Western people since the decay of medieval feudalism”—and, he adds, almost as fiercely as he witnessed it in the Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany of his own time (Cash 1991, 134).

The case of Henry Smith allows Wells to turn the accusations of savagery leveled against African American people back on white Southern society. More profoundly, it enables her to subvert the Civil Hero/Savage Villain gothème described by Lenhardt by exposing the violence of Southern society in its rawest and truest form. In recounting the lynching of Smith through the testimony of one Reverend King, Wells writes:

the father of the murdered child raised the hissing iron with which he was about to torture the helpless victim [...], a hideous yell rent in the air, and, with a sound as terrible as the cry of lost souls on judgment day, 20,000 maddened people took up the victim’s cry of agony and a *prolonged howl of maddened glee* rent in the air. No one was himself now [...]. *The people were capable of any new atrocity now*, and as Smith’s yells became more and more frequent, it was difficult to hold the crowd back, so anxious were the *savages* to participate in the sickening tortures. (Wells 1991b, 170, emphases added).

What is even more revolting in this atrocious scene is that Reverend King—or perhaps Wells speaking through the Reverend—describes the presence of children, who appear to revel in the spectacle, egged on by their parents. “I love children, but as I looked about the little faces distorted with passion and the bloodshot eyes of the cruel parents who held them high in their arms, I thanked God that I have none of my own,” King remarks (Wells 1991b, 170). The gallant South rears its ugly head—its actual head—and in *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*, it appears as an undistinguished, barbarous horde gripped by a frenzy of bloodlust.

Grim descriptions such as this recur throughout Wells’s works, marking a deliberate shift in tone from her otherwise journalistic—though always impassioned—prose. There is, of course, no horror for horror’s sake in her tracts, nor are gruesome scenes like the one above included merely to shock readers—white readers especially. Rather, I suggest that Wells is drawing on the abolitionist literary tradition of employing gothic forms and tropes to deliver its message with visceral clarity and to give aesthetic shape to its condemnation of slavery’s inhumanity. As Teresa Goddu observes, through the discourse of horror, the antislavery movement sought to depict slavery as revolting, at the same time making “the unspeakable realities of slavery speakable” (Goddu 2016, 35, 36). As slavery entered its “afterlife” (Hartman 2007, 6) in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, abolitionist discourse evolved to confront segregation and white supremacist terror, as Wells’s writings demonstrate. Following Goddu, and extending her insights on slavery and the literary imagination to the postbellum South, one can see how the gothic—with its hyperbolic scenes of cruelty and horrific offenses—“provided a ready vocabulary” that turned Jim Crow’s “everyday realities into a hideous tale replete with diabolical monsters, barbarous punishments, and terrified victims” (Goddu 2016, 36, 37). It is a tale in which the gothic operates not as a sensationalistic literary device but as a framing discourse that renders the unbelievable truth of lynching legible, as the harrowing description of Henry Smith’s torture quoted above makes clear. By interspersing her accounts and archival reportages of white terrorism in the South with ghastly scenes of spectacular gruesomeness, Wells not only fills a documentary void—redressing the white press’s negligence and minimization of these events—but also, by shifting the focus from fantastical exaggerations of African American bestiality to the actual brutality of white mobs, transforms gothic excess into the hard facts of lynching.⁵

“The Dark Picture”

Wells’s analysis in both *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* begins by dismantling the myth of the Black rapist—an effort closely linked to exposing how Southern passions crossed the color line in both directions. The “facts as they exist” about lynching and the violence incited by anti-miscegenation laws, she writes, also serve “as a defense for the Afro-American

Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs.” She continues: “[I assert] that there are many white women in the South who would marry colored men if such an act would not place them at once beyond the pale of society and within the clutches of the law” (Wells 1991a, 19). Wells’s statement constitutes a strong accusation that boldly discredits the white patriarchal myth of the Southern angelic belle and, at the same time, unmasks the “threadbare lie” weaponized by white society to justify anti-Black terrorism. But Wells’s attack on white Southern masculinity does not end with the fantasy of the pure, innocent maiden; she also directs her *j’accuse* at white men themselves, drawing attention to the centuries-long history of sexual violence against Black women. As she affirms:

no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of million mulattoes in the South will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his own race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power. (Wells 1991b, 147).

Wells issues a forceful indictment, exposing white-on-Black sexual assault as deeply entangled with the Southern social order and its anti-miscegenation laws. In doing so, she counters the dominant narrative that, as Feimster puts it, sought to “flip” the antebellum script of racial and sexual violence. That same corrective impulse animates Pauline Hopkins’s first novel, *Contending Forces*, where the “dark picture” produced by the intersection of systemic racism and gendered aggression forms the story’s haunting undercurrent.

As its subtitle openly declares, *Contending Forces* is “a romance illustrative of Negro life north and south.” This description already signals a shared intention with Wells’s reportages: to inform readers about the lived realities of race in America. Hopkins, however, approaches this aim through a synthesis of realism and genre fiction, proving herself both well-versed in the classic conventions of the romantic novel and astute in courting the tastes of her contemporary readers. *Contending Forces* abounds with familiar tropes: love triangles, secret identities and buried family ties revealed amid the “oohs” and “aahs” of onlookers, villainous suitors scheming to sabotage the central couple, swooning heroines, and melodramatic proclamations of undying devotion and inner turmoil. But the novel is much more than a skilled exercise in genre. Romance proper is interwoven with political discourse, gothic scenes devoted to slavery and lynching, and reflections on both the history and contemporaneity of African American life. Thus, Hopkins’s novel occupies a hybrid middle ground, blending multiple literary forms and stretching the boundaries of realism as it was popularly perceived at the time. Christine A. Wooley notes how the representation of African American life through the lens of realism carried significant ideological weight, since postbellum depictions of Black life—often steeped in racial stereotypes—were nonetheless legitimized as ‘truth’ by dominant racial ideologies. Writers such as Hopkins, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper “unpack[ed] the relationship between literary representation and cultural ‘facts’,” and in doing

so sought to “remake the real”—a sociopolitical intervention that, as Wooley argues, “requires attention to both literary form and the content it presents” (Wooley 2019, 196, 190). Thanks to this attention to the relationship between narrative form and cultural narratives, Hopkins “destabilizes race as she overturns genre” (Daniels 2013, 159), challenging the idea that strict realism—or at least, 19th-century realism in its white-dominated cultural context—can accommodate the full complexity of African American life. As she writes, “*the inmost thoughts and feeling of the Negro*” must be narrated “*with all the fire and romance that lie dormant in our history*” (Hopkins 1988, 14, emphasis in original).

Richard Yarborough ungenerously describes *Contending Force*’s uneven blend of genres as “marked inconsistencies in tone” (1988, xxxvi). Yet rather than flaws, these shifts reveal Hopkins’s deliberately unruly literary practice, which was shaped above all by her unwavering conviction that literature was “of vital significance to the ongoing progress of black people” and should be used “to revise traditional American history, which had so far excluded evidence of a black intellectual perspective” (McKay 1996, 6)—and a Black female perspective most of all. Although not—at least not entirely—a novel of passing in the strict sense, on the higher level of narrative form *Contending Forces* “passes” as a work of popular sentimental fiction, upon which Hopkins scaffolds a pointed critique of Southern segregation—and lynching in particular—and articulates a distinctly African American, female consciousness grounded in history, political urgency, and resistance.⁶

Hopkins’s agenda is openly articulated—and already gothicized—in her preface to the novel, where she asserts that “lynching is raising its head like a venomous monster” and attacks the South’s supposed nobility by labeling its political system “*Anarchy*” and “a cruel revival of piratical methods” (Hopkins 1988, 14, 15). In this, she echoes Wells’s condemnation of the region as a “mob reign” ruled by “lawlessness” (Wells 1991a, 38; 1991b, 237), and—like Wells—subtly reverses the civil/savage gothème by casting white society on the barbaric side of the pale. The convergence with Wells’s discursive strategy is clear throughout the novel, as Hopkins adopts markedly gothic and horrific tones to depict the truculence of the white South. The most striking example appears midway through *Contending Forces*, when the Black community of Boston is shaken by news of a lynching in the South. Quoting a fictional white supremacist newspaper, Hopkins writes:

Jim Jones, a burly black Negro accused of the crime of rape against the person of a beautiful white woman, was taken from his home by a number of our leading citizens, and after being identified by his victim, was carried into the woods, where, before an immense concourse of people, he was bound to a tree, pieces of his flesh were stripped from his body, his eyes were gouged out, his ears cut off, his nose split open, and his legs broken at the knees. (Hopkins 1988, 223)

This scene of shocking, graphic violence—completely at odds with the novel’s main romantic plot and tone—culminates in the ritual sacrifice of the “beast” so dear to Southern chivalry, as

the woman pours oil upon the “wretch” and uses a torch to light the fire that consumes “the black monster.” Soon after, three men accused of hiding Jones are brought to the scene and “hanged to the nearest trees in full sight of the burning wretch, who made the day hideous with his cries of agony” (Hopkins 1988, 223–224). The meticulous depiction of the inhuman torture inflicted on the man exemplifies what Goddu (2016, 41) calls the “logic of accumulation,” a gothic strategy that Hopkins inherits from abolitionist literature—and perhaps from Wells herself—and that suggests how the Jim Crow South is a seamless extension of the antebellum world. Hopkins makes this claim explicitly in the preface to *Contending Forces* (1988, 15), and substantiates it in the novel by portraying the South, much like during slavery, as a “prison house of horrors” (Goddu 2016, 41).

Because of this and as John Cyril Barton argues, the graphic depiction of Jim Jones’s lynching in *Contending Forces* should not be read as a spectacularization of Black suffering. Rather, the emphasis on the horror of racist violence serves as a strategy to “illustrate the casual reiteration and circulation of such violence as a form of cultural critique” (Barton 2022, 24–25). In this light, Hopkins’s unflinching portrayal of lynching functions as a deliberate rhetorical choice to expose the South as a region gripped by anarchy—a hellscape populated by tortured Black bodies. This accent on horror—rooted, as I have shown, in the gothicized language of abolitionism—also reinforces Hopkins’s broader political claim: that the divide between the antebellum and the post-Reconstruction eras is largely illusory in terms of African American lived experience. Marlene D. Allen observes how in Hopkins’s fiction the gothic becomes “a method of signifying how much of the African past continues [...] to haunt black people, and is projected to do so even in the future” (Allen 2017, 96). This sense of historical continuity is further underscored by the novel’s structural symmetry: as Barton notes, *Contending Forces* is organized around two core passages of racialized violence—the lynching of Jim Jones and that of Charles Montfort (discussed below). By showing how the past reverberates in the present through these moments of racist terror, Hopkins “establish[es] a link between racialized lynchings before and after the Civil War” (Barton 2022). In doing so, she mobilizes the gothic not simply as an aesthetic mode but—as David Punter puts it—as a “mode of history and mode of memory” (1996, 188), thereby actively constructing a counter-narrative of the South.

Though Hopkins’s prose is at its most horrific in the scene of Jim Jones’s lynching, her most poignant writing emerges in the extended backstory to the main romance plot—which she presents as a true story (Hopkins 1988, 14) demonstrating once again the tight interrelation of history and the gothic that characterizes *Contending Forces*. The first four chapters of the novel are devoted to the tragic story of Charles Montfort, a rich slave-owner from Bermuda who relocates to North Carolina at the turn of the 19th century, following news that the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade had introduced a bill to

the House of Commons calling for the “*gradual* emancipation” of enslaved people (Hopkins 1988, 19). The narrator repeatedly assures readers that Montfort is “neither a cruel man, nor an avaricious one” and “a good master”—likely a nod to the more conservative segment of the white public. Yet these claims are simultaneously undermined by stark observations: that he distorts justice to force it into what is “conducive to his own interests”; and that his plan is to “gradually free his slaves without impoverishing himself” (Hopkins 1988, 22, 23, 24). These declarations leave little doubt about the author’s actual moral judgment of this supposedly benign member of the Southern plantation aristocracy.

As the narrative moves from Bermuda to the United States with Montfort, the setting shifts from a stereotypically Edenic idyll to a landscape marked by crudeness and violence. A group of enslaved people sings a work song while their rawhide-armed overseer casually discusses a recent lynching with an acquaintance: “Thar’s been some talk ‘bout a risin’ among the niggers, and so we jes tuk a few o’ them an’ strun ‘em up fer an eggssample to the res’,” the latter remarks (Hopkins 1988, 35–36). The story does not seem to stir the overseer in the least, but when his friend tells him about a white man who “wuz seed walkin’ with Jimison’s wench Violy” and supposedly planned to elope to “Canidy” with her—“his wurst offense, in ginerall, wuz thet he wuz meanin’ fer to marry her!”—the overseer finally reacts: “What is we comin’ to, by thunder!” (Hopkins 1988, 36). The exchange between these two avowed advocates of the Southern savage ideal suggests that male desire for Black women is tolerated—even encouraged—as long as it does not cross the color line through marriage, evoking the *bête noire* of miscegenation. Moreover, and even if the reported incidents are not explicitly related to each other, juxtaposing the miscegenation scare with lynching reveals their intimate connection, a link Hopkins underscores by defining them as two facets of the same “dark picture” (Hopkins 1988, 15).

The dialogue also foreshadows the fate of Montfort, his two sons, and his stunningly beautiful wife, Grace. In an episode that draws on both romance and gothic conventions, Montfort’s neighbor, Anson Pollock, becomes consumed by desire for Grace and devises a diabolical plan to murder her husband and force her into submission. This event constitutes the backbone and moral center of *Contending Forces*, serving also as a blueprint for the novel’s main plot. The final confrontation between Pollock and the Montforts reverberates throughout the story, ultimately becoming a spectral *deus ex machina* in the later narrative arc. Its centrality in the novel’s structure demonstrates Hopkins’s determination to place Black womanhood front and center in her condemnation of white Southern society—showing how the violence that is constitutional to the latter’s order depends on the systematic violation of Black female bodies. In doing so, Hopkins reverses the myth of the Black male rapist to expose the true flow of sexual violence in the South: from white men to Black women.

Crucial to this claim is the rumor that the beautiful Grace, and possibly her husband as well, is passing as white, possessing “a black streak in her somewhar,” as one character affirms (Hopkins 1988, 41). This whisper, together with the accusation that Montfort might incite a slave revolt through his liberal policies, leads to his undoing: he is shot dead by an angry mob headed by Pollock, in a clear reenactment of a lynching. Unlike the graphic spectacle of Jim Jones’s murder, however, Montfort’s killing is notably unspectacularized, likely to channel readers’ attention toward the revelatory scene that follows: Mrs. Montfort’s lashing. Although Grace Montfort’s racial identity is never explicitly confirmed, this much-discussed passage suggests she is indeed part Black—or, rather, casts her as a symbolic embodiment of Black womanhood.

After Montfort’s death, Pollock’s henchmen go on a rampage: two “savage men” (Hopkins 1988, 69) bind her to a whipping post and alternately lash her with rawhides. This scene is strikingly graphic compared to Montfort’s bloodless death: “A shriek from the victim—a spurt of blood that splattered the torturer—a long, raw gash across a tender, white back. [...] The blood stood in a pool about her feet” (Hopkins 1988, 69). The unsettling care with which Hopkins narrates this scene exemplifies her use of horror to expose the prevarication and violence upon which the Southern white social order is built. This time, however, the violence is explicitly gendered. The scene has been read as a rape (Brown 1996)—and sexual assault is undoubtedly suggested by the vivid violation of Mrs. Montfort’s flesh. But this interpretation must be integrated with a reading of the whipping as the moment in which Grace’s body is marked as enslaved—as suggested by Allison Berg (1996) and Jennifer Putzi (2004)—and thus as Black.

If Grace Montfort could be read as a representation of white women’s complicity in racial oppression up to this point (Putzi 2004, 13), the brutal revelation of her Blackness—implied by the lashing she endures—transforms her into the novel’s most potent symbol of white male violence against Black women. The white wife of a successful plantation owner—epitomizing Southern virtue, which lynching claims to protect, and serving as the axis of white Southern patriarchy—is now transfigured into a Black woman who has truly been violated. The emblem Grace once was is desecrated, and with her collapses the fiction she embodied. Once again, the language of terror exposes the bleak truths beneath white Southern myths.

With this scene, and in light of the novel’s declared intent as outlined by Hopkins in the preface, *Contending Forces* seems to suggest that behind the recurrent—and overrepresented—accusation of a Black man assaulting a white woman lies a repressed narrative: that of Black women subjected to sexual violence by white men. Grace’s eerie fate reads as a testament to the unspoken, spectral persistence of that narrative within the male-dominated South. “Shortly after these events Grace Montfort disappeared and was never seen again,” Hopkins writes. “The waters of Pamlico Sound tell of sweet oblivion for the broken-

hearted found within their soft embrace” (Hopkins 1988, 71). With a final gothic stroke, the woman becomes both ghost and legend among the enslaved people of the region, in whose tales she walks “weeping and wringing her hands, night after night about the plantation” (Hopkins 1988, 71). In the end, she surfaces as another Black specter haunting the South, testifying to a history of racial violence obscured by the narrative of gallantry the region fabricated to conceal its sins—one that the works of Ida B. Wells and Pauline Hopkins expose in all its grim reality through the gothic sensibility of their prose.

At the intersection of Wells’s investigations and Hopkins’s fiction lies an urgent confrontation with white-devised narratives that obscure the realities of racial and sexual violence in the post-Reconstruction South. Through distinct but complementary strategies, they dismantle the myth of Southern chivalry to salvage Black stories—and, in the case of Hopkins, especially those of Black women—that would otherwise remain unwritten, while also shedding light on Black American history more broadly. In their works, the gothic becomes a rhetoric of denunciation, a structure of memory, and ultimately a vehicle for social mobilization and historical redress. Together, *Southern Horrors*, *The Red Record*, and *Contending Forces* unearth what the white South sought to bury—showing how the language of terror can be used as a vehicle for truth.

In recasting the South’s myth of civility as barbarism, and its myth of purity as violence, Wells’s reportages and Hopkins’s novel demonstrate how, in the hands of the “proscribed race” (Hopkins 1998, 8), the gothic does not merely represent racial terror but actively reconfigures its meaning, shifting horror and monstrosity from the racialized Other onto the society that produces them. In this reconfiguration lies an act of resistance that reshapes the cultural imagination of the South, stripping away its gallant, nostalgic veneer to reveal a landscape structured by brutality, sexual violence, and systemic terrorism. By staging lynching and white Southern society in gothic terms—through hauntings, grotesque spectacles, and scenes of horror—Hopkins and Wells force the South’s own narratives of itself into confrontation with the truths they suppress. Their works ensure that the violence inflicted on Black bodies—and Black history—does not remain buried under white Southern fantasies, but is instead brought to light with the power to haunt the nation’s conscience.

Notes

¹ Debates over the aesthetics of “terror” and “horror” in gothic literature date back to Ann Radcliffe’s seminal essay “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826). Since then, a substantial body of criticism has emerged to distinguish the psychological, suspense-driven atmosphere of terror from the more visceral, corporeal shock associated with horror. In *The Gothic Flame* (1923)—a study that David Punter calls “strange and irritating” (1996a, 15)—Devendra Varma nonetheless offers a useful formulation: the difference between the two modes, he writes, “is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse” (1923, 130). While terror and horror have always coexisted within the gothic tradition, as Clive Bloom notes (2012, 211), not all gothic tales are horror stories (Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example), nor are all horror stories gothic in the traditional sense (Stephen King’s *Cujo* being one such case). Bloom also

observes that horror remains relatively underdefined as a literary mode, often being conflated with the gothic *tout court*. Indeed, a number of scholars—including Punter in his foundational *The Literature of Terror*—do not draw a sharp line between gothic and horror.

Rather than attempting to define rigid distinctions between gothic and horror fiction—a task better suited for a broader theoretical inquiry—this essay follows a lineage of scholarship that traces the African American gothic to the slave narrative tradition (see Wester 2012, 35–66). Slavery—and its “afterlives” (Hartman 2007, 6) of segregation and racist terrorism—function as core themes that necessitate an aesthetic capable of conveying both the psychological terror and the brutal reality of Black life under white supremacy. In this context, the rhetorical strategies of terror and horror are often deeply imbricated, working in tandem to evoke both dread and abjection. Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* exemplifies this dynamic, as it deploys both gothic atmosphere and horrific spectacle to document the racialized violence structuring Black life at the turn of the 20th century.

² A wide range of scholars have approached the gothic as a language (Malchow 1996, 4) and a discourse (Miles 1991), resulting in an “ultra-adaptable” writing strategy (Lenhardt 2020, 16) capable of articulating a “psychological argument” (Punter and Byron 2004, xviii), “a mode of history and a mode of memory” (Punter 1996, 188), and even a theory of race (Malchow 1996; Young 2008; Wester 2014, 2019; Lenhardt 2020). My analysis is shaped by this broader and more nuanced understanding of the gothic. In particular, the intersection of gothic discourse with race and history is central to my approach.

³ Halberstam argues that “in the context of the twentieth-century gothic, race becomes a master signifier of monstrosity, and when invoked, it blocks out all other possibilities of monstrous identity” (1995, 6). Malchow and Lenhardt not only affirm this claim but demonstrate its structural centrality across the British and American gothic traditions. I align with and build on their view in asserting that the racialized Other is the constitutive threat around which the genre organizes its terrors and anxieties—especially in the American context.

⁴ Similar racialized gender dynamics—particularly the fear of the Black male or monstrous Other desiring the white woman—persist in later films, including the Gill-Man’s fixation on Kay Lawrence in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and the titular ape’s obsession with the “golden girl” in *King Kong* (1933), perhaps the most archetypal variation on this theme.

⁵ On the failures of the white press, the efforts of the Black press to generate public discussion, and the challenges of collecting lynching testimonies in the late nineteenth century, see Brundage 2021.

⁶ In this, *Contending Forces* appears to fall within the nineteenth-century tradition of African American literature that deployed the trope of passing—understood also as a rhetorical strategy with broader narrative implications—to celebrate the “distinctive history, culture, tradition, and worldview” of Black people and, more importantly, to “[represent] blackness as a consciousness, as well as a condition” well before the Harlem Renaissance (Fabi 2001, 6). For a thorough study of this tradition, see Fabi 2001.

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Marco Petrelli is Associate Professor of American literature at the University of Pisa. He authored *Paradiso in nero: spazio e mito nella narrativa di Cormac McCarthy* (Aracne 2020); *Nick Cave. Preghiere di fuoco e ballate assassine* (Castel Negrino 2021); and several essays dedicated to the literature and culture of the US South, American Gothic fiction, African American literature, geocriticism and graphic narratives. Among his latest publications are "A Theory of Southern Time and Space: Memory, Place and Identity in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*" (in *The Southern Quarterly* 58. 3), and "'I need the story to go': Sing, Unburied Sing, Afropessimism and Black Narratives of Redemption" (in *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays*, Edinburgh University Press 2023). His current research project focuses on storytelling, ghosts, and the blues in African American narratives. Email: marco.petrelli@unipi.it