

**Stony Brook University
The Graduate School**

Doctoral Defense Announcement

Abstract

Specters of Haiti: Race, Fear, and the American Gothic, 1789-1855

By

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This dissertation argues that the early American gothic is different from that of the British gothic and that the specter of slave violence in Saint-Domingue accounts for this difference. Unlike the British gothic, which overwrote a despotic, Catholic past onto a revolutionary, “terror”-filled present, American writers wrote a French and American Revolutionary present onto a future in which the worst fears of the early Republic were realized: French Revolutionary philosophy, itself related to the American Revolutionary experience, in the hands of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the slaves in Saint-Domingue. In an atmosphere of nascent national consciousness, the gothic tale in particular became the ideal literary form for grappling with the fear which accompanied the Haitian Revolution. A fundamentally ambivalent form, the gothic could at once highlight the contradictions implicit in the American Constitution, while also rendering the most terrifying scenes of violence practiced upon that constitution. The uprisings that resulted in the first black nation state of Haiti in 1804—and especially the reports of these events circulated in American popular media—supply the material examples on which such scenes become imagined. The frequency and flexibility of the Haitian Revolution as a symbol of widespread anxiety about possible slave violence in the early republic make it indelible in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century American writing and constitutive of its most enduring form, the gothic tale. Aiming to contribute to the emerging field of Transatlantic Romanticism, my dissertation surveys tales and criticism on both sides of the Atlantic, from British romanticists such as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Mathew Lewis, and William Godwin, to the pamphlets and journalism of William Cobbett, novels and essays of Charles Brockden Brown, trial reports and newspaper notices on the slave conspiracies of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, transatlantic writer for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* John Howison, and finally to modern American romanticists Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville.

Date: May 10, 2007

Time: 3:30 pm

Place: (Building, Room No.)

Program: English

Dissertation Advisor: Susan Scheckel