ABSTRACT

CHARLOTTE MITCHELL. “Haunting Back:” The Subaltern Gothic and Genre as Cultural Haunting (Under the direction of Dr. Matt May and Dr. David Rieder)

Critical rhetoric currently lacks an adequate framework for addressing the desiring subject’s abiding affective investment in senseless ideological fantasy structures that reproduce themselves through needless suffering of other subjects. Josh Gunn urges rhetorical critics to turn toward a psychoanalytically-informed “rhetoric of interiors” that seriously considers the neglected persuasive dimensions of affect, fantasy, and desire in the public imagination that contribute to the formation of ideologically-invested subjects. Critical psychorhetorical analysis of genre, understood as compulsive repetitions of fantasy structures haunting the public imagination that simultaneously mirror and shape individual and public consciousness, has the potential to help us begin to understand our cultural investment in a complex of toxic racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies that persist beyond and despite our conscious comprehension. To work towards developing a critical psychorhetorical theory of genre, I look to the southern gothic, a genre that explicitly addresses cultural constructs of haunting and evil, and describe how this genre’s explicit representation of haunting has largely concealed traces of ideological ghosts that haunt the structure itself and reinforced the disciplinary efforts of white heteropatriarchy. I then look to the emerging tradition of the subaltern southern gothic, whose radical treatment of haunting and self-conscious subversion of traditional genre conventions articulates the genre’s unspoken foundational anxieties surrounding racial and sexual Otherness; the subaltern southern gothic, through intentional disruption of the gothic form, undertakes a significant revision of the psycho-social field. Finally, to demonstrate the radical potential of this counter-hegemonic genre to “haunt back,” effecting social change, I describe how Randall Kenan’s subaltern gothic novel *A Visitation of Spirits* re-appropriates traditional gothic tropes to problematize traditional western notions of otherness and monstrosity.