

ROBIN R. MEANS COLEMAN

SECOND EDITION

HORROR NOIRE

**A History of Black American Horror
from the 1890s to Present**

ROUTLEDGE


HORROR NOIRE

From *King Kong* to *Candyman*, the boundary-pushing genre of horror film has always been a site for provocative explorations of race in American popular culture. This book offers a comprehensive chronological survey of Black horror from the 1890s to present day.

In this second edition, Robin R. Means Coleman expands upon the history of notable characterizations of Blackness in horror cinema, with new chapters spanning the 1960s, 2000s, and 2010s to the present, and examines key levels of Black participation on screen and behind the camera. The book addresses a full range of Black horror films, including mainstream Hollywood fare, art-house films, Blaxploitation films, and U.S. hip-hop culture–inspired Nollywood films. This new edition also explores the resurgence of the Black horror genre in the last decade, examining the success of Jordan Peele’s films *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019), smaller independent films such as *The House Invictus* (2018), and Nia DaCosta’s sequel to *Candyman* (2021). Means Coleman argues that horror offers a unique representational space for Black people to challenge negative or racist portrayals and to portray greater diversity within the concept of Blackness itself.

This book is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand how fears and anxieties about race and race relations are made manifest, and often challenged, on the silver screen.

Robin R. Means Coleman is Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion, Chief Diversity Officer, and Ida B. Wells and Ferdinand Barnett Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Northwestern University. Her previous books include the first edition of this title, *African Americans and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, and the edited

collection *Say It Loud! African Americans, Media and Identity*, along with the co-edited volume *Fight the Power! The Spike Lee Reader* and the co-authored *Intercultural Communication for Everyday Life*. Her documentary *Horror Noire* (2019) won the 2020 Rondo Hatton Award for Best Documentary and the 2019 FearNyc Trailblazer Award.

HORROR NOIRE

A History of Black American Horror
from the 1890s to Present

Second Edition

Robin R. Means Coleman

Cover image: CANDYMAN © 2021 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc. and BRON Creative MG1, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

Second edition published 2023

by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2023 Robin R. Means Coleman

The right of Robin R. Means Coleman to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

First edition published by Routledge 2011

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Means Coleman, Robin R., 1969– author.

Title: Horror noire : a history of Black American horror from the 1890s to present / Robin R. Means Coleman.

Description: Second Edition. | New York, NY ; Abingdon, Oxon : Routledge, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022027659 (print) | LCCN 2022027660 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367767198 (hbk) | ISBN 9780367704407 (pbk) | ISBN 9781003168256 (ebk)

Classification: LCC PN1995.9.H6 M43 2023 (print) | LCC PN1995.9.H6 (ebook) | DDC 791.43/61640896073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022027659>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022027660>

ISBN: 978-0-367-76719-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-70440-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-16825-6 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003168256

Typeset in Bembo

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

CONTENTS

<i>Dedication</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xix</i>
Introduction: Studying Blacks and Horror Films	1
1 The Birth of the Black Boogeyman: Pre-1930s	17
2 Jungle Fever—A Horror Romance: 1930s	43
3 Horrifying Goons and Minstrel Coons: 1940s	77
4 Black Invisibility, White Science: 1950s	111
5 A Night with Ben: 1960s	123
6 Scream, Whitey, Scream—Retribution, Enduring Women, and Carnality: 1970s	158
7 We Always Die First—Invisibility, Racial Red-Lining, and Self-Sacrifice: 1980s	197
8 Black Is Back! Retribution and the Urban Terrain: 1990s	235

vi Contents

9	Growing Painz: 2000s	276
10	Representation, Recognition, and Renaissance: 2010s to Present	313
11	Conclusion: Black Horror Today and Tomorrow	357
	<i>Index</i>	364

For Ashlee Blackwell and Tananarive Due. Happily, the Horror Noire documentary brought us together. I am so very grateful for your continued support and our lasting friendship.

Luv 'ya both.

For Mark H. Harris, creator of the incredible website blackhorrormovies.com. You are an absolutely extraordinary writer and editor, with a terrific wit to boot. I am as thankful as I am lucky for our many collaborations (with more to come!).

To the Harris family, thank you.

For Black horror innovators, William Crain, Rusty Cundieff (a fellow Pittsburgher!), Kasi Lemmons, Ken Foree, and John Jennings. Your brilliance and art inspire me.

For Miguel A. Núñez Jr. and Tony Todd. Thank you for your Cameo videos in which you motivated me to get this book done. I listened.

To the Means and Coleman families: I love you!

ILLUSTRATIONS

All images courtesy of Photofest

1.1	Gus meets his doom at the hands of the KKK in <i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	26
1.2	The Monster and Maria in <i>Frankenstein</i>	29
2.1	Kong's next victims in <i>King Kong</i>	50
2.2	A zombie with Murder in <i>White Zombie</i>	59
2.3	The taint of a Black man's shadow in <i>Black Moon</i>	63
3.1	Only a Black man's shadow can enter the white boudoir in <i>I Walked with a Zombie</i>	81
3.2	Dr. Jackson prepares to meet her end at the hands of her ingagi	87
3.3	Spencer Williams Jr. (with hat)	88
3.4	Mantan Moreland	99
3.5	Willie Best	103
5.1	Ben being thrown onto the pyre in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i>	145
5.2	Peter readies to battle zombies in <i>Dawn of the Dead</i>	149
6.1	Blacula in full rage in <i>Blacula</i>	162
6.2	The Thing with Two Heads	166
6.3	Hess and Ganja in <i>Ganja & Hess</i>	176
6.4	The monster Abby in <i>Abby</i>	181
6.5	Sugar's cleavage invites more stares than her zombies in <i>Sugar Hill</i>	182
7.1	Epiphany Proudfoot in Voodoo ritual in <i>Angel Heart</i>	211
7.2	White Dog	221
7.3	The silent but deadly Katrina in <i>Vamp</i>	225
8.1	Joel and K in <i>Def by Temptation</i>	239
8.2	Snoop in <i>Hood of Horror</i>	248

8.3	Sethe and Beloved in <i>Beloved</i>	258
8.4	Candyman invites, “be my victim,” in <i>Candyman</i>	263
9.1	Alexa Woods and the alien monster in <i>AVP</i>	302
10.1	Chris isn’t sure what to make of Rose’s friends in <i>Get Out</i>	319
10.2	A Tethered family portrait in <i>Us</i>	327
10.3	Anthony in <i>Candyman</i>	331
10.4	Dmitri and Nya are backed into a corner in <i>The First Purge</i>	335
10.5	Gail Bishop (played by Regina Hall) in <i>Master</i>	340

FOREWORD

I love horror. I engage the genre as the consummate fan. Importantly, I also contribute to it through my award-winning books and short stories as well as screenplays. When I moved the deep regard I have of horror into a pedagogical space with my 2017 UCLA course, “The Sunken Place: Racism, Survival, and Black Horror Aesthetic,” it was inevitable that I would engage the scholarship of Robin Means Coleman and the first edition of her book *Horror Noire* (2011). Her book helped to put horror, *Black* horror, into necessary sociopolitical and historical context.

Horror Noire and Jordan Peele’s Academy Award–winning 2017 movie *Get Out* came together at the perfect time. It had not dawned on me that I could have a Black horror course before *Get Out* and that it could be so richly enlivened by the historical accounting in *Horror Noire*. *Get Out* was the reference point to talk about Blackness, horror, and lived experience. *Horror Noire* was the cinema-based study of these topics, remarkably going back to the nineteenth century.

Since “The Sunken Place,” I co-executive produced the award-winning documentary *Horror Noire* in 2019 based on Robin’s book. Still more recently, two of my films have been included in the *Horror Noire* film anthology. Today, “horror noire” is THE eponym for the Black horror genre. It is certainly time for a second edition of the *Horror Noire* book, and I am glad that time has arrived!

But what is this thing we call the Black horror genre? As I said in the *Horror Noire* documentary, “Black history is Black horror.” Embedded in this definition—Black history is Black horror—are the ways in which the U.S. has engaged in anti-Blackness practices. For me, this terrible history hits particularly close to home. My mother, Patricia Stephens Due, was a civil rights activist (she is in the Florida Civil Rights Hall of Fame). In 1960, she was a part of the first jail-in in Florida. My mother was simply seeking basic human rights for Blacks in America. She and other students from Florida A&M were jailed for 49 days. Worse, she paid a terrible

physical price as police fired tear gas canisters at her, permanently damaging her eyes. I know all too well that in our lived experiences, Black history is Black horror.

Black horror evidences enormous capacity to interrogate this festering wound in the American psyche that has been present since our nation's birth. Black horror has powerfully examined the monstrosity of racism, and *Horror Noire* digs into those presentations, such as *Them* (2021). And, significantly, Black horror need not always be about the horrors Blacks have to navigate because of the identities that they hold. *Horror Noire* captures us just *being*, doing so through discussions of films like *Night's End* (2022). The point is that Black Horror isn't always historical trauma porn. Rather, Black horror is also the universal through the specific. It can point to specific social, political, and family histories and stories of African Americans—even as racism isn't the monster. It can be a place to showcase scares that are meted out or navigated by Black people. It moves beyond the tropes to show Black characters and their full humanity. Black horror can simply be. The end.

The great thing about the horror genre is that it is an emotion. Was it scary? If it was scary to you, then it was horror. For different people, they will have vastly different definitions of what is horror. For example, *Eve's Bayou* (1997), which is discussed so well here in *Horror Noire*, to me, that's horror. It is brilliant Black horror. Some people might say, "Well, isn't that a family drama?" Absolutely! But there is also a bit of the metaphysical and voodoo in there. And, of course, the family dynamic is so horrific. That's what makes it horror. The monster is in the house. The worst monsters do tend to come from right inside the house, inside the family, and sometimes inside ourselves!

So much has happened since the first edition of *Horror Noire*, and I am excited that this second edition is capturing the progress in the genre of the last decades while, too, looking forward to the future of Black horror. Black women as directors and as stars in the genre have taken center stage. Jordan Peele's win of the Academy Award for Best Screenplay for *Get Out* whetted the appetite for still more Black horror—for example, *Us* (2019), *Candyman* (2021), *Tales from the Hood 2* (2018) and *3* (2020), and *Nope* (2022). Streaming services (in part due to the pandemic) saw an explosion of Black horror being featured on the small screen—*Bad Hair* (2020), *Body Cam* (2020), *His House* (2020), *Spell* (2020), and the *Horror Noire Anthology* (2021), to name a few. Robin brings fresh critical-cultural attention to the genre's new directors (e.g., Nia DaCosta), themes (e.g., Black films absent a focus on anti-Blackness and absent the usual stereotypes and tropes), and controversies (e.g., trauma porn). *Horror Noire 2nd ed.* proves that the study of Black history *is* Black horror.

Tananarive Due, MFA

UCLA Instructor

American Book Award Winner

NAACP Image Award Winner

2008 Carl Brandon Kindred Award Winner

2016 British Fantasy Award

2020 Ignite Awards Winner

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION OF *HORROR NOIRE*

When I wrote the Preface to the first edition of *Horror Noire*, I was motivated, in part, by a feeling that I had to justify why I would write a book on the history of an often-disrespected film genre—horror. If horror was rendered a niche study in the so-called scholarly canon, then one can only imagine the ways in which *Black* horror was marginalized. It was not merely my imagination that I was taking a risk. In spite of the academic freedom protections that being a, then, tenured associate professor might engender, I was soundly warned off writing a book on Black horror by those who thought it would jeopardize my prospects for promotion to full professor. The study of *Black* horror was simply not viewed as enough. For example, I was cautioned that absent the comparative (i.e., whites' participation in horror), the book would be “too narrow.” And, absent physiological responses to horror (i.e., as one person wrongheadedly suggested, I could explain the violence purportedly “endemic” in Black communities through horror), a critical/cultural/historical examination of Blackness through the lens of the horror genre was “an odd thing.” In response, I wrote a Preface that I remain proud of. It is one that, through personal storytelling, claps back at those lightweight objections while centering Blackness and Black horror in our understanding of American history, (pop) culture, and progress.

I am so glad that I did not listen to the skeptics. Instead, I found the scholarship of Frances Gateward as a motivating force, confirming my decision that the study of Black horror was necessary and valuable. In 2004, Gateward edited a special issue of the journal *Genders* entitled “Scared of the Dark: Race and the Horror Film.” I was emboldened to press on with my full history of Black horror beginning in the 1800s, through my cultural analysis, in my unique voice.

But the important lesson here is gratitude, particularly for what I affectionally call my “Sister Scholars,” like Gateward, who have had an impact on the

continued study of Blackness and horror. Enter award-winning writer/scholars Ashlee Blackwell (Saint Joseph's University) and Tananarive Due (UCLA). It was Blackwell who read the first edition of *Horror Noire* and saw its adaptability as a documentary film. It was Due who launched her course "The Sunken Place: Racism, Survival, and Black Horror Aesthetic" informed, in part, by the contours of *Horror Noire*, the first edition. Blackwell, Due, and I, three fierce Black women, came together for *Horror Noire* the documentary as co-producers and talent and have been connected ever since, further advancing interrogations into race, media (not just film), and horror.

"Horror noire" is now part of the popular lexicon as an eponym to describe the genre of "Black horror." *Get Out* (2017), a Black horror film, has earned an Academy Award. There is an ongoing rush to produce more Black horror across media platforms. Black horror is enjoying mainstream appeal and major industrial support through funding and distribution. Gone are the days of justifying the discursive and cultural importance of Black horror (yes, I was promoted to a professor for my various Black horror projects).

In the Preface to the first edition of *Horror Noire*, I recalled how I walked in the footsteps of George "Night of the Living Dead" Romero in our shared hometown of Pittsburgh, PA. A few years after my book came out, I caught up with Romero at a horror convention and listened to his a posteriori arguments about the function of Blackness in his *Dead* series. He co-signed on a key inquiry that shapes the study of horror, "what is scarier, the frights that we create for the screen, or the horrors that this society metes out on itself?" Today, Jordan Peele is influential in shaping modern horror. In addition to his Oscar-winning writing for *Get Out*, he has earned acclaim for *Us* (2019), re-introduced the *Twilight Zone* TV series (2019–), sparked the formation of countless scholarly conference presentations with *Candyman* (2021), and invited praise for his reminder of the Black rodeo tradition through his frightening *Nope* (2022). Peele and this generation of horror creators—like Nia DaCosta, Moesha Bean, and Mariama Diallo—are taking stories of Blackness to new complex and interesting heights sans the B-movie, low-budget stigma. They are crafting bold, entertaining stories. These creators and a great many others have produced much since *Horror Noire*, first edition. It is time to reexamine this daring genre, while shifting away from "here's a stereotype, there's a stereotype" missives. Black horror deserves better, and this generation of image-makers delivers.

Preface to the First Edition of *Horror Noire*

Rick Worland (2007), in his book *The Horror Film*, rather cheekily, though astutely, observes that horror film book authors have a propensity to include "more or less ironic declarations of whether their interest [in horror films] began in childhood or fairly recently, implicitly arguing that one's credibility to speak about the genre was somehow either enhanced or hurt by just when the writer's

interest began.”¹ Here, I join in this trite trend to offer my own declaration of interest—I got into horror films at a very tender age, perhaps as early as 5 years old. This revelation is about more than me confessing the “psychological jungles” of my slightly insane childhood.² My coming clean about consuming horror—and liking it!—is offered to give you some sense of my unique experiences with horror. It is my hope that this glimpse into my psychosocial world will help you to understand where, in part, my interpretations of Blacks’ representations in horror films are coming from.

Confessions of a Horror Kid

I write this book flush with a sense of entitlement. I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA. For you truly diehard horror film fans, I need not say more, as you already fully understand how I can claim this book to be my destiny. For those of you who need a hint: my birthplace is home to the Hercules of horror, George “*Night of the Living Dead*” Romero, as well as to special effects creator extraordinaire Tom “*Godfather of Gore*” Savini.³

As a pre-teen, I was keenly aware that I was quite literally walking in the footsteps of Romero and Savini in my favorite Pittsburgh shopping complex—Monroeville Mall. The Mall (as we Pittsburghers call it) is the spatially and ideologically terrifying centerpiece of the 1979 Romero film *Dawn of the Dead*. The film also featured the spectacular living-to-undead effects wizardry of Savini, who even appears in a substantial cameo role as a “biker zombie.”

In 1979, at the age of 10, I very much liked doing what bored kids across the nation like to do—I hung out at the mall. The teen character Flip Dog (Danny Hoch) in the movie *Whiteboyz* (1999) put this mundane, modern-youth rite of passage into perspective rather succinctly: “All they do is hang out at the mall every day . . . and walk back and forth from Footlocker to Chi-Chi’s, Chi-Chi’s to Footlocker. . . . Those are whack fucking activities.”⁴ Whack indeed. It was kids of my generation who shamelessly started the trend of ditching sand lots and playgrounds, opting instead to walk the wings of shopping malls like zombies.

But Monroeville Mall back in the 1970s was really something rather special. For one, its main floor was then made up of an indoor ice-skating rink. With the rink enclosed in Plexiglas, it looked much like the Civic Arena (a.k.a. the Big Igloo), home to the Pittsburgh Penguins. One could sit at the adjacent Pup-A-Go Go, a restaurant modeled on a hotdog stand, and watch little future Mario Lemieuxs awkwardly speed up and down the ice while little future Michelle Kwans kept to the center of the rink, cross-cutting and jumping. A few years later, the Mall management, failing to heed Romero’s missive on the dangers of mass production, would tear out the one-of-its-kind ice rink and Pup-A-Go Go combo. A cookie-cutter (pun intended) Mrs. Fields is now where center ice used to be.

I saw *Dawn of the Dead* with my grandmother and mother at the Greater Pittsburgh Drive-In Theatre, which often featured late-night horror movies. Though

a decade after *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero's *Dawn* seemed to attract its fair share of Black viewers. There are, perhaps, two intersecting theories about Black folks' affinity with the *Dawn* film. The first explanation is that a decade earlier many of the theaters that showed *Night* were located in inner cities, serving a predominately Black audience.⁵ Perhaps access contributed to Blacks' initial love affair with Romero. However, I think that proximity was just one part of what brought Black viewers to subsequent Romero films. The other key enticement was that *Night* had Ben! Ben (Duane Jones)—a complex, emboldened Black starring character who was calm under fire, competently took charge of a deadly situation, and who surprisingly kicked some (white) butt and took names (after all, Ben does slap around and shoot a white man).

We, two women and a kid, rode out to that drive-in to see if Romero's *Dawn* would again deliver to us another non-shuffling, anti-exploitation, empowered Black hero. Romero did not let us down. He provocatively provided a Black conqueror and more, through the hardy character Peter (Ken Foree), who survives the zombie plague and seeks safety along with a relative stranger—a very pregnant white woman (gasp!), Francine (Gaylen Ross). Would Peter and Francine find hope and a zombie-free life elsewhere? Who is going to deliver Francine's baby (double-gasp!)? Be it 1968 with *Night*, 1979 with *Dawn*, or even today, such representations of race, sex, and gender relationships still remain a big deal.

If memory serves, my trip to the drive-in with my folks was made all the more sublime when *Night* came on after *Dawn* as part of a special Romero double-feature. I kept my sleepiness at bay so that I could again take in *Night* (I'd seen it before) with the "mature" eye of a 10-year-old. I saw the flesh-eating as "nasty." However, I was indescribably, deeply affected by *Night's* infamous ending that served, in my mind, then and now, as a powerful indictment on race relations. In the heart-wrenching, closing scenes of *Night*, after Ben has beaten all odds to survive the night against the cannibal zombies, he is (symbolically) lynched by a mob of shotgun-toting white men. The film reflected directly upon the social climate of its time. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. occurred the very day—April 4, 1968—Romero was driving *Night* to New York City for distribution. For many Black folks in 1968, on the heels of Dr. King's assassination, it was plausible to question if a self-assured Black man like Ben could at least safely exist on the big screen. Though Romero's film was fantastical with its flesh-eating zombies, it was still a film of significant realism. He directed the attention of the film's audience, demanding that we take account of how in the real world of Black men white mobs are far more deadly.

I recall my grandmother being willing to place her hand on a stack of bibles and swear that she recognized one of those "gun toting, Black-man-killing, so and sos," as she called them, featured in the film. I hate to say it, but she may have been right. Real-life Pittsburgh area police and other locals appeared as extras in the pivotal *Night* scene that decided Ben's fate. What we saw in *Dawn* and *Night* were truly *our* Pittsburgh experiences on that screen.

Pittsburgh, like many U.S. cities in the 1960s and 1970s, made it easy to be hesitant about its progressive potential (particularly for minorities). Pittsburgh was, and is, a segregated city. Its neighborhoods are culturally rich, but they also serve as de facto racial boundaries. The Bloomfield neighborhood is predominately Italian. The Polish Hill neighborhood speaks for itself. On the north side of the city, Black folks, especially those living in the segregated remote elevations of the Northview Heights housing project, have to go through great efforts to reach Pittsburgh's downtown. They must get down from atop the city's steepest hills, cross over the "flats," and make their way across bridges over Pittsburgh's famed three rivers—the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio—to get downtown, also known as Pittsburgh's "cultural district." The cultural district happily plays host to touring Broadway shows, conventions, and, even on occasion, a classic horror film festival. To connect with those Black folks living in, for example, the altitudes of the city's east side requires comparable effort. Hence, not only is interracial connection a bit of a challenge in the old Steel City, but also *intra*racial uniting is not all that easy either.

In 2005, Romero made his fourth entry to the *Dead* film series with *Land of the Dead*. *Land's* social commentary is all about boundaries—corporate versus public, rich versus poor, insiders versus outsiders—and location, particularly how those darn three rivers reinforce all manner of divides and separation. I cheered while watching *Land* as the Black gas station attendant-turned-zombie rebel faction leader took the very long walk down out of his neighborhood. He dove into the Point—where the three rivers meet—and marched across the water's murky bottom with his army of dispossessed compatriots to express his dissatisfaction, in his own "special" way, about the values of those on the other side of the racial, class, and corporate tracks in the cultural district. Romero does get Pittsburgh so very well.

Pittsburgh has also, dubiously, afforded me some additional horror cultural capital to draw on. In 1982, the horror film *White Dog* told the story of a vicious German shepherd dog trained by a white racist to kill Black people. When people remark on the fantastical storyline of *White Dog*, I remind them of Dolpho, an Alsatian police dog. In a Pittsburgh suburb, in 2002, Dolpho had three official complaints lodged against him by Blacks for unprovoked attacks. Things came to a head when the dog opted to rip into a 9-year-old Black boy rather than pursue, upon its white handler's command, a nearby, fleeing white drug suspect.⁶ Dolpho was suspended from the force.

At present, Pittsburgh is also home to a vampire "Meetup" group (but then, isn't every city?), and it is working to expand its werewolf group for people like "Nicole," who posts on the werewolf.meetup.com message board, "hi everyone. I'm 20 yrs old, female, and a werewolf. That's about all." The city also boasts the Pittsburgh Ghost Hunters Association (PGHA) that has been investigating paranormal activity in the area since 2002. The "hunters" of the PGHA claim to be particularly knowledgeable about instrumental trans-communicating (ITC).

That is, they record messages “coming from the beyond” (think Michael Keaton in *White Noise* [2005]).⁷

So, yes, that I hail from Pittsburgh, and that I am a horror fan from way back, means that I bring a novel relationship to, and unique perspective on, horror films.

Racing Horror

My interest in horror flicks and their narratives on race certainly does not begin or even end with Romero’s films. Films like *King Kong* (1933), with its “ooo-gaa boo-gaa” chanting dark natives who are enamored by white skin, are extraordinarily useful in putting a spotlight on how we understand the role of race, as well as (imagined) cultural practices. And do not get me started on hip-hop culture-inspired movies such as *Bones* (2001), with their neo-Blaxploitation themes set to a rap soundtrack. The tie that binds all of the films I will examine here is their ability to inspire provocative treatments of race and to offer unique lessons and messages about race relations.

I will show in this book that there are a great many horror films that contribute to the conversation of Blackness. I believe it is particularly important to understand that there is a wealth of horror films, often presented by Black filmmakers such as Spencer Williams (*The Blood of Jesus*, 1941), Bill Gunn (*Ganja & Hess*, 1973), and Ernest Dickerson (*Def by Temptation*, 1990), that feature Black themes, Black cast members, and Black settings that contribute novel content to the genre.

Horror has something to say about religion, science, foreigners, sexualities, power and control, class, gender roles, sources of evil, an ideal society, democracy, and so on. These topics take a compelling turn when examined through the lens of Black culture. My point is that the story of Blackness, as told through horror, is a complex and interesting one. While horror has at times been marred by its “B-movie,” low-budget and/or exploitative reputation, one cannot discount its unique skill at exposing the issues and concerns of our social world, to include our racial sensibilities.⁸

“One way of denigrating the horror genre,” writes Hutchings, “is to denigrate its audiences . . . by arguing that the only people who could actually enjoy this sort of thing are either sick or stupid (or sick and stupid).”⁹ I do not want to give short shrift to what is, for some, a troublesome “bee in their bonnet” about horror films. Many of these movies are, indeed, rife with gore (the sick) and thin on scripting (the stupid). Horror films are rarely *Festival de Cannes* top-prize material, but their audiences may be far more astute than critics and some scholars give them credit for. They understand that the whole of the genre is not inane and that horror filmmakers reveal something much, much more horrifying: that our world and relationships are really being held together with little more than spirit gum.

Night of the Living Dead is now a cult classic. Most aficionados agree that it is one of Romero’s greatest contributions to the genre and to the medium.

However, it has been over 40 years since *Night* demanded that we ask ourselves what is scarier, flesh-eating zombies, or what we are doing to each other on a daily basis.

So, there you have it. Clearly, I believe the horror genre has great revelatory promise, and that is what moves me to explore its myriad definitions of Blackness, as well as what the genre reveals about relevant Black character types, and about Blacks' levels of participation in film and Blacks' contributions to our social world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the years, a host of friends, colleagues, and even strangers helped to push this project forward by offering their support and contributing their insights. I regret that I cannot identify each and every one of you here. However, do know this: I am truly, truly grateful for your gifts of wisdom.

To my mother, Patty—the woman who helped me to understand that lessons in good and evil, moral consciousness, and cultural awareness are to be found in the most unlikely of places. Patty remains one of the best, most interesting, movie dates ever.

I cannot begin to detail here the tremendous support my husband, Randy, afforded me. He read every piece of research. He scoured archives. He watched every movie. He critiqued my arguments. He was unbelievably heroic in his efforts, giving of himself with extraordinary personal and professional sacrifice. Randy, to paraphrase Billie Holiday: “Fish got to swim and birds got to fly. Can’t help lovin’ that man of mine.”

Routledge Publishing has an incredible team of people working hard to ensure that scholarship such as this is presented in its very best form. I am indebted to Matthew Byrne, Senior Editor of Media and Cultural Studies, for seeing great promise in this book. I cannot thank Matthew enough for his advocacy. Likewise, I must thank Carolann Madden, Editorial Assistant, and Stan Spring, (former) Senior Editorial Assistant, and Gail Newton, Production Editor, for managing this book project. To Lisa Williams, Copy Editor: I cannot thank you enough for helping to make this book “sing!” Your exacting attention to detail is enviable. I really enjoyed working with you. To those who worked on the production of this book, I thank you.

I am particularly grateful to Photofest for assisting me in acquiring the images that appear in this book. This is the fourth book project Photofest has helped me with. It is wonderful to work with such efficient professionals.

xx Acknowledgments

Of course, I am especially grateful to the three anonymous reviewers of this book for their careful, attentive reading and astute feedback. Their suggestions were spot-on, thereby making this effort all the stronger.

My heartfelt thanks go to my colleagues in the Department of Communication Studies and in the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies (CAAS) at the University of Michigan. I want to expressly thank my department chairs, Susan Douglas (Communication Studies) and Kevin Gaines (CAAS), for their encouragement and support. The Department of Communication Studies very generously provided funding for this project through the Constance F. and Arnold C. Pohns Research and Technology Endowment Fund for the Study of Communication and Social Change. CAAS, likewise, was quite generous by providing office space and a research assistant.

In fact, the University of Michigan is just chock-full of people willing to give of themselves in support of this research. I wish to thank Lester Monts, Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, for the 2010 Harold R. Johnson Diversity Service Award. Thanks to Evans Young, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Education, for recommending the awesome book title. To Evans Young, Catherine Shaw, Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, and the Women of Color in the Academy Project crew (Robin Wilson, Mieko Yoshihama, Ixchel Faniel), thanks for simply understanding everything. A very special thanks to Rebecca Sestili, Author—Publisher Liaison. Rebecca, I am at this moment because of you. Philip Hallman, the Screen Arts and Cultures Film Librarian, was tireless in his hunt for some of the more rare, obscure, or banned horror films that are discussed here. Similarly, Jeffrey Pearson, Askwith Film Librarian, was also an incredible resource for acquisitions. Jeff is a true horror fan, and the University of Michigan may have one of the finest horror collections in the country thanks to Jeff's attention to the genre. I would also like to acknowledge Michael McLean for sending me away with dozens of horror movies each week to view. University of Michigan staff members Elizabeth James, Chaquita "Quita" Willis, Faye Portis, Chris Gale, and Orlandez Huddleston were all inventive and diligent in helping me to secure the resources I needed to bring this book to its successful conclusion. Their laughter and love are deeply appreciated.

Will Youmans, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan, helped me to push my thinking in new directions. Charles Gentry, a doctoral candidate in American Culture, is an incredible intellectual. The depth and breadth of his Black popular culture knowledge are unmatched. To Charles: Robeson and Poitier would be proud!

To Mark H. Harris, creator of BlackHorrorMovies.com. You cannot imagine how awesome and helpful your website is! It is *the* "go to" site for anyone who claims to be a fan of horror. Yes, Mark, without fail I do say a prayer to the patron saint of Black death, Scatman Crothers.

A special thank you to my dear friend and shero Bambi Haggins, Director of Film and Media Studies at Arizona State University. I *wish* having “NAAA” was my problem!

And to you, dear reader—thank you. Now, look into that mirror, and say it with me: “Candyman. Candyman. Candyman. Candyman . . . Candyman!”

Notes

- 1 Worland, Rick. *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. xi. Print.
- 2 Worland (xi).
- 3 He operates a special effects school, “Tom Savini’s Special Make-up Effects Program,” and a digital film school, “Tom Savini’s Digital Film Production Program.”
- 4 *White Boyz*. Dir. Marc Levin. Perf. Danny Hoch. Fox Search Light, 2004. DVD.
- 5 Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.204. Print.
- 6 Johnson, Ben. “Some Say Police Dog Is Racist.” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 14, 2003: A1. Print.
- 7 Machosky, Michael. “Seeking the Paranormal.” *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*, October 18, 2005. Pittsburgh Tribune. Web. August 2, 2010. www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_385041.html.
- 8 Crane, Jonathan. *Terror and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994. Print.
- 9 Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. London: Pearson, 2004.83. Print.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

INTRODUCTION

Studying Blacks and Horror Films

:01 second into *Jurassic Park* (1993), unnamed Black guard #1 is charged with moving a velociraptor into a holding cage. “Don’t do it! Don’t go in there Black guard #1!” 04 seconds later, Black guard #1 is pureed by the velociraptor.

Jurassic Park may have been thrilling science fiction entertainment to some in that darkened Columbia, Missouri, movie theatre. But for me, this early scene of Black annihilation promised a *horror* show. I recall spending several minutes mourning Black guard #1 (Jophery C. Brown), whose death was witnessed for the singular purpose of evidencing what we all already know—that a velociraptor is a bad-ass monster. To be sure, filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg savvily toy around with audiences’ expectations. This includes figuring out that there is no better way to demonstrate someone’s, or *something’s*, extreme deadliness than for it to secure a bloodbath victory over a Black man with a big black gun.

As those around me in that theater tittered with laughter at the antics of children meeting dinosaurs, I was feeling oddly uneasy, perhaps because I was now looking at the bloody stump of *Jurassic Park’s* (Black) engineer Ray Arnold (Samuel L. Jackson). The dinosaurs had gotten him too. Ray was not the unlikable lawyer, the corporate-secrets thief, or even the big game hunter, who were all, deservedly, eaten by the reptiles. Like Black guard #1, Ray Arnold was an innocent; as such, the only two Black characters in the film were united in that they experienced gruesome, absolutely unwarranted deaths.

The purpose of this recollection is to reveal that, at times, Black audiences have a rather unique relationship with the U.S. film industry’s presentation of Blackness. Some may bring to, and take away from, their film viewing experience culturally specific expectations—what Kozol calls “the racial gaze”¹—in which

2 Introduction

they hope to see themselves as whole, full, and realized subjects rather than simply “window dressing on the set”² or human meat to up a bloody body count.

In this second edition of *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, with greater insight and elaboration, I continue to focus on what horror films reveal about our society’s understandings of Blackness—Black life, culture, histories, and experiences. The contrast between Blacks in horror films versus *Black* horror films remains. That is, I dig further into the treatment of Black people in horror films that have Black representation but do not come out of a sort of the core of Blackness sensibilities (e.g., the *Serpent and the Rainbow* [1988] or *Candyman* [1992]). The examination of the stereotypes and tropes that have confined Blacks’ participation in the genre, particularly in Blacks in horror films, is here.

I am especially enthusiastic about the depth in which this second edition attends to the extraordinary and exciting outpouring of *Black* horror in recent years and its cultural and ideological influences. This edition of *Horror Noire* thoroughly leans into understandings of Blackness on Blackness’ terms. In this regard, writing this second edition has been a bit liberating. I delight in writing about performers, and their turn in Black horror, who I have been fangirling on for years—Mary J. Blige, Janelle Monae, and Lupita Nyong’o. I am relieved that my evaluations of the later decades of Blacks’ participation in the genre do not always lead with and are not always marked by questions of how horror “speaks” difference or reinscribes Othering. There are few necessary reminders that Blackness is not a monolith, that evil “voo doo” is a fiction, or that the Black guy need not always die first. Still, even within Black horror, there are tropes and themes that must be interrogated: the treatment of Black religion, historical trauma porn, locating horror within whiteness, and Black horror absent overt hailings of Blackness.

Favored, instead, is an exploration of how the diversity within Blackness is represented (and if Black horror can truly shed controlling images), what the wave of sociopolitically centered Black horror contributes, and, on the whole, what meanings Black horror might provoke. More, I explore the impetus for some of Black horror’s captivating imagery (recall the haunting shadow puppetry offered by Chicago’s Manuel Cinema for *Candyman* [2021]) and transfixing narratives. Of course, horror is not always about the “best” or “elevated,” and there is plenty of horror that is, simply, spooky here as well.

Since the first edition of *Horror Noire* in 2011, the Black horror genre, now dubbed “horror noire,” has captured the imagination and attention of the film industry, audiences, and scholars alike. Certainly, that is due, in great part, to two key moments over the last decade. First, there is the ascension of director/writer Jordan Peele in the horror genre, beginning with his Academy Award-winning film *Get Out* (2017). Second, the award-winning, critically acclaimed documentary *Horror Noire* (2019), based on the first edition of this book, brought the history of Black horror to the masses (and launched podcasts, a TV horror anthology

series, film festivals, and more). This surge of renewed critical attention (in which I have often participated) means that still more has come to light about the history of this provocative genre. I share these new insights here by looking back at the earlier decades of horror and its treatment of Blackness, by picking up where I left off in 2011 by taking readers into the 2020s of Black horror, and by looking forward to what is emerging in Black horror.

Horror is a genre, according to Mark Reid in *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*, that demands scrutiny when “difference demonizes characters and creates or resists static notions of good and evil.”³ This is not to say that the *only* horror films worthy of study are those which lay bare, or address, our social inequities or debate our hypocrisies. For horror novelist Stephen King, that which is buried beneath the horror fantasy is sufficiently worthwhile; as he states, “We understand that fiction is a lie to begin with. To ignore the truth inside the lie is to sin against the craft.”⁴ To be sure, horror’s intrinsic “fantastical quality has produced more imaginative, innovative and provocative (as well as tortuous and confused) insights than is sometimes apparent in those areas of representation more bound by the demands of realism.”⁵ Through its imagination, innovation, and push toward provocation, horror does not just comment on Black culture; rather, it, as Clover puts it, “tells on” mainstream media as well, noting its lapses in convention, representational and cultural vision, and courage.⁶

What I seek to avoid here is treating the horror genre like “long chains of immutable codes” in which significant historical shifts are disregarded as “little more than minor variations.”⁷ Other scholars have effectively and influentially worked to identify and organize the treatment of Blacks, over time, in popular culture and media. For example, Brown categorizes Black character types frequently seen in early twentieth-century mainstream literature, such as the “content slave” or the “wretched freeman.”⁸ Clark⁹ contributed a typology organized around Black participation, or the lack thereof, in media. He identifies recurring portrayals and trends such as “nonrecognition” (or absence) and “ridicule.” Nelson¹⁰ and Coleman¹¹ focus on television situation comedy to provide a rubric that elucidates the sociopolitical impact of media discourses that include “separate-but-equal” and “assimilationist.” In *Horror Noire*, I have come to appreciate these and other important organizational contributions, while constructing a historical accounting—decade by decade—of Blacks’ participation in the horror film genre. I have taken great care not to shoe-horn this history of horror films into decades. Indeed, in the first edition of the book, I was cautious in my treatment of the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. In the real world, these two decades were as distinct as they were tumultuous, especially in the quest for civil rights. In horror, it dealt with these dramatic social variations by not dealing with them much at all. In this second edition, I revisit these two decades with a more nuanced view of the treatment of Blackness and with attention to additional films from the 1960s. In returning to the full history of Blacks’ turn in the horror genre, my analysis reveals that a cycle of representations continues to coincide with the rise and fall of sociopolitical trends in particular decades, and

4 Introduction

I present my understanding and interpretation of events here. Though delineated by decade, the horror genre features both long-lasting, cross-era trends and temporary ones. I work hard to note examples from each.

Horror as a (Resistant) Genre

The immediate question becomes, given the simultaneously stable (e.g., fear and violence) and flexible (e.g., taste and esthetics) nature of the genre, “What, then, constitutes a horror film?” It is worth stating upfront that arguing what falls within and outside the confines of a genre is a decidedly complex, if not an impossible and at times fruitless, process. Today, especially in this era of releases across media platforms, purist generic boundaries are extraordinarily difficult to define. Is a horror film only a horror *film* on, say, the Hollywood big screen, or do we now accept that horror film has found its home on increasingly smaller screens (e.g., portable digital technologies using streaming video services)? Can horror films be made not only by big studios, or independents, but also by an individual with a digital camera and editing software on their laptop, with little semblance of a script thereby inviting unscripted dialogue and action, and on a minimal budget? Is *Jurassic Park*, for example, adventure, science fiction, a comedy, or all of the above? Continuing the *Jurassic Park* example, does the film now approach the horror category because of its killer monsters, the feelings of fear it aroused, and because it was received and interpreted as horror by at least one audience member based on her belief that the very, very high mortality, very, very low survival rate Blacks regularly have on film is terrifying? These questions reveal that even bringing together medium, industrial, and reception considerations does not a clear definition make.

Hutchings, in his book *The Horror Film*, is correct in his observation that definitions are elusive:

[W]hich films are horror and which films are not remains as distant as ever . . . perhaps the most striking and exciting feature of horror cinema in this respect is that, like one of its own shape-shifting monsters, it is always changing, always in process.¹²

However, accepting inconclusiveness is unsatisfying here, as it is useful to at least broach some understanding of what horror films are, and those that are not, within the purview of this book.

Certainly, the notion of genre, and the practice of assigning typologies, especially within horror, is a “particularly contested one.”¹³ Today, our understanding of genre extends beyond early Aristotelian/*Poetics*¹⁴ and Northrop Frye/*Anatomy of Criticism* notions of teasing out art forms’ separate and distinct formulas and conventions to create a classificatory schema. Rather, genre is as much about the heuristic power surrounding naming a “thing” as it is about sociopolitical euphony. On “naming a thing,” Gateward is useful here in revealing the depth of

the problem; as she points out, “there are so many vampire films in fact, with so many shared conventions of iconography, theme, and character, that the vampire film has become a genre in itself.”¹⁵ The same can be said of Blacks in film. That is, there are so many films featuring Blackness, with so many shared conventions, that *Black film has become a genre in itself*.¹⁶

In the end, marking, or naming a thing, is inherently dangerous in that it may further subordinate that thing (e.g., mother versus welfare mother). However, naming a thing has the potential to be politically powerful and can work to expose material qualities that may be otherwise rendered invisible. There have been useful, inventive categories of films introduced in recognition of the kinds of leitmotif and roles available, for example, for Blackness. To illustrate, in dubbing certain films “Blaxploitation,” this moniker is as much about exposing a category of film imbued with stereotypes of race relations, gender roles, sex, and violence as it is a critique of those who created the stereotypes, the political economy (financial investments, distribution, and marketing) behind such efforts, and reception and the great cultural impact the images had within and outside of Blackness. Additional categories, driven by cultural consensus, social impact, subject matter, style and technique, or quality, continue to emerge all of the time. To illustrate, there were the ’hood movies of the 1990s like *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) or *Menace II Society* (1993). More recently, there are “woke films,” that is, Black Lives Matter-social justice inspired offerings the likes of *The Hate U Give* (2018) or *Black Panther* (2018) or *Queen & Slim* (2019).

Understandably, many would eschew categorizing films through some sort of raciology. Such slotting runs the risk of an overdetermination of all manner of variables of difference, such as worldview, class, sexuality, and gender. Nevertheless, David Leonard makes a compelling and persuasive case for delineating Black film to facilitate study in *Screens Fade to Black*: “it is important to examine Black cinema as a phenomenon in its own right—as something having its own history, cultural traditions, and expressive norms (Africanism, oral tradition, narrative style, spirituality, syncretism, hybridization).”¹⁷

So, what then is horror as conceptualized here? I draw on Phillips’ discussion of horror definitions in his book *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*.¹⁸ Here, he offers that horror as a genre is marked by that which is instantly recognizable as horrifying, that which meets our collective understandings and expectations of what is horrific, and that which is talked about and interpreted as being part of a genre of horror. Isabel Christina Pinedo, in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing*, capably synthesizes the range of horror considerations, defining the genre according to five key descriptors: (1) horror disrupts the everyday world; (2) it transgresses and violates boundaries; (3) it upsets the validity of rationality; (4) it resists narrative closure; and (5) it works to evoke fear.¹⁹ Kinitra D. Brooks in *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women’s Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* correctly notes, “horror, like most other genres, is a textual category for discovering and developing larger societal anxieties through certain

themes of disquieting interstitialities often referred to as monsters.”²⁰ Indeed, in *Horror Noire*, I believe it is most productive to approach our understanding of horror films through this collection of theoretical and conceptual considerations. In doing so, I attempt to avoid the traps and limits of fixing categories while giving credence to a textual openness and ambiguity, or polysemy, to get to the work of probing the representations, themes, tropes, and meanings encircling horror.

There is much to consider when exploring horror, and there are some limitations to my examination. In my critical-cultural/critical race approach, I notably omit the psychoanalytic as well as the aggression and violence emphases that have worked to define horror film scholarship. My query into cultural identity and mediated messages presents a different interest from those questions focusing on the effects of terror and violence on viewers’ real-life psychology or blood lust. While my disengagement with psychoanalysis is guided by my culturally focused research questions, Hutchings presents a more pessimistic view of psychoanalytic readings, describing such film criticism as “deeply problematic” in great part because of its struggle with “notions of the collective, the economic, the technological, the historical, and race and class.”²¹ Jonathan Lake Crane, in *Terror and Everyday Life*, similarly expresses doubts about focusing on “screen violence . . . libidinal desire or some other variation of psychic upheaval.”²²

Another hallmark of the horror genre is its complexity. Just as it can contribute to the most rousing, heroic, and imaginative narratives, it can also generate films featuring chilling, abhorrent, unspeakable violence. It cannot be ignored that physical and emotional violence are often central to the horror film genre. While (hyper)violent dramatic films out of the crime, thriller, and war genres such as *The Equalizer* (2014), *You Were Never Really Here* (2017), and *American Sniper* (2014) have been met with some acclaim and are typically spared the scholarly detour through experimental effects, research on aggression, and psychological disturbance, horror’s reliance on violence as a key narrative device cannot be overlooked. There is an acknowledgment here that it is not simply the bloodshed that makes a horror film; rather, “it is the nihilistic context in which this violence occurs” that makes the horror film.²³ It is easy to see how horror’s violence has come to be seen as lacking in any illuminating value; after all, we live in a world that has given us the nauseating *The Human Centipede 1, 2, and 3* (2009, 2011, 2015). However, what is observed here is that in many instances, violence in Blackness and horror function together to provide important discursive inroads, such as violence as exhibiting a sort of “return of the re/oppressed.” Here, violence, be it gratuitous or declarative, remains revelatory.

Blacks in Horror Films (versus *Black Horror Films*)

This book expands on conceptualizations of the horror genre by adding two categories to its definition. The first is “Blacks in horror” films, and the second is “*Black horror*” films.

“Blacks in horror” films as a category include Black characters and, at times, references Blackness, even if the horror film is not wholly or substantially focused on either one. Nevertheless, these films possess a particular discursive power in the kinds of meaning-making about Black life and culture that they prompt. These films have historically, and typically, been produced by non-Black filmmakers for mainstream consumption. As such, “Blacks in horror” films offer an important opportunity to investigate more than a century of Black representations that have worked to imagistically define Black people. Examples of “Blacks in horror” films that will be discussed in this book include *King Kong* (1933), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), and *Candyman* (1992). The tie that binds many of these films, first, is that they tend to provoke a consensus agreement on what makes horror films—they disrupt our notions of a rational, fear-free, everyday life. Second, these films have contributed significantly to discussions and debates regarding not only Black identities (gender, sexualities, class, ideologies, and the like) but also their proximity to interpretations of what is horrifying and where and how the horrifying or monstrous is embodied. These are films that often “code the monster as racial Other” and worse, still, associate that Other “with a powerful savage religion.”²⁴ Indeed, we see the racial Other in films such as *Candyman* (1992) and Black religion as powerfully savage in the ilk of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988). In addition, these films are “now more hyperbolically concerned than ever with the question of difference” (cited in Grant 2).²⁵

What is not included in this book are those horror films that do not provide significant insight into the legacy of Blackness’ relationship to the horrifying. I exclude those films where Black characters are so exceptionally incidental that they are rendered non-contributory or invisible. The insertions of Black characters in films such as *Firestarter* (1984) or *Wishmaster* (1997), in which they are relegated “to the status of victims, largely undeveloped expendable characters,”²⁶ are not deeply attended to in this analysis. Of course, that sort of erasure is not without meaning, but cataloging again, and again, and again such representational treatment becomes torturous because we know what it is and what it does. Still, there are cases included here of films that speak quite loudly about Blackness, even through its exclusion. The wholesale omission of Black people and Blackness reveals much about our American culture at different points in history. For example, there are intriguing reasons that there are few or no Black families in the 1980s suburbs, which monsters Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers haunt and hunt. This means that a film need not engage in Black casting to have something to say about Blackness. Toward this end, included are discussions of films that may be interpreted as offering metaphors of race. *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), in particular, is a film that lacks a significant on-screen Black presence but merits attention, as it contains the modern, Western white hero whose mission is to protect a similarly situated white woman from a primordial black monster.²⁷

It is also worth considering the film’s presumption of what good and evil look like. This means, in one instance, that there are some donors to “Blacks in horror”

films that warrant investigation because of their significant but odious contributions to our understanding of Blackness-as-monstrosity. The pro-Ku Klux Klan, Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is one film that soundly casts Blacks as dangerous, horrific figures—monstrous, savage boogeymen (often, specifically men) with insufficient morality. Thus, in this book, the “Blacks in horror” film definition at times reaches beyond traditional expectations of what would be typically understood as constituting a horror film. Doing so reveals how, in form and function, that which is contemptible is inscribed into our cultural imagination. In short, the criterion for inclusion employed here is one of salience in exemplifying the historical eras and themes that the films themselves have worked to create and inform. There is no goal to be encyclopedic.

Black Horror Films (versus Blacks in Horror Films)

There is a second kind of film addressed in this book, and that is the “Black horror” film. *Black* horror films are informed by many of the same denotations of horror films, such as disruption, boundary violation, and provoking fear. However, Black horror films are often “race” films. That is, they have an added narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity, in this case, Blackness—Black culture, history, ideologies, experiences, politics, language, humor, esthetics, style, music, and the like. Black films, Cripps writes (and cautions),

have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience. . . . If we were to bring this definition to a fine pinpoint, we should argue forever over who has the right to dance on the head of the pin.²⁸

It is worth noting Yearwood’s point that the phenotype of the filmmaker and their audience is an insufficient parameter for a Black film, horror or otherwise. Black film is about Black experiences and cultural traditions—a cultural milieu and history swirling around and impacting Blacks’ lives in America. Black film becomes such when its iconography, themes, expressions, tones, allusions, and stories emerge out of Blackness, not as an object but as a subject. Black film, including those that focus on the everyday aspects of Black life, is never apolitical. Rather, even the mundane is resistive, countering the notion that cultural veneration (within and without Blackness) is illusive. In this way, Black film at times labors to discharge the specter of dominant whiteness that confines Blackness. Simultaneously, Black film is an art that, to borrow phrasing from Michael Eric Dyson, is nurtured by liberation and emancipation but is not encumbered by such containments.²⁹ Black film, like horror, may be tough to demarcate, but we

cannot deny its existence; instead, it is more productive to view both as dynamic things out of which new desires, esthetics, and boundaries emerge.³⁰

In this book, *Def by Temptation* (1990) is a “Black horror” film. It is offered by Black image-makers: James Bond III is a writer, director, and producer, and Ernest R. Dickerson is a cinematographer. It presents an all-Black cast, with their own Black performative bonafides, including Bond, Kadeem Hardison, and Samuel L. Jackson. It hails a Black audience of a particular generation as it features Melba Moore, who won a Tony in 1970, and R&B singer Freddie Jackson, whose hitmaking peaked in the mid-1980s, and it draws on recognizable tropes of Black culture. *Def* invokes Southern Black church rituals, Black oratory and vernacular, soul music, expressions of humor and insider references, fashion, and other symbolic features. However, it should be noted that not all of these features need to be present for a film to be “Black.”

By contrast, there are horror films that turn their attention to Blackness but fall short of being Black films; they are Blacks in horror. The film *The People Under the Stairs* (1991) is offered by a non-Black image-maker (Wes Craven). It is notable for its character “Fool,” a Black child thief, as the film’s protagonist. But the film’s co-stars are a white incestuous couple, “Mom” and “Dad,” who are the film’s focal point and grotesque antagonists. *The People Under the Stairs* implicates Mom and Dad as slumlords in an impoverished predominately Black neighborhood. While Black criminality and poverty serve as the backdrop, the narrative focus is on Mom, Dad, and a white “daughter,” Alice, who has been abducted and subjected to their abuse. As such, *The People Under the Stairs* is rather a whiteness affair with a predominantly white cast, crew, and textual thrust, even as Fool emerges as the savior in the end. Nevertheless, the tie that binds both *Def* and *People* is, as Tony Williams argues, like many other horror films; they contain “themes highly relevant to audiences occupying marginal positions in society.”³¹

Another Craven-directed film, *A Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995), was co-scripted by a trio of Black writers: Eddie Murphy, Charlie Murphy, and Vernon Lynch. The film stars, in addition to Eddie Murphy, Black actors Angela Bassett, Allen Payne, Kadeem Hardison, and John Witherspoon. More, it connects the Caribbean to a Black neighborhood in Brooklyn, presents a range of Black diasporic arts forms, and relies heavily on culturally derived humor. Here, *A Vampire in Brooklyn* is treated as a *Black* horror film. It is worth remembering, then, as film scholar Ed Guerrero writes in *Framing Blackness*, that “no Hollywood film of any Black image is the result of a single individual’s inspiration or effort, but is a collaborative venture in which aesthetics, economics and politics share (sometimes antagonistically) influences.”³²

Together, “Blacks in horror” films and “Black horror” films offer up an extraordinary opportunity for an examination into how Blackness is surfaced. Perhaps most interesting for both types of films is when and how they variously position Blacks as the thing that horrifies or that which is horrified. The horror genre’s unique narrative, esthetic, and commercial qualities provide for the notion

that “the genre, now more than ever, is proving ‘useful’ in addressing the dilemmas of difference.”³³ Certainly, horror has often been attentive to social problems in rather provocative ways. However, this moment in American social politics—at the intersections of a wrongly articulated post-racial America, the culture wars, anti-Blackness, and media globalization (to include the circulation of Black performances and understandings of race)—is one ideal moment for digging into this filmmaking, identity representation, and ideology-making phenomenon.

Epistemological Flow

Horror Noire is guided by several basic assumptions. The first is that the study of race continues to matter. In W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1920 tome *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, Du Bois offers that he finds himself, focusing on race in America, (sadly) again writing on a theme “on which great souls have already said great words.”³⁴ The theme of race fails to exhaust itself for Du Bois for the very same reasons that pressed him into writing about race in the first place—the ever-present problem of the color line. The “strange meaning of being Black” at the dawning of the twentieth century when Du Bois was writing has followed us far into the twenty-first century. That “strange meaning” of being Black in this millennium may, indeed, be about “the problem of the color line.” However, the half of this partition that is most worrisome is the soup of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. This demands a subtle shift away from internal angst over a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” and instead to activism, civil and uncivil alike, requiring justice and policy reform from the U.S.³⁵ For film historian Thomas Cripps, Hollywood film “from its very beginnings” played a role in sharpening the distinction of the color line, while working effectively to circulate society’s racial beliefs and angst.³⁶ This edition of *Horror Noire* occupies itself with not only how horror has sharpened the color line over the years but also how it is voicing (or not) understandings of racial beliefs that lead to conversations about justice and liberation. As such, it is not merely a study of racism (or sexism, classism, separatism, etc.). Influential feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks demand that we tune into interconnections and intersections between dominant discourses around race, class, gender, and sexualities. Toward this end, the complex realities of Blackness, according to film, are defined and exposed; the Black horror film story is told from the vantage point of empowerment and with a goal of consciousness raising.³⁷

This book also extends Clover’s essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film”³⁸ and Pinedo’s thesis, who, in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*,³⁹ argues that there is much more to horror films than misogyny and violent, voyeuristic gazes. While these, and other troubling instances of “-isms” are found in the films, this book argues that there are also opportunities, if not wholesale efforts, within some of these films to disrupt or

eviscerate our assumptive, dominant views of race. Horror has long been a vehicle to take up all sorts of topics of empowerment, revolution, and rewriting the sites for heroism and evil. “Although direct parallels between social forces and popular culture are risky at best,” presented here are two distinct understandings of how Blacks’ participation in the horror film functions.⁴⁰ In the first instance, Blacks have been rendered deficient—childlike, carrying taint, lower in socioeconomic standing, a metaphor and catalyst for evil, and demonized, even though not always cast, physically, in the role of a demon. But that is hardly the dominant narrative of the story presented here. In accord with the second understanding, this book works to reveal how the horror genre has worked to shed encumbrances of Black representations rooted in, and derived from, a sort of “fin-de-siecle minstrelsy”⁴¹ in favor of, to quote *The Craft’s* (1996) star Rachel True, performances where, quite simply, “everybody live[s] or everybody die[s].”⁴²

A Century of Black Horror

Chapter 1, “The Birth of the Black Boogeyman: Pre-1930s,” begins with silent films and “anthropological” shorts such as 1895’s *Native Woman Washing a Negro Baby in Nassau* to lay the groundwork for the ways in which Black people show up in the genre. This chapter describes how early (Black face) films such as 1904’s *A Nigger in the Woodpile* were not only presented as comedy shorts for non-Black audiences but could also be interpreted as horror with their depiction of violent, anti-Blackness. These films not only reflected the racist and white supremacist sensibilities of the time but also have a lingering impact on cinema that it, perhaps, has yet to shake. This chapter also examines the use of horror conventions by filmmaking innovator George Méliès, an illusionist and cinematographer who introduced one of the earliest “Blacks in horror” films on record. It also turns to D.W. Griffith, a film director who offered one of the most insidious and horrifying representations of Black people as, quite literally, *bêtes noires*, or black beasts.

This era in filmmaking is also noteworthy for its seminal contributions to entertainment media by this country’s pioneer Black filmmakers, who sought to challenge the myriad, damaging discourses of Blackness-as-evil. This chapter reveals, for example, that Black filmmakers such as John W. Noble and Oscar Micheaux, through *The Birth of a Race* (1918) and *Within Our Gates* (1920), respectively, worked to counter fear-inducing racist imagery by presenting Blacks on the big screen as complex, developed, realized figures.

Chapter 2, “Jungle Fever—A Horror Romance: 1930s,” reveals horror’s fascination with predatory primates, as well as its sickening narrative tendency to identify apes and Black people as being virtually inseparable on the evolutionary scale. Apes and Black people have been linked in “Blacks in horror” films through, for example, the exploitation film *Ingaqi* (1930), a mockumentary that claimed that Blacks and apes could (and do) procreate. The chapter then turns to the island of Hispaniola and the country of Haiti. Haiti saw enslaved Africans

bring with them cultural practices that were thought to be at best foreign, at worst deficient, by French, Spanish, U.S., and British colonists. African folkways and religions were imaginatively exoticized and mangled during this decade in now-classic films such as *White Zombie* (1932).

In Chapter 3, “Horrorifying Goons and Minstrel Coons: 1940s,” I examine the transition horror films make from marking Black people as a deadly symbol of evil (e.g., wicked Voodoo practitioners) to adopting a stance of Black people as not only afraid of their own folkways but also to be dismissively laughed at and ridiculed as they stand in that fear. Exploring the presence and use of Blacks as comic relief in horror, this chapter focuses on the contributions of character actors such as Willie “Sleep ‘n’ Eat” Best and Mantan Moreland and their minstrelsy-informed performances (e.g., *King of the Zombies* [1941]). Next, the chapter attends to the quantitatively growing, qualitatively powerful presence of “Black horror” films. These early Black horror films reveal a reliance on cautionary morality tales that define sin as a gateway to evil and, subsequently, otherworldly punishment. The films of, for example, Spencer Williams (e.g., *The Blood of Jesus* [1941]) are used to illustrate how the monstrous is defined when (race conscious) image-makers are at the creative helm.

Chapter 4, “Black Invisibility, White Science: 1950s,” tells the story of how Hollywood shifted its attention from supernatural evils toward technological ones. Enter the Atomic Age, and with it horrifying themes of how science and technology can go astray when experimentation and discovery are left unchecked. As Americans found science laboratories to be the wellspring of things most terrifying (e.g., the fusion bomb), Hollywood deemed these spaces of intellectual and inventive achievement out of reach for Black individuals—that is, in the media’s imagination, Blacks could never be the analytically erudite). As a result, Blacks were omitted from the genre or relegated to the supporting role of snack food for mutant insects. *Monster from Green Hell* (1957) epitomizes this trend.

Chapter 5, “A Night With Ben: 1960s,” details the great cultural significance of director George Romero’s cult-classic film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—and its sequels. *Night* is a film that overtly addressed 1960s America’s social problems and racial climate while reflecting on the general sociopolitical upheaval of the decade. Part of that upheaval was the global decolonization process that shifted into high gear during this era, and this chapter discusses how horror cinema reflected the struggles of the mostly Black and Brown colonized nations to achieve independence from their mostly European oppressors, including an increased level of explicit violence and nihilism that would color (no pun intended) the genre for generations to come.

Blacks return to horror films with a vengeance (pun intended), as detailed in Chapter 6, “Scream, Whitey, Scream—Retribution, Enduring Women, and Carnality: 1970s.” Here, I note the return of Blacks to the horror genre, in both “Black horror” and “Blacks in horror,” through an influx of films offered, not entirely surprisingly, during the rise of the Black Power movement. Both types of

horror films were deeply influenced by these times of Black nationalism, as well the lingering, graphic “television war” of Vietnam and national violence (i.e., assassinations and riots). In this chapter, I detail films that are notable for their anti-assimilationist ideologies, themes of revolution and revenge, and “enduring,” resilient Black women who defeat the monster and live on, ready to fight another day. I also observe how Voodoo is reclaimed in these films as a powerful weapon against racism (e.g., *Scream, Blacula, Scream* [1973], and *Sugar Hill* [1974]).

Horror films from the 1970s do not also escape the label of “Blaxploitation”—the prevalence of financially and culturally exploitative films featuring Black actors and themes during the decade. Here, so-called Blaxploitation-era horror films are noteworthy for frequently advanced notions of Black empowerment through uncivil disobedience and violent revolution (e.g., *Soul Vengeance* [1975]). Sadly, some of these films are also weighed down by anti-human rights narratives which are variously heterosexist, homophobic, and misogynist. It is also noted in this chapter that though there were many horror films featuring Blackness, often they are derivative of the classics—*Blacula* (1972), *Blackenstein: The Black Frankenstein* (1973), and *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976), borrowing from Universal Classic Monsters series *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and MGM’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941) films.

Chapter 7, “We Always Die First—Invisibility, Racial Red-Lining, and Self-Sacrifice: 1980s,” reveals a marked decline of the Black Power-inspired film themes seen in the 1970s. In the 1980s, in a notable reversal, Black people enter into supporting relationships with (monstrous) whites through a display of loyalty and trust that is generally disproportionate and unilateral. Notably, this loyalty is measured through the ultimate act of Black sacrifice (e.g., *The Shining* [1980]). This representational trend of Black self-sacrifice and devotion to whiteness rears its head most prominently in “Blacks in horror” films. That is, Blackness is depicted as most valuable when it harkens to the value system and ideologies of (a stereotypically monolithic) whiteness. In this chapter, I also detail how the decade of the 1980s gentrifies and segregates its whiteness—moving white monsters and prey to the suburbs, places viewed as inaccessible to Blacks. These include suburban or rural settings such as Elm Street, Haddonfield, Illinois, and Camp Crystal Lake, as represented in horror series beginning with *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Halloween* (1978), and *Friday the 13th* (1980), respectively. Thus, only a small but resilient group of films and filmmakers strove to place Blacks in starring roles during the decade, which I detail in the chapter. Finally, in this chapter, I note the return of the horror movie “short” with Michael Jackson (e.g., *Thriller* [1983]).

Chapter 8, “Black Is Back! Retribution and the Urban Terrain: 1990s,” hails the return of “Black horror” films defined by the reintroduction of autonomous Black subjectivity, and the recognition of resilient, empowered characters—they represent the new race films. This chapter describes how Blackness is once again displayed as whole and full, diverse and complex, and therefore seen in horror roles and situations that have been largely elusive for Blacks over the decades. *Def by Temptation* (1990), for example, recalls Spencer Williams’ morality tales

of the 1940s while developing rich and complex characterizations from within Blackness. Black horror films in the 1990s also offered a unique reversal of racial majority/minority roles. If whites were presented at all, they were the ones seen in the role of sidekick or as incompetent, comic relief. During the 1990s, particularly in “Black horror,” it was whiteness that became the symbol of deficiency. In these films, there is often a self-consciousness in the narrative that makes it plain to audiences that the disruption and reversal of type are purposeful—part retribution and part forced atonement. This is most obvious in Rusty Cundieff’s *Tales from the Hood* (1995), in which he provides cautionary tales about seeing value in the ‘hood and its residents. In all, this era describes a period in which Black characters’ survival and/or demise do not rise or fall on the will and favor of non-Blacks. Films of this era additionally present the battle over good and evil as being played out *within* the confines of predominately Black urban neighborhoods. So fearsome are cities in the 1990s that odd entities of all stripes, such as the alien Predator of *Predator 2* (1990) and the sickle-wielding children of *Children of Corn III: Urban Harvest* (1995), pay the cities a visit to prove their worth.

In Chapter 9, “Growing Painz: 2000s,” I talk about the struggle of Black representation to find its footing in horror against the chaotic backdrop of 9/11, war, and financial crisis. I also present an analysis of “Black horror” films that are inspired by hip-hop culture. This chapter details the (potentially) troublesome exaltation of Blaxploitation in films by Black filmmakers, such as *Bones* (2001), directed by Ernest Dickerson and starring rapper-turned-actor Snoop Dogg. These new millennium “Black horror” films continue to present a spatial allegiance to the ‘hood as seen in the 1990s. However, in the 2000s, an explicit rationale for such a geographical focus is the historical and esthetic credibility that such places promise. Films targeting the hip-hop generation are churned out (e.g., *Bloodz vs. Wolvez* [2006]), and are often set, quite literally, to a hip-hop beat (e.g., *Now Eat* [2000]).

There is no dearth of “Black horror” films during this period, some of which evidence great imagination and creativity and others a great banality, due to the proliferation of underground and low-budget films earmarked for a then robust straight-to-DVD market (e.g., *Dream Home* [2006]). The liberation from the commercial mainstream and the possibilities of alternative modes of distribution are considered. I identify film production companies such as Maverick Entertainment as independent filmmakers and industry innovators who are making and distributing well-produced Black horror films. I also discuss the conspicuous lack of Blackness that characterized certain horror trends during this decade, such as torture porn, found footage, and home invasion films, as well as how, conversely, the explosion of zombie cinema followed Romero’s lead in bringing back the Black presence.

I conclude the book with Chapter 10, “Representation, Recognition, and Renaissance: 2010s to Present,” in which I address the increased quantity and quality of Black representation in horror and how it relates to the decade’s high-profile instances of racial abuses and the subsequent push for social justice. I take

deep dives into several landmark Black horror movies that unapologetically tackle sociopolitical topics of import to Black Americans. I discuss Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and its repudiation of the notion that Obama's election signaled a "post-racial" America. I then discuss Peele's *Us* (2019), which shifts its focus from racial prejudice to classism and inequality. I follow that up with Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021), delving into its commentary on police abuse and urban gentrification of Black areas, and Gerard McMurray's *The First Purge* (2018), which channels Black America's frustrations into a violent spectacle. I then wade into the debate over Black horror turning into "trauma porn" by examining three controversial works that have been labeled as such: *Antebellum* (2020), *Karen* (2021), and the Amazon series *Them* (2021). I end with a look at how far the portrayals of Blacks in horror have come over the years, with Black representation now at an all-time high.

Notes

- 1 Kozol, Wendy. "Relocating Citizenship in Photographs of Japanese Americans during World War II." *Haunting Violations: Feminist Criticism and the Crisis of the 'Real.'* Eds. Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001.235. Print.
- 2 Taken from the report title *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities*. Washington, DC: Commission on Civil Rights.
- 3 Reid, Mark A. *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.61. Print.
- 4 King, Stephen. "Acceptance Speech: The 2003 National Book Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters." *On Writing Horror*. Ed. Mort Castle. Revised ed. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2007.10. Print.
- 5 Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. London: Pearson, 2004.115. Print.
- 6 Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.229. Print.
- 7 Crane, Jonathan. *Terror and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.23. Print.
- 8 Brown, Sterling A. *The Negro in American Fiction*. New York, NY: Atheneum, 1933/1972. Print.
- 9 Clark, Cedric. "Television and Social Controls: Some Observations on the Portrayals of Ethnic Minorities." *Television Quarterly* 8 (1969): 18–22. Print.
- 10 Nelson, Angela. "From Beulah to the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air: A Brief History of Black Stereotypes in Television Comedy." Unpublished manuscript, 1991.
- 11 Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. New York, NY: Garland, 2000. Print.
- 12 Hutchings (7, 9).
- 13 Vares, Tina. "Framing 'Killer Women' in Films: Audience Use of Genre." *Feminist Media Studies* 2.2 (2002): 213. Print.
- 14 Aristotle (350 BCE). [Trans. S. H. Butcher.] *Poetics*.
- 15 Gateward, Frances. "Daywalkin' Night Stalkin' Bloodsuckas: Black Vampires in Contemporary Film." *Genders Online Journal* 40 (2004): 3. Web. June 20, 2005. www.genders.org/g40/g40_gateward.html.
- 16 See: Cripps, Thomas. *Black Film as Genre*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978. Print.

16 Introduction

- 17 Leonard, David J. *Screens Fade to Black: Contemporary African American Cinema*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006.3. Print.
- 18 Phillips, Kendall R. *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. Print.
- 19 Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997. Print.
- 20 Brooks, Kinitra D. *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror*. New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018.5. Print.
- 21 Hutchings (76).
- 22 Crane (vi).
- 23 Crane (4).
- 24 Pinedo (7).
- 25 Grant, Barry Keith. "Introduction." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.2. Print.
- 26 Pinedo (111).
- 27 See: Gonder, Patrick. "Race, Gender and Terror: The Primitive in 1950s Horror Films." *Genders Online Journal* 40 (2004): n.p. Web. January 19, 2006. www.genders.org/g40/g40_gondor.html. Archived at: www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/?page=10 [Accessed April 4, 2022].
- 28 Cripps (*Genre* 11).
- 29 Dyson, Michael Eric. *Entertaining Race*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021.36. Print.
- 30 Yearwood, Gladstone L. *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000.119, 121. Print.
- 31 Williams, Tony. "Trying to Survive on the Darker Side: 1980s Family Horror." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.173. Print.
- 32 Guerrero, Edward. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993. Print.
- 33 Grant (8).
- 34 Du Bois, W.E.B. *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920. vii. Print.
- 35 Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York, NY: NAL Penguin, 1903/1969.45. Print.
- 36 Cripps, Thomas. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993. Print.
- 37 See: Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009. Print; hooks, bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- 38 Clover, Carol J. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996. Print.
- 39 Pinedo.
- 40 Zimmerman, Bonnie. "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.382. Print.
- 41 See: Winokur, Mark. "Technologies of Race: Special Effects, Fetish, Film and the Fifteenth Century." *Genders Online Journal* 40 (2004). Web. January 20, 2006. www.genders.org/g40/g40_winokur.html.
- 42 Burgin, Xavier (dir.). *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*. Philadelphia, PA: Stage 3 Productions, 2019.

1

THE BIRTH OF THE BLACK BOOGEYMAN

Pre-1930s

Beginning in the mid-1800s, white men from occupations as diverse as chemical scientists, eyeglass makers, and magicians were beginning to explore film's technological boundaries and to press its storytelling ability.¹ In Europe, filmmakers were proving that whatever came out of their imaginations, the film could handle. This included giving birth to (presumably) the world's first horror film proper—a two-minute, silent short entitled *Le Manoir du Diable* (*The Haunted Castle*), presented on Christmas Eve, 1896, at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in Paris by French theater performer/magician Georges Méliès:

A large bat flies into a medieval castle. Circling slowly, it flaps its monstrous wings and suddenly changes into Mephistopheles. Conjuring up a cauldron, the demon produces skeletons, ghosts, and witches from its bubbling contents before one of the summoned underworld cavaliers holds up a crucifix and Satan vanishes in a puff of smoke.²

This was the era of the silent film (late 1800s to late 1920s), a period in which the moving image could not yet be coupled with synchronized sound for mass reproduction and theatrical playback. This was also a time when to be a filmmaker meant that one either had access to the (often experimental, self-invented) equipment necessary to capture a series of still images and make them move (e.g., “magic lantern” zoetropes) or possessed the capability to capture moving images using a film camera.³ The filmmakers created what were then called “photoplays,” with many of them initially only mere seconds or minutes long, thereby earning the moniker film “shorts.” Films were initially watched through viewing machines such as the Kinetoscope which accommodated one viewer at a time. However, advancements in film technology rapidly evolved and the projection of moving images for large,

paying audiences was accomplished in 1893. Although the films of this period were silent, it was not uncommon for them to be accompanied by live orchestral music and sound effects. “Intertitles,” or stills of printed text or transcribed dialogue, were edited into the films to detail plot points while actors pantomimed their dialogue. In 1926, the first feature film with pre-recorded, synchronized sound was introduced.⁴ In 1927, *The Jazz Singer* included music, sounds, and, importantly, dialogue. From that moment on, “talkies” were a mainstay.⁵

In the early years of film, Blacks were portrayed by whites in blackface—a demeaning and racist cultural fetishization. One of the earliest known treatments of Blacks in what might be considered a horror film proper (though the term “horror” was not widely used at that time) was in the French film *Off to Bloomingdale Asylum* (1901).⁶ The film was made by magician and illusionist Georges Méliès, known for his stage performances and approximately 500 short films which include themes of the supernatural and the macabre. *Asylum* is rife with ghostly figures as described in Méliès’ catalog:

An omnibus drawn by an extraordinary mechanical horse is drawn by four Negroes. The horse kicks and upsets the Negroes, who falling are changed into white clowns. They begin slapping each other’s faces and by blows become black again. Kicking each other, they become white once more. Suddenly they are all merged into one gigantic Negro. When he refuses to pay his car fare the conductor sets fire to the omnibus, and the Negro bursts into a thousand pieces.⁷

The film’s “Negroes” were performed by white actors in blackface who depicted the violence meted out when one crosses racial boundaries and the brutish end to the metaphorical white man’s burden through the destruction of the Blackness.

U.S. audiences were hardly left out of the film’s beginnings. An early reference to Blacks in America in association with a spooky theme was in 1897 when the American film company Biograph offered a comedic short with the offensive title *Hallowe’en in Coontown*, thereby linking Blacks to the frightful holiday.⁸ *Hallowe’en* joined the ranks of dozens of “coon” films, such as the *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1907) or *Coontown Suffragettes* (1914), in which Blacks, portrayed by whites in blackface, were comically diminished. The short film *Minstrels Battling in a Room* (circa 1897–1900) was a bit more narratively complex. Here, Black men and women (all portrayed by white men in blackface) are in what may be a nightclub, where they turn rowdy. The “Black” attendees even go so far as to turn on a white man.⁹ The fate of the Black individuals in the film for “battling” a white man is unknown as the film’s deteriorated state makes a firm conclusion impossible.¹⁰ However, in both the real and fiction of that time, there are dire consequences for Black people assaulting whites.

Indeed, many films from the pre-1950s have been irreparably damaged or lost. The deterioration of film can be attributed to the use of unstable, highly

flammable nitrate. G. William Jones in *Black Cinema Treasures: Lost and Found* details the problem:

Nitrate was used universally for 35-millimeter theatrical films until World War II. Nitrate's chemical composition is very close to the composition of gunpowder, and this sped up a transition to non-flammable acetate stock so that nitrate could go to war . . . because nitrate stock has a tendency to destroy itself. First, such films become covered with a fine, yellow-brown dust as the backing begins to break down. Then, the images begin to stick to the next turn, so that unreeling the film does further damage. . . . Finally, the film becomes a mixture of sticky, semi-solid masses awash in a puddle of dust. Estimates are that almost fifty percent of the world's pre-1950 film heritage is now gone forever—most of it due to nitrate decomposition.¹¹

Some films did survive. For example, in 1898 directors Edwin S. Porter and George S. Fleming, working under the auspices of the Edison Manufacturing Company, filmed *Shooting Captured Insurgents*. This was real footage of four white soldiers executing four Black men. In doing so, Edison's company may have produced one of two of America's earliest, grisly horrifying shorts. The second is the 1898 short documentary *An Execution by Hanging*. The film company Biograph hailed *Execution*, which documented the hanging death of a Black man in a Jacksonville, Florida jail, as the only live hanging ever captured on film. Butters describes the scenes as "explicit" and "ghastly":

[T]he executioner adjusts a black cap over the prisoner's head. The noose is placed over his neck. After the man is hung, his body quivers and shakes from the tension. The nostalgic claim of the innocence of early silent cinema is clearly broken by this film. The death of an African-American man is clearly on the screen. His crime is never announced; his punishment is all the spectator understands.¹²

Real Black people, not whites in blackface, were frequently seen in silent, ethnographic films which were defined by scenes of individuals going about their daily lives while a white, male "adventurer"/filmmaker closely documented their activities. These presentations were hardly "real." Rather, they served the function of casting Blacks as Others—curiosities and oddities so markedly different from whites that their most mundane habits were recorded and exhibited as if Blacks were animals in a zoo. The footage appears, at times, to be surreptitiously shot, unbeknownst to its Black "star." At other times, the films' subjects seem to go about their business conscious of, but in spite of, the camera trained upon them. In 1895, shorts such as *Native Woman Coaling a Ship at St. Thomas*, *Native Woman Washing a Negro Baby in Nassau*, and *Native Woman Washing Clothes at St. Vincent* all present Black women engaged in day-to-day chores. Still, Musser

warns that these images gestured toward “a kind of primitive,” and as such, there is hardly a “nonracist innocence” to be found.¹³

These early films also depicted a very narrow range of activities engaged in by Black people, which were set up by the filmmaker. For example, *The Watermelon Contest* (1895), featuring a group of Black men prompted to race one another to finish a large piece of the fruit, was as perplexing as it was stereotypical. Edison (1898) and German émigré Sigmund Lubin (1903) both produced films called *Buck Dance*. Lubin described his version as featuring “a number of smokes dancing for their favorite watermelon.”¹⁴ Tellingly, the films of the early twentieth century spoke volumes about what *white* filmmakers obsessed over as they pertained to Blacks—watermelon and chicken (e.g., *Watermelon Feast* [1903]; *Who Said Chicken?* [circa 1910]) rather than any particular interests of Black people. Over the coming decades, horror would appropriate such narrow stereotypes, with Blacks’ love for melon and poultry being depicted as a powerful, effective distraction from the monsters chasing them, thereby leading to their potential demise. To illustrate the pertinacity of these reductive images, years later, in the comedy-horror film *Boys of the City* (1940), the Black character Scruno (Ernest “Sunshine Sammy” Morrison) would halt his fearful quaking in response to a ghost sighting just long enough to sing the praises of and then dine on a piece of watermelon.

Black life, according to these early film shorts, was narrowly defined as deficient. These films said that Black people were childlike but hardly harmless. Intimate images of loving Black families were elusive. They were often depicted outdoors (in squalid conditions) and far outside of modernity. Their work, when they (lazily) did it, was of a laboring kind. The choice was made to ignore Black achievement in favor of narratives that privileged reinforcing a racist view of Blackness.

Through what was described as “cartoon humor,” Lubin’s *In Zululand* (1915) presented Black women dressed up as ghosts to frighten off a relative from marrying a “good-for-nothing-nigger.”¹⁵ Lloyd Ingraham’s *Hoodoo Ann* (1916) also has a wedding theme. A white woman, Ann (Mae Marsh), enlists her maid, Black Cindy (Madame Sul-Te-Wan), to lift a curse. With the help of Black Cindy, it is hoped that “the wedding of Ann is the funeral of the hoodoo.”¹⁶ As such, perhaps the banishment of references to Blackness in these Blacks in horror films would have been preferable given the alternative, as evidenced by the representation of the Black clergy in 1904’s *A Nigger in the Woodpile*.

A Nigger in the Woodpile was not intentionally inscribed with the tropes of the horror genre. However, it can be interpreted as horrifying all the same. In the film, a Black church deacon (played by a white actor in blackface) is depicted as the frequent purloiner of a white farmer’s firewood. Hoping to put an end to the thievery, the farmer replaces a cord of wood with sticks of dynamite. Predictably, the deacon comes along to steal the wood and, unbeknownst to him, picks up the explosives as well. The deacon is shown returning home, stopping to greet his wife (also a

white male actor in blackface in yet another example of gender annihilation) who is cooking in the kitchen. He then places the “wood” into their fireplace. Their home explodes, leaving the couple, charred from the fire, to stagger about the ruins of their home. At this moment, the white farmer appears joined by a white male helper. The two men drag the deacon away. Perhaps the farmer plans to deliver the deacon to the proper legal authorities for charges (as if the bombing of his home was not punishment enough); however, the real-life 1904 rife-with-racism lynchings belie imagining such a conclusion.

For much of the early 1900s, the generic qualities of horror went uncharted. The concept of a “horror” film did not enter into the popular lexicon until the 1930s. Though many of the representations of Blackness described thus far were seen outside of the horror genre proper, such images continue to figure prominently in American cinema’s understanding of what is most horrific in our society. These representations function as reminders of the little value placed on Black life. Butters notes that the actions depicted in films such as *A Nigger in the Woodpile* can be easily dismissed by some: “one can argue that violent depictions of African Americans were simply part of the slapstick tradition of comedy that dominated early screen portrayals. Slapstick comedy . . . involves cruel humor and violence.”¹⁷ However, the film also exploits anxieties about Black and white people occupying the same spaces by deploying stereotypes of Black criminality to evoke fear among whites about the presence of the “niggers” among them.¹⁸

Filmmaker/producer Lubin (perhaps better known for his Black stereotype-laden Sambo and Rastus film series introduced around 1909) united horror and slapstick while using the talents of real Black actors to offer one of the first horror films featuring a story focused on Black life. The 1915 horror-comedy production *The Undertaker’s Daughter*, directed by Willard Louis, is a short, silent film starring John Edwards and Mattie Edwards. As described in Lubin’s publicity material, *Daughter* told the following story:

Mattie Cook, the Undertaker’s daughter, loves John Scott, who has no job, but father wants her to marry Sime Sloan, who has one and it takes all of Mattie’s persuasive power to overcome Dad, but she is equal to the occasion. She gets rid of Sime and Bime [other suitors] by promising to marry them if they will prove their love for her. One must sleep in one of her father’s coffins and the other sit by it all night. [With the help of noise and John, she gets rid of them.] In their fright they run through the meeting house presided over by Dad, who gets a couple of spills. He finally decides that John is the most sensible and can help in the undertaking business.¹⁹

The stars of the film, John and Mattie, who were part of the “Negro stock company of the comedy section of the Lubin Company,” would appear in two other films together. Mattie would go on to make appearances in two films by the acclaimed Black director Oscar Micheaux.²⁰

D.W. Griffith and *The Birth of a Nation*: Making Blacks Horrifying

It is the racist who creates his inferior.

—Fanon (93)²¹

D.W. (David Llewelyn Wark) Griffith was born in 1875 in La Grange, Kentucky, to a Confederate-Army-officer-turned-state-legislator. In 1885, during Reconstruction, while the Griffith family was experiencing significant financial hardship, the family patriarch died. Dropping out of school to support his family, Griffith eventually turned his sights to becoming a playwright. Both theater and film were acceptable career paths for Griffith, and he pursued writing and acting on both the stage and the screen. Griffith was said to be a marginal writer, and his scripts were often rejected. In 1907, after a move to California, Griffith failed in his attempts to sell his scripts to Edwin Porter, a noted director working under the auspices of (Thomas) Edison Manufacturing. In 1908, Griffith visited Sigmund Lubin seeking work. Griffith's application was rejected. He then traveled to New York, where he landed an acting job with Biograph Company in 1908. Shortly thereafter, Griffith was permitted to direct at Biograph, and over the next five years made an astonishing 450 short films while honing his camerawork and editing skills, including techniques like cutting, cross-cutting, and close-ups. In 1913, as a productive, successful director, Griffith left Biograph to start his own Reliance-Majestic Studios. It was through his Reliance studio that Griffith made *The Birth of a Nation*.

D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) did not showcase his writing skills, or the lack thereof. Rather, the film's script was primarily based on two Thomas Dixon Jr. pro-White supremacy, terrorist-themed novels—1901's *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* and 1905's *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*. Dixon was described favorably in a magazine as a “preacher, lecturer, novelist, and Southern country gentleman long known for the earnestness, we might say fanaticism with which he deals with . . . the Negro problem.”²²

Griffith paid Dixon a few thousand dollars, as well as a portion of the profits, in return for Dixon's stories and consultation. In return, Dixon also became integral to the promotion of the *Birth*. It was Dixon who infamously got the film screened in the White House for President Woodrow Wilson, who said of the film, in part, “And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”²³ Together, Griffith and Dixon earned millions from *Birth*.

The Birth of the Black Boogeyman

The Birth of a Nation tells the story of two families—the Southern Camerons and the Northern Stonemans—during the Civil War and Reconstruction period. At three hours long, the drawn-out film plot is rather straightforward. The first part of the film tells Griffith's version of the history of the end of the Civil War and

President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. The second part of the film is about "race and revenge," with Southern whites, good-hearted white Northerners, and their loyal Black servants bonding.²⁴

The Camerons live in the town of Piedmont and are former slave owners. Theirs is a distinguished family full of war heroes and doting, supportive women. The Stoneman family are friends from Pennsylvania led by the family patriarch, Congressman Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis). Stoneman is an abolitionist who, in spite of being an influential politician, is also depicted as weak and demasculinized—he is sickly, wifeless, possesses a clubfoot that gives him a pronounced limp, and is an integrationist who has been ideologically duped by human rights and quality seeking Blacks. The Cameron family includes three sons who all join the Confederate army. Two of the Cameron sons are killed in the Civil War. One son, Ben (Henry Walthall), becomes a war hero and is dubbed "the Little Colonel." The Little Colonel (as he is referred to for the remainder of the movie) is sent to a Northern hospital to recover from his wounds, where he meets Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) and falls in love. The Stoneman family has two sons who join the Union. One son is killed, and the other son falls in love with Margaret Cameron (Miriam Cooper), whom he meets during a visit to the Cameron home. Liberal Northern politicians such as Stoneman are depicted as being displeased with the South for attempting to secede from the rest of the country. His distance from southern tradition is shown through Stoneman sponsoring a "mulatto" named Silas Lynch (George Siegmann) to come to Piedmont to assist in the integration effort.

According to film historian Ed Guerrero, *Birth* was the first true feature-length film made in America, setting the "technical and narrative standard for the industry" while carrying on the Hollywood trend of uniformly devaluing African Americans as "buffoons, servants, and a variety of subordinates."²⁵ The principal Black characters in *Birth* are presented by whites in blackface. They include: Gus (Walter Long), a Union soldier who is lynched by the Ku Klux Klan for making romantic overtures to the very young Flora "Little Sister" Cameron (Mae Marsh); Silas Lynch, a corrupt politician; Lydia (Mary Alden), a wicked "mulatto" woman who kidnaps Elsie because Lynch desires the white woman; and Mammy (Jennie Lee) and Tom (Thomas Wilson), formerly enslaved loyalists to the Cameron family who remain on as their servants. These characters are joined by a host of extras, some of whom are played by Black actors who variously portray corrupt politicians, robbers, would-be rapists, arsonists, cheats, and (attempted) murderers.

The Birth of a Nation's definition of Blacks and Blackness is extraordinarily alarming. Viewers' initial introduction to Blackness, and the prompt to associate Black culture with monstrosity, comes when Black Union soldiers arrive at Piedmont. As they "enter the town like *monsters*," they prey upon the white people shown as complete innocents and leave destruction (e.g., looting) in their wake.²⁶ These soldiers are contrasted with white Confederate soldiers who are

beleaguered and war-weary as well as honest and committed to protecting their (white) land, (white) families, and livelihood.

While the violence of the Civil War was terrifying, according to the film, its true horror came during Reconstruction in the form of unchecked, freed Black men. For example, in one scene, the Little Colonel is standing on a sidewalk. Blacks bully their way through, forcing the Little Colonel to quickly cede the sidewalk by jumping out of harm's way. At this spectacle, Lynch proclaims, "This sidewalk belongs to us as much as it does to you, Colonel Cameron." However, as Griffith depicts the scene, there can be no expectation that any viewer would find the behavior of the Black men, or Lynch's reaction to it, as anything but unchecked brutishness. As such, Griffith portrays Blacks as wolves overtaking the sheep.

If Blacks are the wolves in Griffith's movie, they are not averse to eating their own. In one scene, when Mammy meets the Black Northern servant of the Stonemans, she kicks him in his butt while proclaiming: "Dem free Niggers fom de North sure am crazy." In another, much more violent scene, when the loyal ("Uncle") Tom character refuses to side with the interloping Black Union soldiers, they string Tom up by his arms in a tree and whip him, evoking powerful lynching symbolism. When a white man tries to rescue Tom from the brutality, the white man is shot by the Black soldiers thereby arousing a terror and hatred of Blacks and their actions.

Blacks also have a taste for booze and chicken, as Griffith depicts in a scene entitled "The Riot in the Master Hall—The Negro Party in Control of the State House of Representatives." At first glance, this scene is to be understood as sadly comical. A collection of Black men (depicted by Black actors) is assembled in the legislature; they begin misbehaving—one sneaks bites of chicken, another takes off his shoes, plopping his filthy bare feet atop his desk, yet another sneaks gulps from a bottle of booze. The men are to be viewed as pitifully inept, that is, until they pass legislation permitting interracial marriage. As white men and women helplessly witness the vote from the whites' only section of the hall's balcony (a sort of reverse Jim Crow segregation as depicted by Griffith), the Black men turn to look upon the white women. The scene has the Black men now far less interested in the flesh of chicken and particularly excited about the flesh of white women.

However, it is in the film's most startling and infamous sequence, "The Grim Reaping," that Griffith firmly plants the idea of that which is Black is horrifying and monstrous. Gus "the renegade," as he is called in the film, is eager to take advantage of his recent freedom as well as exploit the new interracial marriage law. He settles on a child, the youngest Cameron daughter, "Little Sister." Little Sister is shown playing alone in the woods, as Gus stalks her. Finally, he approaches and says: "You see, I'm a captain now and I want to marry," and then touches the girl's arm. The chase is on as Little Sister breaks away and flees, stricken with panic. With Gus in hot pursuit, Little Sister makes a break for it deeper into the forest

until she reaches the edge of a precipice. Deeming Gus as a fate worse than death, Little Sister throws herself over. Shortly thereafter, in her dying breath, Little Sister reveals to the Little Colonel that Gus was her tormentor. That Gus is to be viewed as a Black male sexual predator advancing on white girlhood is clear. In Dixon's book *The Clansman*, the rape is actual (not the implied touch and "eye rape" as portrayed in the film), with the Black male predator described in monstrous terms: "the black claws of the beast sank into the soft white throat."²⁷

Indeed, *Birth* was made during a period of time (which continues to have a fixity) when a Black man merely looking at a white woman ("eye rape") resulted in their lynching. The paranoid and unfounded fear of interracial rape was a potent weapon, cited as justification for mob justice by Southern Congressmen like Mississippi Representative Thomas Sisson, who, in his argument against the 1922 Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, echoed *The Clansman's* depiction of the situation: "When these Black fiends keep their hands off the throats of the women of the South, then lynching will stop."²⁸ The impact of the racist scenes housed in a technologically significant film remains a wicked bell that cannot be unringed. Blackness was effectively transmogrified, with Blacks becoming one of the most loathsome and feared of all creatures.

Griffith's attack against Blackness did not stop there. He continued to play on the "myth of the Negro's high-powered sexuality" and the idea that "every black man longs for a white woman" through the character of Lynch.²⁹ When Lynch goes beyond merely touching a white woman's arm, as Gus did, to holding hostage and groping Elsie, there could be no confusion that Griffith sought to indict all Black men (even "mulattoes") as rapists. Bogle (1993) confirms that Griffith's construction of the Black man as beast was deliberate:

Lillian Gish's comments in the January 1937 issue of *Stage* verify the fact that Griffith was well aware of the contrast and that he used it to arouse his audience. Said Gish: But one day while we were rehearsing the scene where the colored man picks up the Northern girl gorilla-fashion, my hair, which was very blond, fell far below my waist and Griffith, seeing the contrast in the two figures, assigned me to play Elsie Stoneman.³⁰

The actions of the likes of Gus and Lynch are used to justify the rise of the Ku Klux Klan—"Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization. The hate group does delivers as expected, they murder Gus and Lynch."

Only 6 years old at the time, the NAACP Civil Rights organization took up the challenge of getting *Birth* banned. Dixon ran an end-run around the NAACP, taking the film to the White House to screen for old college chum President Wilson and his family, as well as the Supreme Court and members of Congress.³¹ After viewing the film, President Wilson has been widely credited with saying, "it's like writing history with Lightening. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly



FIGURE 1.1 Gus meets his doom at the hands of the KKK in *The Birth of a Nation*
David W. Griffith Corp./Photofest

true.”³² While it has been debated whether Wilson uttered these very words (Dixon may have exaggerated and there is no written record of this Wilson quote), what is known is that the President was fully aware that he was being quoted in this way. He did nothing to counter the claim or repudiate his proximity to racism. Rather, in the midst of controversy and protest, Wilson hailed Griffith’s *Birth* as “a splendid production.”³³ With the President’s purported endorsement of the film, distributors charged a premium \$2 admission price over an 11-month period and 6,266 screenings to an estimated three million people in New York City alone.³⁴

Griffith was not done imaginistically abusing Blacks. In 1922, he made a comedy-horror film with Black characters entitled *One Exciting Night*, about a haunted house. “The black characters,” writes Cripps, “were strikingly off the mark. The central character, an improbable detective, was a ‘Kaffir, the dark terror of the bootleg gang.’ The remaining Black roles were played by blackfaced whites as traditional servile flunkies, who trailed through the plot.”³⁵ Peter Noble adds to this description while indicting Griffith:

This comedy is a noteworthy instance of how a director steeped in anti-Negro prejudice can influence his audience. The Negro character in *One*

Exciting Night [played by a white actor in blackface] commenced the long line of those well-known screen puppets, the cowardly Black men whose hair turns white or stands on end when they meet danger in any form. We know them well by now; they are afraid of the dark, of thunderstorms, of firearms, of animals, of police, and so on. . . . In *The Birth of a Nation* he portrayed the coloured man with hatred, and seven years later, in *One Exciting Night*, with contempt.³⁶

In spite of protests against his films and even an unpleasant encounter with his Black maid—who said, “it hurt me, Mr. David, to see what you do to my people,”—Griffith refused to acknowledge the harm caused by his films.³⁷

Gus as (Frankenstein’s) Monster

To borrow a phrase from Carol Clover, author of *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, “but where exactly is the horror here?”³⁸ To understand *The Birth of a Nation*’s racialization of Blackness as horror, it is useful and illustrative to compare the film’s infamous sequence “The Grim Reaping,” with Gus as a monster in pursuit of a white girl resulting in her death, with that of a similarly notable scene in an undisputed horror film, *Frankenstein* (1931), in which the Monster actually kills a white girl.³⁹ Though the films appear nearly 15 years apart, spanning the silent and sound eras, such a comparison is apropos as both films capably center the audience’s attention on a dangerous Thing, highlighting and signifying monstrosity through the juxtaposition of a triumvirate of purity—whiteness, womanhood, and youth. What is key is how these films variously treat their monsters and how they ask the audience to feel about them.

In *Frankenstein* (there are no Blacks in this movie), a young medical scientist, Dr. Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive), recreates a man out of scavenged body parts and animates him with electricity. Dr. Frankenstein creates the man (henceforth “the Monster”) over the objections of his fiancée, Elizabeth (Mae Clarke), and his former professor, Dr. Waldman (Edward Van Sloan). The cultured, enlightened Frankenstein has a helper, Fritz, who is lacking in both culture and enlightenment. Fritz (Dwight Frye) is marked as aberrant by his deformities (a hunched back and facial scars) and cruelly delights in torturing the Monster (Boris Karloff).

The Monster is hidden from the public in the cellar of Frankenstein’s laboratory but is unprotected from Fritz, who torments him with a flaming torch. When the Monster’s fear of fire is misinterpreted as unfettered rage, Frankenstein and Waldman decide that the Monster must be restrained. The Monster is put into chains. While chained, the Monster is again threatened by Fritz and in self-defense kills his attacker. Discovering the murder, Frankenstein and Waldman drug the Monster, and Waldman prepares to disassemble the creature. Just as Waldman is about to begin the surgery, the Monster awakes and in another

moment of self-preservation, he kills Waldman. The Monster escapes his confines and sets out to explore the world. The Monster encounters Maria (Marilyn Harris), a young girl playing alone near a lake, who invites him to join her in play. The beast and the girl engage in a game of tossing pretty flowers into the lake to watch them float. The Monster, thinking all pretty things float, picks up Maria and tosses her into the lake, discovering too late that he has made a deadly mistake. The gaff is devastating:

[T]he Creature was not acting with evil intent. He errs in logic but not in feeling. His actions are the natural consequence of trying to figure out how he should play with the girl. He meant to treat her as delicately as she treated the lovely mountain wildflowers. She perishes, and the Creature is doomed for the crimes of being both a monstrosity and a child murderer.⁴⁰

The Monster returns to Frankenstein's home and peers into Elizabeth's bedroom, where she is frightened enough by his looking upon her to scream and faint. Her screams send the Monster fleeing into the countryside. In the meantime, Maria's father has recovered her body, taking it to the doorstep of Frankenstein, whom he holds responsible for the girl's death. The father is followed by a mob intent on destroying the Monster. In the film's final scenes, the Monster is surrounded and trapped in an old mill. The Monster, who is miserable and distraught over what he now understands himself to be, directs his anger toward Frankenstein. The Monster grabs the doctor and throws him to his death. The mob then sets fire to the mill, thereby destroying the Monster.

What makes the Monster unique, and thereby dissimilar to *The Birth of a Nation's* "monsters," such as Gus and Lynch, is the narrative technique of demanding that the audience sympathizes with the beast and its miserable plight because "a monster who loathes his own life and contemplates existence with a downcast eye exhibits troubling parallels with depressed humans."⁴¹ Unlike the Monster, Gus and Lynch are far from sympathetic figures. Their predicament is the arrogantly presumptuous belief that a power grab, as well as a literal grab of white women, is within reach. More, Gus and Lynch's "failings," which functions to raise ire, is their inability to see their monstrousness, or Blackness, as problematic.

Where Gus, in particular, and the Monster are the same is in their grotesque bodies, which become a "locus of contradictions."⁴² The Monster is an outsized atrocity with an assemblage of body parts. His flesh is corpse colored and lacks living vibrancy; with life coming from an electric shock, there is no blood pumping through the Monster's undead, reanimated body. And yet, this freak of nature does not invite viewer abhorrence, only condolence and pity. It is Dr. Frankenstein, a wealthy, über-intellectual who, with his God-complex, is to be scorned.

Gus, however, is to be understood as most monster-like. His uniform is filthy and ragged. Gus himself has a veneer of dust, accentuating a swarthinness. His monstrous look is heightened due to the use of blackface. As a result, Gus' bulging



FIGURE 1.2 The Monster and Maria in *Frankenstein*

Universal/Photofest

white eyes appear frantic and wild, his skin a muddy, streaky gray-black. At times he appears to skulk and creep rather than move about proudly upright like the Cameron men (or even the Monster). After Little Sister kills herself rather than “marry” Gus, he further secures his fate when he shoots and kills one of his white pursuers. Though the Monster’s body is supposed to be every bit as problematic, the Monster’s sullen eyes mark him as mournful. The Monster becomes more human than Gus can ever be as he does not kill his pursuers (a mob of peasants); rather, in torment, he kills his creator—a symbol of man and science gone wrong—in effect saving humanity from such hubris.

Gus and the Monster reveal disparate horrors even as they both promise to provide “particularly intense moments” of birth, entrance, transformation, and destruction.⁴³ Both are depicted as being born out of the imagination of privileged minds. The Monster is a creation of Dr. Frankenstein, and Gus and Lynch are born out of a claimed social liberalism gone wrong. Both Frankenstein and Stoneman are viewed as mad scientists embarking on an irrational, dangerous social experiment: “Thus, as Dr. Frankenstein makes his monster not fully realizing what he is doing, Stoneman makes Lynch.”⁴⁴ Gus, Lynch, and the Monster’s entrances into the world reveal that each, whether he knows it or not, possesses a reliance on his (white) master. The Monster is child-like and vulnerable in his entrance. By contrast, as free men, Gus and Lynch enter the white world with

their power uncontained and behaviors unchecked. For the Monster, Gus, and Lynch, their transformation into the monstrous comes when each is fully absent from their masters. But only the Monster learns important lessons and becomes a new “man” because of it. Even as the Monster is a triple murderer, having killed Fritz, Dr. Waldeman, and Maria, his necessary demise is a sad mercy killing. Importantly, the Monster is not viewed as monstrous because of lust. That would be the purview of Gus and Lynch since they do not innocently mistake young white girls for flowers but rather see them as potential lovers. As Williams notes, the hallmark of a monster is its sexual difference—an aberration—from the “normal” male.⁴⁵ More, Gus and Lynch cannot be “normal”; rather, their attempt at race mixing is a sexual transgression that is marked very clearly as dangerous.

In *Birth*, there is never any move to hold Stoneman responsible for his creation. In fact, when Lynch turns a romantic eye to Elsie, Stoneman’s daughter, Lynch is marked for destruction by his creator, Stoneman himself. In doing so, Stoneman is recentered within whiteness, seemingly freeing himself of his misguided trust in Black possibility, snapping out of his temporary insanity. In the end, there are no Blacks in *Birth* to pity.

Birth’s startling imagery took Dixon’s racist stories to new heights. *Birth* was the first film to be screened in the White House. The film has been credited for persistent cycles of interest in the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacist groups.⁴⁶ It continues to be used as a piece of propaganda and as a recruitment tool for neo-Confederates and neo-Nazi groups.⁴⁷ *Birth* has been honored by the Library of Congress with inclusion in its National Film Registry (1992) and celebrated by the American Film Institute, which ranked it the 44th most important film of all time. In 2004, the popular African American DJ and music producer DJ Spooky kicked off a world tour for capacity crowds at venues such as the Lincoln Center (New York) and the Vienna Festival, presenting his “re-mix” of the film, which he retitled *DJ Spooky’s Rebirth of a Nation*. DJ Spooky set the film to a hip-hop beat and inserted colorful graphics into the film.

To be sure, *The Birth of a Nation* is not part of the horror genre proper. Nevertheless, it introduced, and secured in the American popular imagination, a character of quintessential horror that would become a recurring, popular narrative device for instilling fear. In presenting Gus, as well as other Black men, as malevolent, *Birth* has the dubious distinction of introducing the loathsome “brutal buck” character into film. The brutal buck is a vicious Black male, and all the more dangerous because he is so single-minded and unrelenting in his evil doing. He cannot be reasoned with, as he lacks rationality. The character is so base and primal that he can only be understood as animalistic. Donald Bogle famously discusses the damage Griffith has done in presenting Black men as brutal bucks: “always big, baadddd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh. No greater sin hath any black man. . . . Griffith played hard on the bestiality of his black villainous bucks and used it to arouse hatred.”⁴⁸ And, indeed, variations on the theme continue to resurface in media, such as George H.W.

Bush's infamous Willie Horton "Weekend Passes" (1988) political campaign television ad, in which a Black convicted murderer and rapist is featured, and in films such as the "Blacks in horror" film *Candyman* (1992), in which a Black man holds a white women captive, caressing her while inviting her to "be my victim."

Black Creators Take on Fright Films

In response to *Birth*, with the goal of counteracting its effects, Black films—that is, films starring Black actors and featuring Black stories, and (ideally) made and distributed by Blacks, immediately began to appear "in earnest."⁴⁹ Black filmmakers correctly anticipated the power of Griffith's productions and did not sit idly by while their race and culture were being soiled. For example, George and Noble Johnson, through their Lincoln Motion Picture Company founded in the summer of 1915, released *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916) in an effort to present a positive contrast to *Birth*. Similarly, there was the Frederick Douglass Film Company, formed in 1916 by Dr. George Cannon and Rev. Dr. W.S. Smith with the specific goal of countering the effects of *The Birth of a Nation*. The Company's first film, *The Colored American Winning His Suit* (1916), depicted African Americans as industrious and self-sufficient.

The historical epic *The Birth of a Race* (1918) was, too, a direct rebuttal that was the brainchild of Emmett J. Scott, Booker T. Washington's right-hand man at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute. Scott's vision for the film was to tell "the true story of the Negro—his life in Africa, his enslavement, his freedom, his achievements—together with his past, present and future relations with his white neighbor."⁵⁰ Unfortunately, dependence on a white film company to craft the final product left Scott vulnerable to financial mismanagement and creative hijacking by producers who scrapped the Negro angle altogether.⁵¹ In its place was a story tracing the human race as a whole—from Adam and Eve to Jesus, Christopher Columbus, the American Revolution, and Lincoln, all the way up to World War I—with an emphasis on how everyone is created equal except, it seems, when it comes to creative control.

Appealing to neither Blacks nor whites, *The Birth of a Race* was a commercial failure, but its shortcomings helped further spur pioneering Black filmmaking Noble brothers to create their own response to *The Birth of a Nation*—without white interference. The result was another "birth," the drama *By Right of Birth* (1921), which, rather than the larger-than-life scale of race, strove "to picture the Negro as he is in his everyday life, a human being with human inclination, and one of talent and intellect."⁵² The movie was more successful at achieving its racially conscious aspirations, but lacking the access to the funds, theaters, and distribution networks of white studios, it struggled to reach viewers, and the Johnsons' Lincoln Motion Picture Company folded after just five years and five films.

Acclaimed novelist and filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, through his Micheaux Book and Film Company (1919), picked up Lincoln's mantle and ran with it,

pointedly rebuking Griffith in his early efforts. The title of his feature *Within Our Gates* (1920) is a direct reference to an epigraph from Griffiths' *A Romance of Happy Valley* (1919), and the story showcases the horrors of lynching, unlike *Birth's* heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan's mob justice. *Gates* is most memorable for its attempt not only to counter Griffith's epic but also to reimagine the infamous "Grim Reaping" scene, with a Black woman⁵³ being pursued by a white man who wants to rape her.

One benefit of the expansions of Black filmmaking (Black produced or otherwise) was the introduction of a wealth of diverse Black images, presenting complex, multidimensional characters, as well as a broad range of narratives, including fright films. For example, the Unique Film Co. offered the three-reel, all-Black cast "Black horror" film *Shadowed by the Devil* (1916). *Devil* is a morality tale, focusing on three characters—"the good, the bad, and the ugly,"⁵⁴ and what it means to be a "good [Black] man."⁵⁵ The film

contrasted the characteristics of three individuals—a spoiled "princess," a man possessed by the devil [literally], and Everett, "a good industrious son of poor parents, a quiet and sober young man, a loving husband and . . . father [who] shows the traits of his early learning."⁵⁶

As intriguing as the film sounds, *Shadowed* came and went almost as quickly as Unique Film Co. itself, as the company put out only one other (non-fright) film before its fast demise. The paucity of Unique's output was not unusual as "the economic vulnerability of Black and White independent film companies in the silent era meant that most companies only had one or two films to their credit."⁵⁷

Indeed, the economic difficulties faced by film companies were real and complicated along racial lines. For example, Richard Norman, the white owner of Norman Film Manufacturing Company, detailed the monetary and resource challenges he faced in a letter to Anita Bush, a Black actress in the silent Black fright film *The Crimson Skull* (1921). In return for her labor, Bush requested a greater salary. In response, Norman explained his financial constraints, implicating racial boundaries:

[A]s our picture will be produced for colored theatres only, it will have a possible distribution in about 120 theatres; 85% of which have an average seating capacity of but 250. These figures are no comparison with the 22,000 white theatres in which our product will find no market.⁵⁸

Bush did not receive her salary bump, but she did sign on with Norman to star in *The Crimson Skull*, joining her former theater co-star, the Black actor Lawrence Chenault, in the film.

The Crimson Skull was advertised as a "baffling western mystery photo-play" featuring the "Skull" and his stick-up gang the "Terrors," who, while cloaked in

a black costume painted with a white skeleton, play on superstitions by haunting, terrorizing, and robbing their victims. The film was so well received when screened in Baltimore, Maryland, at the Carey Theater that it was “continued for two days.”⁵⁹

The Ebony Film Company (1915), despite what its name seemed to promise, was not Black-owned. As most white-owned film companies of the day did, it made its stereotypical contributions to representations of Blackness through films such as *Money Talks in Darktown* (1916) and *Shine Johnson and the Rabbit’s Foot* (1917). Though the company was white-owned, it was managed by front man Luther J. Pollard, its only Black officer, and it kept a sizable cadre of Black stock company performers. Ebony Film Company produced a number of fright films, bringing their catalog to a quantitatively impressive collection of two dozen. Ebony featured Black actors in a whopping five comedy-horror shorts between 1917 and 1918: *Devil for a Day* (1917); *Ghosts* (1917); *Mercy, the Mummy Mumbled* (1918); *Spooks* (1918); and *Do the Dead Talk?* (1918).⁶⁰

Ebony films were screened for both Black and white audiences, even though they were primarily marketed toward whites, as this 1918 company advertisement in *Motion Picture World* reveals: “colored people are funny. If colored people weren’t funny, there would be no plantation melodies, no banjos, no cake walk, no buck and wing dance, no minstrel show and no black-face vaudeville. And they are funny in the studio.”⁶¹

In response to Ebony’s offerings, Black viewers noted their offense, as “Mrs. J.H.” wrote in a Letter to the Editor of the *Chicago Defender*:

I consider it my duty, as a member of the respectable class of theater patrons, to protest against a certain class of pictures which have been and are being shown at the theaters in this district. I refer to pictures being exploited by the Ebony Film Company, according to the advertisements, and which make an exaggerated display of the disgraceful actions of the lowest element of the race. It was with abject humiliation that myself and many of my friends sat through the scenes of degradation shown on the screen, and if they were meant for comedy, the meaning certainly miscarried. When beastly actions of the degraded of our people are flaunted before our eyes in places of amusement it is high time to protest in the name of common decency.⁶²

The Black press was similarly scathing in its reviews of Ebony films. The *Chicago Defender* pointedly advised: “when you see one of these so-called ‘all-colored comedies’ advertised, keep your money in your pocket and save the dime as well as your self-respect.”⁶³

In all, baseness and silly, disgraceful actions were the general approach to Blackness for nearly the first two decades of the twentieth century. However, Oscar Micheaux would wipe the exaggerated smiles from faces and reign supreme in offering “Black horror” films.

Oscar Micheaux: Master of the Macabre

Oscar Devereaux Micheaux was born in 1884 to formerly enslaved parents and reared in Kansas. At approximately age 26, in March 1910, he wrote to the Black-owned and operated weekly newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, describing his life as a “resident, pioneer and landowner” in the predominately white Gregory County, South Dakota. While homesteading (he did not embrace the identity of “farmer”), Micheaux began filling notebooks with the semi-autobiographical tales of the (barely) fictional character “Oscar Devereaux,” ultimately turning his notes into one of his first self-published and distributed books, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*. This would be the first of his six novels.

Micheaux’s move into film began in 1918 when George Johnson of Lincoln Motion Picture Company reached out to the author after seeing an advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for his book *The Homesteader*. Lincoln sought to acquire the rights to the book for the purpose of adapting it for the big screen. A flurry of communication between Micheaux and Johnson resulted in Johnson trying to “convince Micheaux that he had more expertise in ‘the picture game,’ and promising that he could mold the book ‘into a first-class feature.’”⁶⁴ However, Micheaux was insistent that his novel, at 500 pages, was worthy of a feature-length, six-reel film, not the usual two to three reels typically produced by Lincoln, and common for Black films at the time. Negotiations broke down, as Micheaux became determined to produce *The Homesteader* himself under his Micheaux Book and Film Company.

In 1919, Micheaux became the first Black American to make a feature-length film with his silent drama *The Homesteader*. The filmmaker “wrote himself into history” by first drawing upon his now-famous biography and then continuing to create works that offered a sociopolitical take on Blackness not seen before in popular culture.⁶⁵ The stories he created became the basis of some of his most famous works, such as the silent films *Within Our Gates* (1920), *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), and *Body and Soul* (1925). Micheaux was the epitome of an independent filmmaker, drawing on the kindness of his network of Black friends who let him “shoot films in their living rooms and set up chairs there for screenings.”⁶⁶ The result—over a 30-year career, Micheaux made approximately 40 films.

Among those films, at least three were silent fright films which more closely resemble the horror genre of today. Micheaux did not indulge in (or suffer) comedy horror. His films went about the very serious business of storytelling. One such film, a dramatic fright film, *A Son of Satan* (1924), nearly failed to see the light of day due to some sly business maneuverings on the part of Micheaux himself.

Noted Micheaux scholars Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, in their book *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*, explain that to save money and to maximize profit, the filmmaker turned crafty distributor.

He would not submit his films, for licensing, as required, until he had already booked and advertised the film. The tactic saved Micheaux the time and resources associated with securing licensing only to be told to cut some material to meet the requirements of licensing boards' censors. Instead, Micheaux attempted to move the boards to act in his favor, quickly and with little hassle, by explaining that theaters were already waiting for the delivery of his films. The censors need not worry about his films' content since they were already anticipated and would be seen only by Black audiences.⁶⁷ To cajole the board, "his letterhead during this period listed all the films he had in distribution and described his firm as "Producers and Distributors of High Class Negro Feature Photoplays."⁶⁸

When the Virginia Board threatened the release of *A Son of Satan*, Micheaux booked the film anyway, without approval, in Attucks Theatre in Norfolk, and circulated ads and other promotional materials for the film. Only then did the Board hear from Micheaux, who had been ignoring their demands for changes to the film. Ultimately, his strategy was a brazen feat:

His tardy reply illuminates how he manipulated the system to make it work to his advantage, while avoiding the undesirable consequences of his own misdemeanors. Setting the scene for a melodrama, and playing the role of the trickster, he struck a note of "contrition," saying he had been traveling in cinder-infested Jim Crow cars throughout the South all summer and "was just so tired and distracted half the time" that he never felt composed enough "to set down and explain the why of." Playing to the paternalism of the board, he pleaded poverty and reminded them that these films were only shown to Negro audiences, anyway.⁶⁹

The seven-reel *A Son of Satan* included Lawrence Chenault, of *The Crimson Skull* fame, in its cast. According to ads, the film featured "a powerful supporting colored cast" performing an adaptation of a Micheaux story, *The Ghost of Tolston's Manor*.⁷⁰ The film is about a man who, on a bet, agrees to spend the night in a haunted house. The tale was described as "a hair raising story of adventure in a haunted house, where rattling chains and walking ghosts are as common as parrots and puppies."⁷¹

The film was not, however, without its controversies. The Virginia Board rejected the scenes of miscegenation for "reasons of discretion."⁷² They were unequivocal in their condemnation of *Son of Satan*, making it clear that their regard for its messages of racial strife and miscegenation, as well their view of Black audiences who would consume the film, was dim:

The central figure in the plot is a mulatto whose villainies justify the significant title of the photoplay. By implication at least, the audience is led to believe that the criminal tendencies of the man are inherited from his white forefathers. *A Son of Satan*, at best, is unwholesome as it touches

unpleasantly on miscegenation. . . . The most serious feature of the picture, however, is the series of race riots incited by the *Son of Satan*, who uses a white man as his tool. While it might be argued that these riots, in reality, are attributable to the villainous negro, it should not be forgotten that a white man is his partner in crime. Riot scenes of any sort are calculated to arouse the passions, and even the mildest presentation of race conflict is inflammatory material of the most dangerous sort for treatment on the screen. . . . In this connection it should be remembered that the picture, in all probability, will be offered only to negro theatres where a large proportion of the audiences will doubtless be illiterate, or so ignorant as to misinterpret even what is good in the films. *A Son of Satan* is rejected on the ground that it might tend to corrupt morals or incite to crime.⁷³

By still others, it was met with some scorn for its depiction of Blacks drinking, gambling, and shooting dice. The Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York rejected the film, thereby withholding its license for such depictions, as the Commission states in its letter to Micheaux:

The picture is filled with scenes of drinking, carousing and shows masked men becoming intoxicated. It shows the playing of crap for money, a man killing his wife by choking her, the killing of the leader of the hooded organization and the killing of a cat by throwing a stone on it. There are many scenes of crime. The film is of such character that in the opinion of the commission, it is "inhuman" and would "tend to incite crime."⁷⁴

The film did deploy some worrisome tropes as it portrayed Black men in all manner of "carousing." White men were portrayed as savage Klan members. As such, the film evidenced how Micheaux could be "unabashedly defiant to both white and black America."⁷⁵ Still, *A Son of Satan* was generally well received. The *Chicago Defender's* D. Ireland Thomas wrote of the film:

[S]ome may not like the production because it shows up some of our Race in their colors. They might also protest against the language used. I would not endorse this particular part of the film myself, but I must admit that it is true to nature, yes, I guess, too true. We've got to hand it to Oscar Micheaux when it comes to giving us the real stuff . . . I do not want to see my Race in saloons or at crap tables. But it is not what we want, that gets the money. It is what the public clamors for that makes the coin jingle.⁷⁶

Micheaux's next fright film, *The Devil's Disciple* (1925), again counts among its stars Lawrence Chenault. It is described in the *New York Amsterdam News* as "intensely gripping and dramatic" as it tells the story of the dangers of big city life, in this case, Harlem, for young women. The danger takes the form of a man, a

disciple of Satan, who seduces and exploits “women of the streets.” One woman believes that she can change the man, only to become a victim of degradation herself. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, “what ensues makes a story of such nerve-tingling suspense and dramatic situations that you are gripped in an ecstasy of entertainment from which you are not released until the end is flashed before your eyes.”⁷⁷

Micheaux was still not done with his spooky offerings. *The Conjure Woman* (1926) was based on Charles Chesnutt’s 1899 short story collection of the same title. The collection presented seven short stories, all set in Patesville, North Carolina, centering on the act of conjuring—a hoodoo magic⁷⁸—by Blacks (enslaved and free) resisting the cruelties inflicted upon them by violent, racist whites. Micheaux wrote Chesnutt outlining his ideas for adapting the first story of *The Conjure Woman*, *the Goophered Grapevine*, for a “photoplay”:

I think you could develop a good synopsis from the first story of *The Conjure Woman*. Write the case of the man and woman into a good love story, let there, if possible, be a haunted house, the haunts being intriguers to be found out near the end, the heroine to have ran off there and in hiding—anything that will thrill or suspend, but have a delightful ending and give opportunity for a strong male and female lead.

(Oscar Micheaux to Charles Waddell Chesnutt, 30 October 1921,
Charles Waddell Chesnutt Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society,
Cleveland, Ohio)⁷⁹

Sadly, the film, which was inspired by Chesnutt’s tale of a hexed grape vineyard, did not make much of a splash, for reasons unknown. What is known is that the film was not extensively promoted and it saw very limited screenings.⁸⁰

Micheaux’s films have been understood as “race movies” and morality tales that have the dual goal of circulating a positive, uplift-the-race message while showing Black Americans as complex, but still leading with their humanity—loving and good, flawed and weak, and morally wrong and forthright. Micheaux also had a good eye for a compelling story. His fright films were provocative, psychological thrillers (not merely “bump in the night” spooky movies). His films would lay the foundation for the likes of Black actor/director Spencer Williams and the creation of his “Black horror” morality-themed films of the 1940s. Nonetheless, Blacks’ participation in horror would continue to be marred by imagistic mistreatment almost exclusively in “Blacks in horror” films.

Conclusion

It was against this early-twentieth-century backdrop when W.E.B. Du Bois would famously lament Black Americans “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity,” that Black cultural producers entered into

filmmaking.⁸¹ They sought to offer up entertainment from their own vantage point of Blackness while countering the prevailing contemptuous representations being circulated by those who were particularly invested in preserving the dominance of whiteness. Such responsiveness was an enormous creative responsibility as well as unfortunately confining. Certainly, for these Black filmmakers, the profit potential was inviting. However, Griffith's falsehoods proved strong motivation for Blacks to enter into the field of cinema, doing so quickly and in increasing numbers. Independent Black film companies and Black theaters began to spring up. By the late 1920s, an impressive 700 Black theaters were serving Black audiences (proving that an arts "renaissance" was not just a Harlem phenomenon).⁸² Still, the life of the Black filmmaker was far from easy. Censorship, distribution, access to resources (e.g., equipment, actors, payroll, ad dollars), and seeing a return on their investment were significant, often unconquerable problems.

Predictably, non-Black filmmakers continued to dominate the industry, and their narrow vision of Black people and Black culture prevailed. There seemed to be no conquering depictions of Blacks as monstrous. More, race-baiting comedy horror films featuring the bugged-eyed, spooked Negro were reaching a fevered pitch. For example, 1924's *Fools in the Dark*, directed by Al Santell, sees a young, aspiring "chiller" movie screenwriter come under the threat of a death ray gun. The young man is rescued by a "Black" street cleaner (played by Tom Wilson in blackface) who is insultingly named "Diploma." Soister et al. cite a *The New York Times* review which references Diploma's performance:

[He] is frightened and the caption, as he stands gazing into the glistening orbs of a stuffed tiger, has him saying: "Feet, don't fail me now!" . . . His most terrified period is where he inadvertently steps into a pool of glue, his substantial pedal extremities becoming stuck, without his being aware of it, to some calico attached to Dr. Rand's pet skeleton. Hence one sees the skeleton following Diploma's every step. This goes on for quite a stretch, when through clever manipulation the cold bone fingers reach out and touch Diploma on the shoulder. As the Negro is not accustomed to medical research or ethnological studies he is quiveringly surprised at the lightness of the tap and the coldness and hardness of the fingers. He dare not look around, so feels behind him with trepidation, getting his fingers on about the location of the skeleton's fourth rib. Then slowly he turns his head, and the second his eyes light on the skull he flees for dear life.⁸³

While the 1930s did see blackface performance ebb, providing more opportunities for "real" Black actors, sadly the roles made available, particularly in the horror genre, were dreadfully regressive. The decade also saw increased participation of Black women—no longer would they be depicted by white men in blackface. However, the roles written for Black women often portrayed them as evil Voodoo practitioners.

The 1930s also introduces still more representational problems. “Jungle films”—films about the purported uncivilized lives of Black people in places such as the continent of Africa or on the island of Haiti—became more popular during the decade. These films’ contribution to the horror genre was profound and the tropes of these films have a hold on horror films today. Blacks as savage, wicked Voodoo practitioners chanting “ooo-ga boo-ga” while whipping themselves around in a frenzied ritualistic dance to the cadence of drums echoing out from the jungle rivaled the grotesqueness of a Gus or a Lynch. Whites would still be depicted as superior and enlightened . . . and still the protectors of white womanhood, which continued to be imperiled by Blacks. The 1930s was very much a decade of worrisome “Blacks in horror” rather than restorative “Black horror.”

Notes

- 1 Blacks and women have been largely excluded from the story of film’s invention and development.
- 2 Jones, Alan. *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies*. London: Rough Guides, 2005.13. Print.
- 3 Zoetrope technology moved static images of an activity, sequentially arranged, at such a rapid speed that the images appeared to move. For example, stills of a galloping horse could be cycled at such a speed as to make it appear that the horse in the images was moving. A “magic lantern” was the predecessor to the modern film projector.
- 4 Warner Bros. issued the film *Don Juan* with a music soundtrack. However, in 1894, WKL Dickson with Edison Manufacturing Company attempted to sync sound. In the non-commercial, experimental film Dickson is seen and heard playing the violin for a few seconds while two men waltz together to his music. *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*. Disc 2. Prod. Brent Wood. Kino on Video, 2005. DVD.
- 5 *The Jazz Singer* (1928) was the breakthrough “talkie” for the U.S. It was largely a silent film but included some singing and dialogue. It also featured whites in blackface.
- 6 The language of “horror film” was not yet part of the American lexicon. That would not happen until the 1930s with Universal Studios films such as *Dracula*. Instead, horror films were described as “chillers,” “shockers,” “thrillers,” and “frightening.” But these adjectives advertised emotional response; they did not hail a genre association.
- 7 Noble, Peter. *The Negro in Films*. New York, NY: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1970.27. Print.
- 8 Butters, Jr., Gerald R. *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002.34. Print.
- 9 Butters (20).
- 10 Butters (20).
- 11 Jones, G. William. *Black Cinema Treasures: Lost and Found*. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1991.14–15. Print.
- 12 Butters (32).
- 13 Musser, Charles. *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991.530. Print.
- 14 Butters (22).
- 15 Richards, Larry. *African American Films through 1959: A Comprehensive, Illustrated Filmography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1998.90. Print.
- 16 Cripps, Thomas. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993.135. Print.
- 17 Butters (31).

- 18 Stewart, Jacqueline Najuma. *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005. See: 4–43. Print.
- 19 Quoted by Richards, Larry (177).
- 20 Leab, Daniel J. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975.13. Print.
- 21 Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986.93. Print.
- 22 Leab (*From Sambo* 26).
- 23 Robinson, Cedric J. *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks & the Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film before World War II*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.108. Print.
- 24 Snead, James. *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994.39. Print.
- 25 Guerrero, Edward *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993.17. Print.
- 26 Butters (71, emphasis mine).
- 27 Carter, Everett. “Cultural History Written with Lightening: The Significance of the Birth of a Nation (1915).” *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*. Ed. Peter C. Rollins. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1998.304. Print.
- 28 Holden-Smith, Barbara. “Lynching, Federalism, and the Intersection of Race and Gender in the Progressive Era.” *Cornell Law Faculty Publications, Paper 1029* (1996): 55, <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/facpub/1029>.
- 29 Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1993.13–14. Print.
- 30 Bogle (*Toms, Coons* 13–14).
- 31 Guerrero (*Framing Blackness* 13).
- 32 Snead (41).
- 33 Keene, Jennifer. Wilson and Race Relations. In
- 34 Carter (vii).
- 35 Cripps, Thomas. *Black Film as Genre*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978.22. Print.
- 36 Noble (43).
- 37 Cripps (*Slow Fade* 64).
- 38 Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.34. Print.
- 39 The Whales 1931 Universal *Frankenstein* is considered the classic, seminal film. An earlier, 1910 short, at 16 minutes, directed by J. Searle Dawley through Edison Studios, precedes this effort and may be the first film adaptation of the Mary Shelley (1818) *Frankenstein* novel.
- 40 Crane, Jonathan. *Terror and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.91. Print.
- 41 Crane (72–73).
- 42 Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997.54. Print.
- 43 Pinedo (55).
- 44 Butters (73).
- 45 Williams, Linda. “When the Woman Looks.” *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.20. Print.
- 46 Goldberg, D.J. *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.117. Print.
- 47 Southern Poverty Law Center. 2010. Southern Poverty Law Center. www.splcenter.org/. Web June 8, 2009. Also see: Stokes, M. D.W. *Griffith's the Birth of a Nation*:

- A History of the Most Controversial Film of All Time*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007.9. Print.
- 48 Bogle (*Toms, Coons* 13–14).
- 49 Cripps (*Genre* 15).
- 50 Greene, R.H., “‘Birth Of A Race’: The Obscure Demise Of A Would-Be Rebuttal To Racism,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, October 25, 2015, audio, 5:16, www.npr.org/2015/10/25/451717690/birth-of-a-race-the-obscure-demise-of-a-would-be-rebuttal-to-racism.
- 51 Cripps (*Slow Fade* 74–75).
- 52 Cripps (*Slow Fade* 76).
- 53 In the film, the woman, Sylvia, is mixed race (Black and White) and adopted by and raised in a Black family. She is to be read as Black.
- 54 Richards (152).
- 55 Butters (105).
- 56 Butters (105).
- 57 Butters (xvi).
- 58 Bowser, P., and L. Spence. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.115. Print.
- 59 “Carey Theater, *The Crimson Skull*.” *Afro-American*, May 19, 1922: 4. Print.
- 60 Many of *Ebony’s* films, like most films of from the 1800s and early 1900s, are lost.
- 61 Bowser and Spence (92).
- 62 “Ebony Films” [Letter to the Editor]. *Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1916 (4).
- 63 Bowser and Spence (92).
- 64 Bowser and Spence (10).
- 65 Bowser and Spence (10).
- 66 Davis, T. “Foreword.” *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*. Eds. Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000. ix. Print.
- 67 Bowser and Spence (16).
- 68 Bowser and Spence (16).
- 69 Bowser and Spence (17).
- 70 Some movie posters for *A Son of Satan* misprint the story’s title as “Tolson’s,” rather than “Tolston’s.” There may have also been occasions in which *A Son of Satan* was marketed under the alternate title *The Ghost of Tolston’s Manor*, thereby leading to some confusion as to whether these were two distinct films. Credible scholarship, such as that produced by Pearl Bowser, Louise Spence, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, leads to the conclusion that *A Son of Satan* is the film, and *The Ghost of Tolston’s Manor* is the story.
- 71 Regester, Charlene. “The African-American Press and Race Movies, 1909–1929.” *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*. Eds. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser. Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press: 2001.47. Print.
- 72 Bowser and Spence (17 144).
- 73 Musser, Creekmur, Bowser, Green, Regester, and Spence (252).
- 74 Musser, Charles, Corey K. Creekmur, Pearl Bowser, J. Ronald Green, Charlene Regester, and Louise Spence. “Appendix B: An Oscar Micheaux Filmography: From the Silents Through His Transition to Sound, 1919–1931.” *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*. Eds. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser. Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.252. Print.
- 75 Butters (139).
- 76 Musser, Creekmur, Bowser, Green, Regester, and Spence (251).

42 The Birth of the Black Boogeyman

- 77 Musser, Creekmur, Bowser, Green, Regester, and Spence (256).
- 78 According to Zora Hurston, hoodoo is an African-Americanism for the West African term “juju.” Conjuring, a kind of folk magic, through the use of roots and/or the mixture of herbs is part of the tradition, as is engaged prayer. See: Hurston, Zora. “Hoodoo in America.” *Journal of American Folklore* 44 (October—December 1931): 174.317–417. Print.
- 79 Musser, Creekmur, Bowser, Green, Regester, and Spence (260–261).
- 80 Musser, Creekmur, Bowser, Green, Regester, and Spence (261).
- 81 Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York, NY: NAL Penguin, 1903/1969.45. Print.
- 82 Nestey, James R. *Black Images in American Films, 1896–1954*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982.79. Print.
- 83 John T. Soister, et al. *American Silent Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Feature Films, 1913–1929*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012.74. Print.

2

JUNGLE FEVER—A HORROR ROMANCE

1930s

Voodoo and zombies. Kid's stuff, right? Grade B movies. Well, that's wrong. Just one hour plane ride from Miami is the Caribbean country of Haiti, and this country is literally being held hostage by Voodoo priests who can and do turn people into zombies.

—Bill O'Reilly (20)¹

In 35 short years (1895–1930), American film went from being the expensive, experimental hobby of inventors to a full-blown commercial industry—“Hollywood.” By the mid-1930s, film production was hailed as a leading industry in the U.S., with \$2 billion in financial worth. The average weekly attendance at theaters rose steadily from 40 million in 1922 to 48 million in 1925 and 110 million in 1930.² The 1930s was also when the term “horror film” finally entered into the lexicon.³

Nearly every mainstream film company began producing horror films; however, Universal Studios can be credited with innovating this “Golden Age” of horror films with their now-classic string of monster movies—*Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), and *The Invisible Man* (1933).⁴ Universal's monsters were joined by other popular Universal horror films such as *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932), as well as a string of sequels such as *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *Dracula's Daughter* (1936). Thanks in part to the efforts of Universal, the 1930s remains one of the most celebrated periods in film history. Unfortunately, Black characters were largely absent from Universal's monster movies, with the rare exception of the Black actor Noble Johnson, who had small parts as the servant “Janos the Black One” in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and as the servant “the Nubian” in *The Mummy*.

These kinds of limiting roles were criticized by the Black press, with one writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier* pointing to Universal as an example of how little respect production companies had for Black audiences during this time.⁵ Indeed, Blacks were experiencing filmic slights, but they were not only coming from Universal.

Black filmmakers had little opportunity to inform the film industry during this time. The advent of sound, a costly technological innovation, and the crisis of the Great Depression, which brought economic collapse to global markets, made for a deadly pecuniary mix for Black filmmakers. Already teetering financially, many saw their companies completely fail. Black films, then, became white scripted, owned, produced, and distributed. While featuring Black actors (and still on rare occasions whites in blackface), these films were largely for a white target audience. As such, the social realism that was a hallmark of, for example, Oscar Micheaux's films took a back seat to depictions of happy Black folks in physical and emotional service to whites whose most urgent battle was a battle for love, as seen in the dramas *So Red the Rose* (1935), *Rainbow on the River* (1936), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

Horror was no different.

Conquering the Black World

1930s horror displayed an obsession with “out of Africa” tales in which whites “conquer” or tame the continent. It was a preoccupation that may be attributed to the early twentieth-century adventures of President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909). Roosevelt was a historian (he was named President of the American Historical Association); he was a naturalist, conservationist, and explorer (he is credited with discovering the 625-mile uncharted river the Rio Roosevelt); he worked with the Smithsonian, the National Museum of Natural History (D.C.), and the American Museum of Natural History (New York). Hence, his exploits came with a scholarly and world-leader credibility, which was widely reported on.

Roosevelt could be considered one of the first “media” Presidents. As expected, his travels were widely reported. More than that, he was one of the first U.S. presidents to have his political speeches audio recorded for mass circulation. Roosevelt also allowed his image to be captured and distributed through a collection of silent film clips. And then there are the many scholarly and nonfiction writings authored by Roosevelt. Taken together, this range of media made Roosevelt one of the most publicly accessible leaders of the early twentieth century.

As a result of Roosevelt's willing presence in mass media, Americans were provided with ample coverage of his life's travails, including his African safari escapades. In 1909, he visited the then-Belgian Congo for an expedition with the purpose of acquiring animals for U.S. museums. He and his team returned with a trove of over 11,000 specimens (e.g., elephants, hippos, rhinos, and insects) for preservation and/or mounting. In the public's mind, Roosevelt had successfully gone into a primordial Africa, coming returning unscathed and with its riches. Roosevelt was presented as standing triumphant over the continent.

Roosevelt contributed to his own myth-making through his writings about his safaris, regularly portraying himself as a kindly, pragmatic figure. In one instance, he wrote that he *almost* pitied the Black African porters on his expedition as they had only their clothes, one blanket, and a tent. That is, until he met the Kikuyu who, he reported to the public, only had a small blanket, but no clothes and no tents. It was then that Roosevelt assuaged his guilt by proclaiming “how much better off” his porters were “simply because they were on a white man’s safari.”⁶ Such experiences were further well documented thanks to a robustly publicized, massive compendium project of Roosevelt’s speeches, quotes, and writings. The compendium project began in 1928 and was finally completed in 1941, uncoincidentally corresponding with the great proliferation of America-taming-the-jungle films.

Love in the Jungle . . . with Apes . . . That’s Nasty!

Occasionally a hoax of some kind will win a front page story, but it’s best if newspapers can be “let in” on the stunt.

—*The Encyclopedia of Exploitation* (138)⁷

“Animalistic, ‘wild’ sexuality.” Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Black Sexual Politics*, observes that Black women continue to be plagued by sexual stereotypes. She writes of “Western perceptions of African bodies,” noting that the “mélange of animal skins, . . . breast worship, and focus on the booty” remains ubiquitous.⁸ Hill Collins further notes that from Sarah Bartmann (the pejoratively dubbed “Hottentot Venus”) to Josephine Baker to Destiny’s Child, the attraction—or, more precisely, the marketability—of Black women’s bodies has been tied to hypersexual primitive figures. Significantly, it is Black women’s *sexuality*—not romance or love—that image-makers during the 1930s horror cycle honed in on with fetish-like attention.

Exploiting that curiosity—and the willingness to believe the worst about Blacks on any continent—were salacious horror-inclined documentaries of dubious authenticity, such as *Africa Speaks* (1930) and *Ingagi* (1930). The latter was a particularly reprehensible, “Blacks in horror” jungle film about Black women’s animalistic-turned-bestiality sexual proclivities. Set in the Congo, the film is said to be influenced by Roosevelt’s exhibition in the country. *Ingagi* is one of the more sickening horror films, not because of any expected horror tropes of blood and gore (there is none of that) but due to its disgusting claims about Black people’s sexual relations.

Ingagi tells the story of white research scientists who travel deep into the jungles of the Congo to investigate the odd rituals of a Congolese tribe that both reveres and fears gorillas, or “ingagis,” that give their virgin women to the beasts. Appalled by the natives’ ritual sacrifice of its women, the scientists work to rescue

a young Black woman victim from the clutches of an ape-beast. In the course of saving the woman's life and killing the animal, the men (and therefore the film's audience) are led to believe that the woman was not simply saved from being pummeled and/or eaten by the animal. Rather, she was rescued from enduring an encounter with bestiality. To bring this point home, at the film's end, a different woman, semi-nude, emerges from the jungle thicket holding a human baby, but its skin is covered in fur. The infant is described as "a strange-looking child, seemingly more ape than human."

Ingagi was not originally marketed as a horror movie or even fictional by its director William Campbell or its producers Congo Pictures, Ltd. Instead, in an attempt at a novel marketing strategy, it was described as a true and factual *documentary* film. That is, Campbell claimed that *Ingagi* was simply the edited, but otherwise unadulterated footage shot by expedition members. He promised audiences that travelers and the tribe's activities that they witnessed were real and that nothing was staged. In promotional materials, tag-lines encouraged film-goers to believe the events depicted in *Ingagi*: "You Have Heard of Such Things But You Doubted Their Reality . . . But Here in This Amazing Film Are Shown for the Very First Time These Amazing Facts," "A Million Thrills . . . An Authentic Record of African Adventure!," and "Myths And Legends Of Darkest Africa Reduced To Reality Through Astounding Camera Records!" The hit film was soon popularly referred to as "the gorilla sex picture," broke box office records, and even spawned a tune called "My Ingagi."⁹

A human engaging in intercourse with a gorilla was never shown on-screen. Rather, the audience was literally kept in the dark as grainy, distant camera work and poor lighting allowed inter-species copulation to only be implied. Largely obstructed from view were the white actresses in blackface portraying some of the Congolese women.¹⁰ In fact, the poster art for the film was far more arousing and explicit as it showed an ape fondling a bedraggled, bald Black woman's bare breasts. Here, Black women are implicated in a complicated scheme of aberrance in which they are simultaneously hypersexual and available but are not at all feminine, beautiful, or sexy (by traditional, Western standards). As for Black men, *Ingagi* alludes to an "aggressive Black male sexuality in the form of the gorilla" on the prowl for lascivious Black women.¹¹ Worse, promotional materials included the question, 'was Darwin right?' Hence, *Ingagi* suggested a direct link between Black people and the "super-masculine black beasts."¹² The result was a film that worked to trigger audiences' disgust toward Black people and their unique ability to breed with an ape, a kind of bestial and incestuous kin relationship.

The controversy around *Ingagi* did not stop there. According to *LA Times* reporter Andrew Erish, several months after the film's release (as should be expected), suspicion began to emerge about its authenticity as a documentary. *Ingagi* included scenes and stock footage from older, well-known jungle films such as *Heart of Africa* (1915) (another purported "documentary" about safaris in Kenya). Many of *Ingagi*'s gorilla scenes were shot in a California zoo. It was proven,

by a signed affidavit no less, that actor Charles Gemora portrayed the offending gorilla while clad in a gorilla suit. Someone recognized one of the “African” women in the films as an often-cast extra in Hollywood films. The *Los Angeles Examiner* reported that regular “Central Avenue Negroes” were cast as the tribesmen. Still, when pressed, the film’s director and others involved in making the film insisted that *Ingagi* was authentic, and cities continued to book the film as such. Three years later, after the film had its day in theaters and after the film’s production company boasted about profits in excess of \$1 million, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) said the filmmakers could no longer promote the film as authentic.¹³ As part of their case, the FTC noted that “ingagi” was a made-up word.¹⁴

In all the controversy, no one seemed to care about the attack on Black people and their sexuality. In spite of the establishment of a governing code for morality and decency in the film industry, which included the rejection of female nudity, real or implied, if serving a prurient interest, Black women’s bodies did not rate. The Black “native” body, deemed neither moral nor decent, “was at once made an acceptable site for sexual titillation and sanctioned racial degradation.”¹⁵ Sadly, there was no *Birth of Nation*-type campaigns to boycott the film. In the end, *Ingagi* went down in history, according to a *New York Times* review summary, as “one of the most outrageous hoaxes ever perpetrated.”¹⁶

On the immediate heels of *Ingagi* came 1932’s *The Monster Walks*. This “Blacks in horror” movie is mundane (certainly compared to *Ingagi*). Greed motivates a pair of housekeepers to try to do away with Ruth (Vera Reynolds), the daughter of their recently deceased employer. Ruth has just inherited her father’s riches and mansion, which happens to house an ape in the cellar. The housekeepers put on ape costumes in a plan to kill Ruth while pinning the murder on the animal. Of course, just in the nick of time, Ruth is saved by her heroic fiancé Ted (Rex Lease).

Monster delivers several horror clichés which had been developing over the years—scary animals, the gothic, spooky mansions, the beautiful, delicate white woman victim, the handsome and heroic white male savior, and, notably, the comic-Negro. *Monster* features the (in)famous character actor Willie Best, appearing under the unmistakably offensive stage name “Sleep ‘n’ Eat,” in the role of Exodus, Ted’s driver, and butler. Exodus is child-like, rambunctious, and always profoundly and comically scared by *everything*—lightning, the dark, big houses, noises, silence, and even a bearskin rug. The film is a rather serious fright-fest, except when Exodus appears in a scene. The film even ends comically as Exodus is featured in its final scenes. Here, he and the ape finally come face to face. His meeting with the animal is supposed to yet again give credence to the theory that on the evolutionary scale there is very little distance between Black people and primitive primates (as also theorized in *Ingagi*). Exodus brings *Monster* to its conclusion with these lines, delivered to Ted in a drawl, about the ape: “You mean that he’s related to me?! . . . Well, I don’t know. I had a grandpappy that looked something like him. But he wasn’t as active.”

Importantly, *Exodus* also illustrates a trend around how audiences were prompted to understand Blacks in America in opposition to those from other parts of the non-Westernized world. When portrayed in domestic settings, the dominant representation of Black people during this period was comedic. The representation aligned with the faithful and happy-go-lucky representations seen in films such as *Gone with the Wind*, which claimed to harken back to a more racially “orderly” time in American history. However, when Black roles (played by African American actors) were set in the foreign (e.g., *Ingagi*, *Tarzan*, the *Ape Man* [1932], and *Black Moon* [1934]), they were presented as dangerous, hypersexual savages who posed a considerable safety threat to whites, though there was no implication that they would upend whiteness and the racial hierarchy.

The King of Ape Love

It was *Ingagi*'s success that convinced the film studio RKO to green-light the “Blacks in horror” film *King Kong* (1933), in which a giant ape, Kong, falls for, pursues, and abducts a white woman.¹⁷

King Kong did not stray far from the *Ingagi* film-within-a film narrative device—a kind of “optical colonialization.”¹⁸ In *Kong*, a white American filmmaker and crew sail to Skull Island, somewhere in the Indian Ocean (around Indonesia), to make a movie featuring a (by their standards) beautiful, blond white woman against the backdrop of a “real” primitive island which has been untouched by evolution.

Upon their arrival on the island, the crew mounts an expedition and encounters a tribe made up of Black (not Indonesian) natives. Bogle (2005) reports casting for Kong included hiring “everybody they could find,” as long as they were not light-complexioned. The studio was looking for extras with a “dark complexion, big lips, and kinky hair.”¹⁹ The use of Black actors to portray Indonesians illustrates a typical racial impulse by Hollywood to conflate anyone with dark skin as Other.²⁰ The natives are clad in bits of animal cloth, carrying spears, with their faces painted, and wearing Afro wigs. The “native’s chief,” a bit part, is played by the celebrated Black actor Noble Johnson. The tribe (and this should sound very, very familiar) offer their silent, submissive semi-nude virgin women as “brides” to Kong to remain on the ape’s good side.²¹

Upon the arrival of the filmmaker and crew, the Chief and his tribe spot the young, blond “beauty” Ann Darrow (Fay Wray). The natives immediately conclude that her white skin makes her special. The Chief’s jubilant exclamation, “Look at the golden woman!” (translated into English by the ship’s Captain, who just happens to speak “native”), enjoins the Black male gaze with the ape’s, with Kong similarly fawning over Darrow once he lays his eyes upon her. Black women are afforded no such courtesy regarding their beauty or value. First, the aspiring filmmaker Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) dismissively observes, “Yeah, blondes are scarce around here,” Second, the Chief proposes a troubling

trade—he will hand over *six* Black women to the Americans for Darrow alone. The plan is to sacrifice Darrow, with the Chief and his tribe theorizing that Kong will be infinitely more pleased with her. Of course, the Chief's offer is refused. As Greenberg elaborates, this confrontation is racial myth-making at its worst:

According to this debased view of other lands and people, one of “our” women must be worth six of theirs. And although “their” men are capable of the most heinous aggression, one of “our” men can still take on and whip half a dozen of theirs in a fair fight . . . *Kong* then, is the epitome of the white man's daydream of the brute black, the heartless, mindless foreigner, feasting on violence and rapine.²²

Snead, similarly, persuasively argues that Kong is “the coded Black” in which Black identity is implicitly carried in the form of an ape.²³ Kong's racist racial coding is easily recognizable—his color is black; he is described as emerging from a “lower,” primitive culture; he is surrounded by dark-skinned natives-turned-mini-Kongs when they dress up like apes to worship their big Kong. The soundtrack that accompanies scenes with Kong consists of drums, an auditory cue that is typical of jungle films and the appearance of Black natives.²⁴

Later, the natives sneak aboard the ship and kidnap Darrow, an event described in broken English by a Chinese cook, Charlie (Victor Wong): “Crazy Black man been here.” When Charlie asks to go ashore to lend his support—“Me likey go too!”—his request is summarily dismissed. Charlie neither makes it off the boat nor is he seen again.

After the tribe kidnaps Darrow, they deliver her to the giant Kong with a great ceremony. Certainly, it is worth questioning, “what the monster would do with the girl if he had a chance to keep her . . . given the obscure nature of his desire and genital apparatus.”²⁵ However, *Inqaaqi* has previously implied that anything is possible and that the rescue of Darrow from the animal means saving her from a most unimaginable encounter with a 50-foot beast.²⁶

The film also asserts that, unlike his past encounters with Black women, Kong's reaction to Darrow is unique in that he does not immediately kill or consume her; rather he falls in love and wishes to keep her around. Indeed, Kong's profound desire for a “human” partner is not transferable to Black women. Interestingly, audiences are to feel badly for Kong as affection for Darrow humanizes him. He becomes marked by his protective heroism and in the gentle stroking of her striking blond hair—hair, the film's audience is reminded, that the ape has not been seen before among the Black inhabitants of Skull Island.

Eventually, Darrow is rescued from the ape's clutches by Driscoll. However, it is the tribe that suffers the consequences of Kong's loss of his white “bride.” The animal goes on a rampage, destroying the village and killing scores of natives. He bites off their heads, beats them, eats them, and stomps them to death. In one scene, deleted from most prints, he tramples the infants in the village.²⁷ Kong is



FIGURE 2.1 Kong's next victims in *King Kong*

RKO Radio Pictures/Photofest

captured, enslaved by the Americans, and put on exhibition on a New York City stage while in shackles in a scene that recalls auction blocks for enslaved Africans in which they were showcased for fetishistic, visual dissection.

Kong escapes his captors and begins his search for Darrow. Much like the Monster in *Frankenstein*, Kong, the big black ape, makes the fatal mistake of entering the bedroom of Darrow and taking her away for what will be a final moment together. The implicit narrative goal is to keep the beast out of the (white) boudoir.²⁸ There is little disagreement that Kong represents masculinity and sexual dominance, as there are “few images of male domination in all of Western art more outlandish and unforgettable than the giant ape holding [Darrow] like a prize atop the delirious deco-phallicism of the newly constructed Empire State Building.”²⁹

Comparing the infamous images of predatory Black men displayed by Gus and Silas Lynch in *The Birth of a Nation* to *Kong*, Young writes, “King Kong provides one version of this overdetermined racist cultural fantasy” while also reinforcing “the more muted historical ‘realism’ of *Birth [of a Nation]*.”³⁰ Not surprisingly, Kong is ultimately shot down and killed, executed by military forces, effectively ending his international pursuit of a white woman.

But Kong is only metaphorically Black. It is also fauna from a pre-modern territory that has crossed the line to challenge dominant human subordinate animals.

As such, *King Kong* is “animal horror” cinema in that it “tells the story of how a particular animal or an animal species commits a transgression against humanity and then recounts the punishment the animal must suffer as a consequence.” It is irrelevant, as Gregersdotter et al. point out in their book *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*, whether humans are to blame for the animal’s offense; the rule is animals—be they apes (e.g., *King Kong*), rats (e.g., *Hood Rat* [2001]), sharks (e.g., *Deep Blue Sea* [1999]), snakes (*Snakes on a Plane* [2006]), dogs (*White Dog* [1982]), or even sharks in tornados for a bit of animal horror meets eco-horror (e.g., *Sharknado* [2013])—should not violate human territory, and the horror lies in when they do.³¹

This primitive ape/beautiful white woman love story would continue to enthrall filmmakers and audiences for decades to come. In 1976, John Guillermin remade *King Kong*, initially advertising for a “well-built” Black man for the role of Kong.³² Ann’s name was changed to Dwan, and the purpose of the expedition was changed from filmmaking to a crew working for a petroleum company exploring an “undiscovered,” albeit fully inhabited, South Pacific island for oil. Much of the remainder of the film remains true to the original. Though this is a post-Civil Rights/Black Power movement release, there is little evidence of racial sensitivity in the film. The representation of South Pacific islanders as primitive Black people remains, as does the notion that the islanders believe six Black women are equivalent to one white woman.

The union of two messages, the importance of white women and the animalism of Black (men), has proven to be so unrelentingly popular that in 2008 NBA basketball star LeBron James posed as the dangerous Kong with white model Giselle in the role of Ann Darrow for the April cover of *Vogue*, a fashion magazine. In re-enacting a scene from the famous horror film, James and Giselle moved the link between Black men as lusty apes and white women as their prey a bit closer to the realm of the real.

In 2005, when Peter Jackson offered up the third major studio remake of *King Kong*, the release reignited long circulating debates about the big black African ape as a metaphor for Black male depravity, in contrast to Western white superiority and desirability. Jackson’s *King Kong* is also fairly faithful to the original 1933 film. However, Jackson works to reimagine a few key scenes, as they pertain to Blackness. The Black natives of Skull Island (many of whom are further blackened up with makeup while their teeth are filed to points) are the horror in this movie—they are filthy, terrifying, hostile, and violent. Hordes of them swarm over the white filmmaking team, spearing and clubbing many of them immediately after they land on the island. The natives are depicted as monsters who, inexplicably, shake and shudder and growl as their eyes are rolled back in their heads. This performance of possession allows the viewer to get a better look at these wicked people, who are pierced with bones and adorn themselves with charms made of skulls.

Jackson’s other principal representation of Blackness is displayed through the self-sacrificing character Ben Hayes (Evan Parke), a World War I veteran who

serves as the ship's trusted and resourceful first mate. The character is spared from sharing a scene with the ghoulish, blacked-up natives as he happens to stay aboard the ship to repair it while the others go ashore. When the natives attack, Hayes appears on the island but only after the natives have scattered from gunfire offered by the ship's white captain. Hayes adopts the role of a protective father figure to a white teen survivor named Jimmy, who is a member of the ship's crew. The bond between Hayes and Jimmy becomes so profound that Hayes turns sacrificial when Kong attacks. In Hayes' final scene, about midway into the movie, he draws Kong to him screaming, "Look at me!" and warning the others, "Go back. Back across the log. Get Jimmy out of here. You gotta run Jimmy. Do as I say. Run!" Kong kills Hayes while Jimmy escapes.

When Kong is forced to perform in America, his unveiling is preceded by blacked-up, afro-wig-wearing "natives" performing a spirited song and dance number. Jackson's *Kong* won Academy awards for special effects and sound, and earned over \$650 million in ticket and DVD sales, making it one of the highest-grossing movies to be distributed by Universal Pictures.

The Legacy of the Ape—Beyond the 1930s

Science fiction films such as *Planet of the Apes* (1968) extended the theme of white superiority over racially coded inferior species such as apes. *Planet of the Apes* (based on Pierre Boulle's novel *La Planete des singes* [1963]), which launched four sequel feature films, a remake, and two television series (one of them animated), tells the story of a group of American astronauts who travel through space from the year 1972 to the year 3978 and crash land in an "upside down world" in which apes (gorillas, orangutans, and chimpanzees) rule over mute, primitive humans. This animal horror film is not dissimilar from the *King Kong* films in that it picks up the "interrogation of human and animal categories by asking the question if the human has the right or even the ability to keep re-erecting the border that makes it possible to separate and inhabit these categories." This film (and the series of films after) works to bring into sharp relief that which horrifies—the knowledge of "the borders that separate the two to be artificial and imaginary."³³ Race figures prominently in *Planet of the Apes* where even the apes invoke a racial caste system. The astronauts are a team of three. There is the Col. George Taylor (Charlton Heston), a square-jawed, blond, white male who takes charge of the mission. Taylor leads his two crewmates as they try to figure out where, and when, they are. Landon (Robert Gunner) is also a white astronaut, but his timid manner and humanistic approach to the world renders him subordinate to the forceful, cocksure Taylor. A third man, Dodge (Jeff Burton), rounds out the team. A serious Black man, he is a formidable intellectual, hailed by his colleagues for his scientific skill. When the men are hunted by the verbal, gun-toting, clothed apes, Taylor is injured but survives. Landon is lobotomized, though not killed. Only Dodge is killed. A taxidermist stuffs him, and he is put on display in a museum.

A fourth astronaut, a young, blond woman named Stewart (Dianne Stewart), has her life-support system fail during the space trip, and she dies long before the craft lands on the ape planet. In removing the white woman from the film at its very beginning, Stewart, a blond or the “most precious cargo,” as Taylor describes her, is also spared a close encounter with apes who in this film now possess the ability to examine and probe the human body. In the 1970 sequel, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, the obsession with blondes briefly rears its head again. When a gorilla soldier (the blackest and crudest of the apes in the ape world) stumbles upon the body of a platinum-blond white woman, the ape is so enamored with her tresses that he stops in his tracks to stroke her silky, blond locks.

Conquest of the Planet of the Apes (1972), a pointed allegory about race relations and oppression in the U.S., is the only film in the series to be closely associated with the horrifying: “Watch the screen explode as man faces ape in the most horrifying spectacle in the annals of science fiction.”³⁴ Such a promotion signaled that *Conquest* was not a family-friendly science fiction film, as the previous films had been marketed. A prequel, *Conquest* is set in 1991 with its story centering on how apes, through armed revolution, came to dominate humans and rule the Earth. Informed by the events of the Watts riots of 1965, Black-focused narratives appear throughout the film. For example, a Governor’s assistant, MacDonald (Hari Rhodes), who is Black, carries much of the Blackness-centered dialogue. MacDonald is a sympathetic, heroic figure who is enduring in the face of racist microaggressions. In one scene, MacDonald is accused by a white police officer of loving apes, to which another officer responds, “Don’t it figure.” To be sure, the audience is being invited to view the officers as crude racists attacking the refined MacDonald. MacDonald must also bear watching an ape slave auction scene where a chimpanzee is described as “in early prime and perfect physical condition” as well as “familiar, obedient, and docile,” with bids beginning at \$800. This scene is rife with reversals: apes as enslaved symbolize and implicate the U.S. in the slave trade; rebelling, apes begin to embark on their own human and civil rights campaign through civil and uncivil disobedience. MacDonald is at the center of teasing out these connections to America’s history of racial politics through a conversation with the ape’s heroic leader:

MACDONALD: How do you propose to gain this freedom?

CAESAR (CHIMPANZEE): By the only means left to us—Revolution. . . . You above everyone else should understand. We cannot be free until we have power. . . .

MACDONALD: Violence prolongs hate. Hate prolongs violence. By what right are you spilling blood?

CAESAR: By the slave’s right to punish his persecutors.

MACDONALD: Caesar. I, a descendant of slaves, am asking you to show humanity.

In the film’s final scenes of apes revolting against their enslavement, they are armed with M16 rifles (recalling the Vietnam era) against a red, black, and green

background color scheme (presented through lighting and colored smoke bombs), thereby evoking the colors associated with the Pan-African flag. In interviews, the filmmakers note that they were aware that they could not have a movie with the leader of the Watts riot as its star, but they could have an ape as a revolutionary leader.³⁵ There were even claims that Black audiences identified with the film's less-than-subtle messaging, with one magazine reporting Black movie-goers could be heard cheering, "Right On!" as the apes battled "Whitey."³⁶

Out of Haiti Comes Myth-Making

But in Haiti there is the quick, the dead, and then there are Zombies.

—Hurston (179)³⁷

Haiti, at approximately 17,250 square miles, comprises the western part of the island of Hispaniola. Though a small country, over the last four centuries, it has loomed large in history as being at the center of a tug-of-war between a number of foreign occupiers. Today, Haiti has only eight decades of freedom under its belt. Having (barely) survived an exploitative cycle of invasion and subjugation, as well as catastrophic earthquakes in 2010 and 2021, the cost to Haiti has been high, giving it the unfortunate distinction of being "the poorest nation in the western hemisphere."³⁸

Haiti's troubles began in 1492 when Christopher Columbus landed on the island, "discovering" it and naming it Hispaniola. Columbus claimed the land and its people, the Taino Arawak, for Spain. Spain brought to the island disease and sophisticated weaponry, against which the Arawaks could not defend themselves. A generation later, around 1517, with the decimation of the Arawaks, enslaved West Africans from countries such as Benin (then Dahomey) were brought to Hispaniola to cultivate sugar. They brought with them a variety of African religious practices that Europeans fought to expurgate from their belief systems. Unable to openly practice their faiths, Hispaniola's enslaved sought preservation nonetheless by blending and camouflaging their belief systems and rituals within the religion of their enslavers. Catholicism in particular proved convenient with its similar doctrines and devotional practices. This concealment of indigenous religions was not an uncommon practice. Dr. Bellegarde-Smith, a Haitian-born scholar of Haitian history and of Vodou, explains the history:

Vodou is related to other transplanted African traditions such as Santeria, which took root in Cuba and Candomblé in Brazil. In all of these places, Catholicism was the official religion of colonizers. Slaves and common people hid the spirits they knew inside their veneration of the Catholic saints. To this day, many Haitians combine Vodou practices with Catholic devotion.³⁹

During the late 1600s, the island again suffered violence at the hands of colonizers as the French settled in its northern-most reaches and stripped it of its tobacco resources, thereby sparking territorial conflict between France and Spain. Eventually, in 1697, the two intruding European countries would take it upon themselves to divide Haiti, with France securing the western third of the country and naming it Saint-Domingue (which would later become Haiti).

In 1793, one of the island's most significant revolts by the enslaved occurred—the Haitian Revolution—which eventually led to the abolition of slavery there. The revolution leader, the Haitian-born slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, “a voodooisant or adept of voodoo” prayed for, or “called upon the spirits,” to bring freedom to Haiti.⁴⁰ The spirits apparently responded with some measure of favor, as L'Ouverture and his army also ran off the English who were trying to gain a foothold on the island. L'Ouverture, in becoming Haiti's new national leader, created a constitution and worked to repair the exploited island's economy for its citizens. For approximately five years (1798–1802), Haiti understood freedom and self-governance it had not experienced for three centuries.

Haiti's independence was threatened again when L'Ouverture moved to rid the country of all European control, a condition that Haiti's remaining European plantocracy opposed by bringing in some 30,000 French troops. To further dilute the Black citizenry's resistance, L'Ouverture was seized and incarcerated. Held in dismal conditions without relief, L'Ouverture would die from pneumonia after being denied medical care.

In L'Ouverture's place, the African-born, enslaved Jean-Jacques Dessalines stepped in, leading Haitians to beat back the French and famously tearing the white pane out of the French *tricolore* to declare the country a Black republic. He would pronounce Haiti (yet again) independent in 1804. France would try to reclaim the island in 1825 but left with a treaty in which France would recognize Haiti as independent, but at a cost of 90 million francs for the impoverished country. (For its part, the U.S. refused to acknowledge the country's independence until 1862.⁴¹ Haiti's rise and recognition in the world were further complicated by leadership coup after leadership coup, fueled by outsider interests.)

In the meantime, some 10,000 Haitians, French colonists, and those still enslaved fled the turmoil, landing in New Orleans, Louisiana (lured by its similar plantations), thereby having a dramatic impact on the city's cultural landscape. This migration proved important to myth-making about the Caribbean, which came to be viewed as a “fatal, promiscuous place” whose cultural products “travel willy-nilly around the world, mutating as they do at each point of arrival.”⁴² Indeed, in the U.S., the religion Vodou became “Voodoo” (though many continue to resist the spelling as vulgar). Even one horror film, *The Love Wanga* (1936), explained that Haiti's religions came to be “*known to White men as VOO-DOO*” [emphasis mine].⁴³

In 1915, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (who screened *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House and praised its director) ordered yet another occupation

of Haiti. For 19 years, from 1915 to 1934, the United States possessed Haiti in what it described as a pre-emptive seizure purportedly motivated by World War I concerns that Germany might want the island for its own militaristic advantage. The U.S. occupation of Haiti, led by the Marines, took the form of a ruthless dictatorship, marked by an extreme violence in which all forms of political dissent were met with brutal bloodshed. The violence inflicted on the island's inhabitants was fueled by a deep-seated racism and hatred on the part of the U.S. military: "The highly placed Marine officer Smedley Butler referred to the leaders of the peasant resistance as 'shaved apes, absolutely no intelligence whatsoever, just plain low nigger [sic].'"⁴⁴ In 1932, under President Roosevelt, it was announced that Marine's time in Haiti was to officially come to an end by way of staggered mass departures. The last Marine exited in 1934, waving goodbye to a country that they left in a social, political, and economic shambles.

It is likely no coincidence that the Marines' departure from Haiti beginning in 1932 coincided with the release of the first American Voodoo-meets-zombie-inspired horror movie, *White Zombie* (1932), with Haiti as its setting. Indeed, the Marines brought back harmful fabrications about the Haitian people's purportedly odd folkways, including the villainous use of black magic (deadly spells and poisonings).

In the Beginning, There Was *White Zombie*

Depictions of Voodoo (absent zombies) in the film have been around nearly as long as the medium itself.⁴⁵ Rhodes in his book *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film* identifies some early treatments of Voodoo in film history beginning with the 1913 film *Voodoo Fires*, which linked evil rituals to hell's inferno. Sigmund Lubin's film company threw in a reference to Voodoo as ignoble in *Ghost of Twisted Oak* (1915). The film *Unconquered* (1917) associated Voodoo with ritualistic human sacrifice.⁴⁶

Then there was *The Witching Eyes* (1929), a "Black horror" film that may have been written and directed by an African American, Ernest Stern, and which stars Black actors discovered by Oscar Micheaux—Salem Tutt Whitney, Lorenzo Tucker, and Sylvia Birdsong. *Eyes* was an early entry into the now popular trend of depicting how (Haitian) Voodoo could be used to disturb affairs of the heart. As uncovered from *The AFI Catalog* and cited in *American Silent Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Films, 1913–1929*, the film is described as having a two-part focus, one on revolution and the other on romance:

Haitian Val Napolo, possessed of a witching hand and the evil eye, is persuaded by his friend Cortex to go to the United States and pose as a leader of his people. Napolo meets with great success and gets to know Sylvia Smith, the daughter of a recently deceased Black leader. Napolo develops a burning desire for Sylvia, but she favors Ralph Irving, a gentle poet.

Napolo puts a curse on them and breaks up their love affair. When Sylvia still refuses him, Napolo kidnaps her. Ralph learns of the abduction and rescues Sylvia, discrediting Napolo in the eyes of his people.⁴⁷

What is notable about these early Voodoo films is what they are missing—zombies. Indeed, early on, Voodoo was depicted as a sort of pagan religion whose unique properties include black magic-inspired rituals fueled by blood/lust. However, the Voodoo film saw a dramatic change in 1932's *White Zombie*, which added to Voodoo's mythology the ability to raise the dead to do one's bidding. *White Zombie* can be credited with spawning the prolific zombie horror film subgenre (e.g., *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]; *The Serpent and the Rainbow* [1988]; *Little Monsters* [2019]).

White Zombie is sharply informed by the William Seabrook travelogue *The Magic Island* (1929), about zombie-making in Haiti. While monsters such as Frankenstein's monster or Dracula had a literary origin, the zombie is deeply informed by nonfiction written by white Europeans and Americans. Seabrook's book is by far the best known and frequently cited; even as it was "much maligned by serious scholars of Haitian history and culture at the time of its publication," it was, and continues to be, enormously popular.⁴⁸ Written during the U.S. Marines' occupation of Haiti, *The Magic Island* is a white supremacist tome depicting the country as extraordinarily difficult for the civilized and refined whites occupying it as they suffered the uncultured Haitians. The Marines' racism-fueled violence was presented sympathetically and necessary (much like the whites in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*) given the inadequacies of the Black inhabitants.

Seabrook found it hard to assert his credibility. According to Cussans (2017), his "sensational fiction" often "blend[ed] awkwardly into biographical fact." For example, Seabrook, born in Kansas and raised in Maryland, claimed "deep Black roots" because his white grandmother's wet nurse was purported to be a Black Obeah from Cuba, who perhaps passed along "illuminations" which Seabrook was invited to witness through his grandmother's hypnosis of him.⁴⁹ Seabrook also insisted that his book is based on a two-year stay with a Voodoo priestess. Written in a sensational, propagandistic style and accompanied by glaringly racist illustrations drawn by Alexander King, in it, Seabrook wrote of witnessing Voodoo rituals:

[I]n the red light of torches which made the moon turn pale, leaping, screaming, writhing black bodies, blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened, drunken, whirled and dance their dark saturnalia, heads thrown weirdly back as if their necks were broken, white teeth and eyeballs gleaming.⁵⁰

Seabrook further worked to lend credibility to his devised yarn by citing scholarly sources such as the University of Pennsylvania's *The Museum Journal* (1917)

which published outrageous essays about Black Haitians, reporting that they bit the heads off snakes, were taught “to hate the whites” during their Voodoo rituals, and would eat “a goat without horns,” that is, a human child, “raw or partly cooked.”⁵¹ Seabrook even claimed that he was sharing the secret formulas for bringing forth the undead, recipes which were found on the body of a “bocor” or sorcerer:

To call up the dead. Go to a cemetery on a Friday night at midnight, one where shootings have taken place. Go to a man’s grave, taking along with you a white candle, one leaf of wild acacia, and a fully loaded gun. On arrival you will make this appeal: “Exsurgente mortui et ad me veniunt. I require of you dead that you come to me.” After saying these words you will hear a stormy noise; you do not take fright, and then fire one shot. The dead will appear to you; you must not run away, but walk backward three steps, saying these words: “I besprinkle you with incense and myrrh such as perfumed Astaroth’s tomb,” three times. *Sending back a dead spirit after you have called it.* Pick up a handful of dirt, which you will throw to the four corners of the earth saying: “Go back from where you came, from dirt you were created, to dirt you may return. Amen.”⁵²

Seabrook would go on to write more perjurious “nonfiction” about his first-hand observations of devil worship in Africa, his foray into cannibalism (tastes like veal), and his study of witchcraft practices from around the world.

White Zombie did little to discount the stories about Haiti as presented by Seabrook; rather, the film—though not as fierce—used *Magic Island* as its broad template. The “Blacks in horror” film, which is about trickery and love, tells the tale of Charles Beaumont (Robert Frazer), a wealthy white businessman who, while traveling, meets a young white couple—Neil (John Harron) and Madeline (Madge Bellamy) from New York. The couple plan to marry, and Beaumont persuades them to have their wedding on his property in a remote Haitian jungle. Beaumont’s motives, predictably, are not pure, as he has become obsessed with the blond Madeline. He concocts a plan to lure the couple to Haiti where he will abduct Madeline, keeping her on the island for himself. Beaumont enlists the assistance of a sugar plantation owner (the obviously named) Murder Legendre (Bela Lugosi), who has mastered the power of Voodoo and controls a horde of zombies who do his evil bidding. When Murder lays eyes on Madeline, he wants her too, thereby setting off a wicked tug-of-war for the only white woman on the island.

White Zombie’s claim to fame is its introduction of the zombie monster. However, as the film title promises, the focus is on *white* zombies enslaved by Murder in his sugar mill, though Black and white zombies toil side by side in perilous conditions. Murder throws light on their purpose, “They work faithfully, they are not worried about long hours.” The mill drudge recalls Seabrook’s chapter

entitled “Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields,” which similarly introduces the zombie as enslaved toiler:

[A] soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life . . . and then make of it a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation or the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens.⁵³

Together, the book and film provide a fantasy of post-slavery docility—ageless slaves tirelessly and forever laboring under the deadliest conditions without complaint. Murder has dozens of such zombie drudges but especially prizes his possession of five white, French zombies who (unlike the Black Haitians) were all formidable foes before he took their souls. There is a captain, a thief, the island’s Minister of the Interior, and the hulking high executioner, who, Murder explains, “almost executed me.” The fifth zombie is Murder’s greatest trophy, a fellow who he describes as “once my master”—a powerful white witchdoctor who Murder tortured at length before he spilled his Voodoo secrets.

The horror in this film, though, as with many horror films before and since—from *King Kong* to *Candyman* (1992)—is to be understood as the threat made against a (blond) white woman. Rhodes writes, “all men—zombies, fiancée,



FIGURE 2.2 A zombie with Murder in *White Zombie*

United Artists/Photofest

betrayers all want to sexually possess the women.”⁵⁴ However, this is not entirely true. In the film, not “all men” are shown obsessing over Madeline—just the white living ones, Black zombies must not look or touch. On the issue of desire, the film was cited in a July 29, 1932, *New York Times* review for using zombies as sexually chaste monsters because “they make good servants. They can carry off blondes without getting ideas in their heads, which helps in these mad days.”⁵⁵ In the end, Murder and Beaumont the true monsters pay for their lustful treachery with their lives, leaving Madeline to finally unite with Neil.

Haiti is not let off the hook as monstrous. Haiti’s impact on whites—driving white men mad with lust and giving rise to white villains such as thieves, witchdoctors, and executioners—is understood as the true source of horror. In one catch-line related to the film, it is asserted that Haiti was always wicked but became most concerning when whites (a woman in particular) became its victim: “They knew that this was taking place among the Blacks, but when this fiend practiced it on a white girl . . . all hell broke loose.”⁵⁶ To be sure, *White Zombie* is an indictment of Blackness. The audience learns that the island is “full of nonsense and superstition” and is inhabited by natives participating in an odd “death cult” who “use human bones in their ceremonies.” These practices were “brought here from Africa,” the purported wellspring of evil. The sparse representation of Black characters in the film does not spare them from stereotyping as they are described as monstrous all the same, as when Neil thinks Madeline is “in the hands of natives” and proclaims (reminiscent of Gus-Little Sister in *The Birth of a Nation*) that she would be “better dead than that!”

Still, a few Black portrayals are noteworthy, offering an earliest (surprisingly) effective depiction of Blackness. The film presents a funeral scene in which the camera lingers for a moment on a group of (non-zombie) Black pallbearers. The men are appropriately solemn and silent, but still memorable. They are striking—smartly dressed and polished from their well-manicured haircuts to their perfectly fitting tuxedos. They are consequential for what is not portrayed in their depiction; there are no “feets don’t fail me now” antics, just elegance.⁵⁷

However, the most notable representation in *White Zombie* occurs in the first few minutes of the film and comes from a cameo appearance by the prolific, accomplished Black actor/singer/screenwriter/director/composer Clarence Muse (uncredited) as “Coach Driver.”

Perennially cast by Hollywood as a servant, Muse appeared in approximately 219 movies before his death at age 89 in 1979. He first appeared in *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), the first all-talkie, big-studio film featuring a predominately Black cast. *Hearts* cast Muse as a doting, formerly enslaved grandfather who, despite his great affection for his grandson, sends him away from their southern home to get an education in the north. Though described by film/popular culture historian Donald Bogle as being confined to “Uncle Tom” roles,⁵⁸ Muse often spurned objectification, developing his characters’ humanity.

In *White Zombie*, Muse’s character, the Driver, is charged with delivering Neil and Madeline to Beaumont’s mansion. When their stagecoach comes upon a large

group of Black men and women digging in the road, blocking the carriage's path, the Driver astutely and concisely explains the tradition (as depicted in the film) of Haitians burying their dead in the road: "It's a funeral, mademoiselle. They're afraid of the men who steal dead bodies. So, they dig the graves in the middle of the road, where people pass all the time." Here again, the influence of *The Magic Island* upon the movie is apparent as it was Seabrook who wrote of road burials: "why, so often, do you see a tomb or grave set close beside a busy road or foot-path where people are always passing? It is to assure the poor unhappy dead such protection as we can."⁵⁹ In another scene, as the Driver moves Neil and Madeline closer to their destination, he spots some shambling white zombies insistently yelling, "Zombies!," while urging the horses to gallop at full speed to put more distance between the coach and the monsters. Frightened, Neil demands answers, "Why did you drive like that you fool? We might have been killed!" The Driver delivers a soliloquy in a measured timbre that sounds more like a professorial lecture: "Worse than that, monsieur. We might have been caught. . . . They are not men, monsieur. They are dead bodies . . . Zombies. The living dead. Corpses taken from their graves who are made to work in the sugar mills and the fields at night." The Driver drops the couple at Beaumont's mansion. He again sees the monsters and warns, "Look, here they come!" and then flees the scene (thereby exiting the film). Still, his is not a stereotypical scared-Negro routine; rather, he presents himself as wisely departing expeditiously given the looming danger.⁶⁰

Muse's portrayal of the Driver, albeit brief, contradicted much of what Hollywood was presenting about Blackness. Five years after *White Zombie*, it seemed the industry had learned little, as Robert Stebbins observed in *New Theatre*, July 1935:

The Negro's activity in the Hollywood film is confined to fleeting shadows of him as a lazy servant . . . or a coachman who has been made to look ridiculous . . . He is also . . . a voodoo-maddened villain bent on exterminating the white race in "Black Moon," or at best a benighted prisoner intoning the ubiquitous spiritual in the death house while the hero is prepared for his walk along the "last mile."⁶¹

Sadly, Muse himself can be implicated in this indictment against Blacks' representations in film, as his participation in the "Blacks in horror" film *Black Moon* (1934) presented a devolution in representational progress.

Black Moon tells the story of Juanita (Dorothy Burgess), a white woman sent away to the U.S. from her home in San Christopher by her uncle and plantation owner, Dr. Raymond Perez (Arnold Korff), and by the plantation's overseer, Macklin (Lumsden Hare). The two white men are "alone" in San Christopher surrounded by over 2,000 "natives" who are described as mostly "bandits" from nearby Haiti. San Christopher, then, becomes "the site of unending violence, named for the patron saint of lost causes."⁶² Solidifying San Christopher's fate, the

natives have brought Voodoo to the island, with rituals including blood worship and human sacrifice on behalf of their “Black gods.” Juanita cannot shake her connection to the island and even takes up playing “native drums” in her spare time. It is revealed that when Juanita was a child, after the natives murdered her parents, she was provided with a Black caregiver who secretly inculcated her in Voodoo, filling her “with the sound of drums and the sight of blood.” Hence, the horror in this film is the idea that Voodoo can creep out of the jungle and into a white home and a white woman at anytime and anywhere.

Beguiled by home, Juanita returns to San Christopher with her daughter Nancy (Cora Sue Collins) (her husband to arrive later). Her return is celebrated as a triumphant one by the hordes of natives who come out to shower her with flowers until they are beaten back by her uncle, who has a reputation for brutalizing and killing the natives. Yet, over the course of the movie, it is the natives who are depicted as relishing murder—Macklin, Anna (Nancy’s white nanny, Eleanor Wesselhoeft), an unnamed Black man who tries to alert Juanita’s husband to the evil and a Black woman-turned-human sacrifice are all killed. It is made clear fairly early on that Juanita is far too tainted by the natives to be saved and her whiteness restored. She drums, slips into trances, enjoys playing with knives, and dances sensually in Voodoo rituals (surrounded by approximately 500 African American dancers in native costumes).⁶³ Juanita abandons her daughter to sneak off in the middle of the night to be with the natives, a transgression that is met with repulsion by her uncle who washes his hands of her. Juanita eventually becomes so “blackened” through being Black natives and Voodoo adjacent that she tries to slaughter her husband and daughter. For all of these sins, Juanita is destroyed by her savior husband.

Joan Dayan (175, 178) in *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, writes that white women’s taking on (wicked) Blackness was a recurrent theme in many writings by colonial historians of the Caribbean. Dayan explains that these historical works asserted that “whites’ gradual taking on of the traits of Blacks was seen not as imitation but *infection* [emphasis mine].” While Blacks were described as trying to assimilate into white culture (with varying degrees of success) when whites adopted elements of Black culture they were described as having “caught a disease, as if they were too weak-willed or amoral to resist the contagious attraction of loose living, scanty dress, and languorous talk. . . . Unbearable heat and numerous Blacks contributed to the inevitable pollution of civility and grace.”⁶⁴ *Black Moon*, then, becomes more than a horror tale about the abominable blackening of a white woman; it is also a stark, violent warning against racial integration.

The Black “problem” in the film does not end with Juanita’s death. Enter Clarence Muse, as “Lunch,” the owner of a schooner who hails from Augusta, Georgia. Lunch shuttles people from San Christopher to Haiti, entertaining them with a song while they sail. It is through Lunch that both Caribbean Blacks and U.S. Blacks are marked as backward on a scale of deficiency. Lunch refers to the island Blacks as “monkey chasers,” explaining that monkeys like coconuts, and



FIGURE 2.3 The taint of a Black man's shadow in *Black Moon*

Columbia Pictures/Photofest

so do the natives, who chase the monkeys to steal their fruit. Lunch also reveals that the natives are lazy, child-like, and have to be kept under a watchful eye and scolded because they prefer sleeping instead of working. In fact, at the film's end, the whites escape the native's bloodthirsty rampage because some have fallen fast asleep during their attack. This gives Lunch an opening to lead the white islanders to safety. Sadly, Lunch is portrayed as a comic-negro and Uncle Tom stereotype. He is alternately waggishly bug-eyed scared and bravely loyal and sacrificing for whites.

Muse was emotionally torn by the roles he was offered, lecturing and writing about their confining nature often (e.g., his self-published work *The Dilemma of the Negro Actor*, 1934). In an essay mournfully titled “When a Negro Sings a Song,” Muse writes of the predicament Black performers were faced with when the only work afforded them by Hollywood comprised song, dance, and comedy: “There are two audiences to confront in America—the Black and the white. The white audiences definitely desire buffoonery, songs and dances from the Black man, while the Negro audience wants to see and hear the real elements of Negro life exemplified.”⁶⁵ The dignity Muse worked to bring to his performances was most apparent in Black films and in his own script writing, further revealing a tension between “Black films” and “Blacks in white films.”

Muse would continue to labor to bring some depth and complexity to his characters. For example, in 1941, Muse was featured in a substantial supporting role as Evans the Butler in the “Blacks in horror” film *Invisible Ghost*. Again, teaming up with Lugosi who plays a doctor named Kessler, Muse’s Evans is also the manager of the Kessler estate, which includes supervising its white domestic employees (e.g., cooks and groundskeepers). As murders begin to plague the Kessler home, Evans is perceived as intelligent and perceptive, even participating in an interview with the law enforcement who seek his insights. Evans is indeed a key player in cracking the murder mystery, ultimately aiding in securing the arrest of the culprit, Kessler.

Nevertheless, these slightly better-crafted roles remained a rarity for Black actors who, for decades to come, would be associated with depravity—Voodoo, black magic sorcery, and bloodlust.

If Loving You Is Wrong, I Don’t Want to Be Right

Movies such as *King Kong* and *White Zombie* were really glowing love stories. Thanks to the threats from natives and an ape, in *King Kong*, Ann came to appreciate her true love and savior, Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot) all the more. Likewise, if Madeline had second thoughts about marrying her Neil, all that was settled when she saw her other choices, a Voodoo-tainted white man or white zombies. *The Mummy* (1932) also took up love, adding biraciality and even the one-drop rule to the mix. In this film, Helen (Zita Johann) is half Egyptian/half English but marks herself as quite separate from African countries, including her mother’s birthplace of Egypt. Gazing out at the pyramids from an English club, to Helen, the country looks “beautiful” even as it is a “dreadful” place. Her father, the governor of Sudan, left her in Egypt for a trip back to his own “beastly, hot” country. Suddenly, Helen is mesmerized, coming under the spell of Ardeth Bey/Imhotep (Boris Karloff), a 3,700-year-old resurrected Egyptian priest who was mummified and buried alive for the sin of abusing magic by trying to cast a spell to bring his true love back to life after her death. Imhotep recognizes that Helen is “of our blood” and then reveals to her, through magic, that Helen was his beloved

in another life. In fact, blood figures prominently in Imhotep's world. When the Nubian (Noble Johnson), a servant to a white "master," comes under Imhotep's spell as well, the Nubian's susceptibility to the magic is explained in the film as being based on his Black blood: "The Nubian! The ancient blood. You made him your slave." The Nubian becomes Imhotep's slave, just as Nubians had been in ancient Egypt, as seen in a flashback. It is from the grips of the lovesick Imhotep that whites must rescue Helen. But they are doing more than retrieving her from an undead monster; they are freeing her from "an oppressed and backwards ethnic other" by seeing her as sufficiently white.⁶⁶ Helen is also able to escape Egypt's myths, with its superstitions and polytheism, when her real true love, the intellectual Frank (David Manners), who talks emphatically about the value of scientific reasoning, saves her from temperamental Mummy.

White women were rarely looking for love in all the wrong places, but it seemed as though Black women were doing it (more like lusty encounters) all of the time. *Ingaï* was one grotesque reminder. The biggest mistake a Black woman could make, however, was to settle on a white man as her sweetheart. If getting it on with a monkey was implausible, then trying to woo a white man was wrong . . . dead wrong.

In the "Blacks in horror" film *The Love Wanga* (1936), the setting is Paradise Island, just off the coast of (you guessed it) Haiti.⁶⁷ There resides Klili Gordon (Fredi Washington), a biracial plantation owner (who must be understood as Black) who is in love with Adam Maynard (Philip Brandon), the white owner of a neighboring plantation. In this "true" story, in which the "names have been changed," Adam has treasured a very close friendship with Klili, but he cannot bring himself to love her because, as he explains, the "barrier of blood that separates us can't be overcome." Klili, who is phenotypically as light as Adam, cannot ever be white enough as somewhere in her bloodline there is African ancestry. Hence, unlike *The Mummy's* Helen, she is tainted by the one-drop rule, in which just a bit of Black blood makes one instantly and forever Black. When Adam chooses (predictably) Eve (Marie Paxton), a white woman, for his bride, Klili becomes enraged with jealousy. Baffled and irate, she holds up her arm next to Eve's proclaiming, "I'm white too. As white as she is!" The depicted tragedy of her Black blood is a textbook tragic mulatto stereotype. Here, her close proximity to whiteness makes Klili attractive and sexually desirable to white men (more so than darker-skinned Black women). However, she is still Black and the irreconcilability of her situation/condition makes her unsuitable for love and marriage. Klili's undying love for Adam is depicted as impossible but not surprising as she and her taste become part of the well-trod myth about "mulatto" women liking the very best of things: "Numerous European accounts of the mulatto women dwell, in particular on their exquisite taste, their love of finery, and their special attachment to lace, linen, silks, and gold."⁶⁸ Of course, liking and having are two very different things, and Klili can never have Adam. The tragedy for Klili, as is depicted in popular culture for most "mulattos," is the pain of her identity which ultimately leads to a dangerous insanity.⁶⁹

Klili indeed becomes a danger by turning to Voodoo. Black Voodooists abound on Paradise Island, working fervently on their craft in a place where the people are otherwise, according to the film, unhurried and primitive. There are plenty of Bocours (witch doctors), Loas (spirits), and zombies, as the film explains their existence: “the lifeless bodies of murdered negroes reanimated by the Bocours for evil purposes.” Everyone, good or evil, seems to know how to craft an ouanga (wanga) or charm, which can be alternately used to spark love or to prompt death. When not engaged in some sort of magic, the island’s Black inhabitants spend a considerable amount of time throwing dice, gambling, and dancing. *The Love Wanga*, of course, does not deny Blacks a beat to dance to, and the ever-present beat of Voodoo drums, or “Rada,” is heard. The drums are described in sensuous terms—they present a “throbbing” and “pulsating” beat—while the camera lingers on the shirtless, muscled chest of a Black man fervently beating the instrument.

Klili falls easily and instinctively into Voodoo. First, she uses a death charm to send Eve to the brink of death (from which she is miraculously saved). Next, Klili raises 13 zombies, undead Black men, to kidnap Eve and put her into a trance so that Klili can finally kill her.⁷⁰ Here, the zombies are only slightly reimagined from earlier filmic portrayals. They are still reanimated empty vessels under someone else’s control. However, *The Love Wanga* removes from the audience’s memory colonial and occupation discourses in favor of what Dayan describes as a new idiom dismantling the West’s/U.S.’ culpability in forced labor.⁷¹ In this reframing, Black people are de facto overseers enslaving other Black people, though undead and perhaps the cause of their death in the first place. Whites’ massacres of Blacks are not exposed.

However, *Wanga* is most notable for its attention to racial identity. Fredi Washington, a Black actress with a very fair complexion and green eyes, was typecast as the tragic mulatto, and her most notable role was as the “passing” Peola in *Imitation of Life* (1934). *The Love Wanga* continued its confusing color play by casting the white actor Sheldon Leonard as LeStrange, the Black overseer of Adam’s banana plantation. Leonard is an odd choice to play a Black man; however, his casting may have been a pre-emptive move on the part of the filmmakers, as Washington ran into trouble with censors in the non-horror film *The Emperor Jones* (1933), also set in Haiti. In *Jones*, Washington kisses the Black actor Paul Robeson, which censors, ironically, feared looked too much like a white woman kissing a Black man.⁷² To remedy the problem, Washington was instructed to wear darker makeup to appear Blacker. In *Wanga*, makeup was not a feasible solution to the race dilemma as Klili must look “as white as” Eve. Perhaps it was better for a white-appearing woman to be seen in an embrace with a white male actor than for her to be seen with a Black one. In *Wanga*, then, it is dialogue, not appearances, that must mark LeStrange (a rather apropos name) as Black. He refers to Adam as “my master,” and then there is this sad exchange:

LESTRANGE TO KLILI: You're Black. You belong to us. To me.
 KLILI: I hate you, you Black scum!

Like Klili, there can be no mistaking LeStrange's Blackness because of his proximity to evil. He is just as adept at Voodoo, and as wicked, as Klili. LeStrange steals a Black woman's dead body, dresses it in Klili's clothes, and hangs the body from a tree as part of a Voodoo curse against Klili for rejecting his love. At the end, when LeStrange's Voodoo curse does not deliver death upon Klili quickly enough, he chokes her to death with his bare hands.

In 1939, *The Love Wanga* was remade starring an all-Black cast in *The Devil's Daughter*. Written by George Terwilliger and directed by Arthur Leonard, this was a film scripted, directed, and produced by whites but which targeted Black audiences.

The film's opening scenes function to establish just how different Black folkways in the Caribbean are. In a lengthy sequence, a large group of shabbily dressed banana plantation workers are seen singing and dancing in a clearing. This is also the site for gambling and cockfighting. It is also revealed that the workers practice Voodoo as an evil magic for all manner of immoral ends.

This version of the film tells the story of two half-sisters from Jamaica. The first is Isabelle (Nina Mae McKinney), whose mother was a Haitian Voodooist. Isabelle has been running the family plantation and has earned the love and support of its Black and Creole workers. The second sister is Sylvia (Ida James), who left Jamaica years ago to pursue higher education in the United States and became a refined Harlemit (the time period coincides with the Harlem Renaissance). When the siblings' father dies, he leaves the plantation and his wealth to the more cultivated Sylvia, while the coarser Isabelle gets nothing. Sylvia returns to Jamaica to claim her fortune and manage the plantation while enlisting the help of an overseer named Ramsey, who claims to be in love with her but is only after her money. Ramsey is played by the white actor Jack Carter. Though the white actor Sheldon Leonard used a blackvoice dialect in *The Love Wanga*, Carter does not. In fact, his race is not addressed at all. The color casting of Ramsey may be intentionally subversive as it is Ramsey who is a liar and a thief.

Two central Black male characters are presented, one positively and the other for a lesson in self-hate. There is John (Emmett Wallace), who loves Sylvia and, in the end, wins her love. There is also Percy (Hamtree Harrington), Sylvia's butler from Harlem, who believes Black Jamaicans are lacking and, with comic effect, is punished for his contempt when he is tricked into believing they have stored his soul in a pig (which is later eaten).

The film's primary focus, however, is on the great dissimilarities between the two sisters, which actually functions to complicate U.S. versus Jamaica comparisons, and brings some depth to the portrayals. Isabelle is depicted as the rough and tumble sister doing the hard work of running the plantation while fawning over John, who is not interested in her. Sylvia is depicted as having returned

bourgeois, touring the plantation in fancy dresses while being driven around by a chauffeur. The divide between the sisters is at the line between the urban and urbane versus the rural and unsophisticated. However, even this contrast is recast through a caution about the dangers of leaving home, becoming snobbish, and losing touch with one's people. Harlemites Sylvia and Percy are exposed as gullible due to their geographic and cultural separation from "home." More, while plantation work is seen as rudimentary and inelegant, being cultured and well-read is cast as rather useless.

Isabelle devises a plan to win back the plantation—she exploits prevailing superstitions by reminding Sylvia and John that her mother was Haitian, implying that she can perform Voodoo. Isabelle instructs her workers, many of whom actually do practice Voodoo, to beat their drums in the jungle with more vigor than they ever have, thereby moving Sylvia to observe that the drums sound even more "menacing" than she remembered from her youth. Sylvia believes she has become the victim of a Voodoo ritual when Isabelle drugs her and pretends to prepare her for a sacrifice. The film presents a rather lengthy Obeah (magic) ceremony over which Isabelle presides, offering incantations. Isabelle is revealed to be faking her power—if she was truly magical, she would not need to rely on drugs. John rushes to Sylvia's rescue while bringing up identity: Isabelle is not Haitian "enough" to effectively do Voodoo. Isabelle and Sylvia make their peace. Sylvia turns over the plantation to Isabelle as she comes to understand, "I don't belong."

Chloe, Love Is Calling You (1934) is an intriguing, provocative "Blacks in horror" film that takes on not only the tragic mulatto but also Jim Crow-era racial violence. A poor, elderly Black woman and Voodooist, Mandy (Georgette Harvey), seeks revenge for the thoughtless lynching of her husband, Sam. Mandy is the mother or "mammy" to a young adult daughter, Chloe (Olive Borden, a white actress), who appears white and who suffers harassment from both Blacks and whites because of her mixed-race identity. Still, Chloe has two male suitors. The first is Jim, a long-suffering, doting "colored" man (portrayed by the white actor Philip Ober) with a drop of Black blood in his veins. Chloe has no love for Jim. The second is Wade (Reed Howes), a white man who has just arrived in town to oversee the nearby turpentine plantation and who initially mistakes Chloe for a white woman.

Chloe desperately loves Wade but runs from him because of her racial secret. For dreaming of loving a white man, Jim accuses her of listening to her "white blood speaking." Chloe thereby presents the typical tragic mulatto tale in which she is emotionally tormented by being trapped in Blackness, even though her body gives little hint of it. However, both the Black and white populations claim to see Black in Chloe, as evidenced in a scene when a Black man attempts to assault her by remarking, "High yellow, they always was my meat." Likewise, when two white women encounter her, they sneer, "She's so dark."

The twist here is that years ago Mandy swapped her own deceased Black infant for the white Chloe to punish Chloe's white father, the Colonel, for ordering Sam's murder. When by Mandy's side, everyone sees Chloe as Black and treats

her as such in a likely inadvertent lesson in constructions of race. When it is confirmed that Chloe is indeed white, she (like Tarzan) immediately recuperates her whiteness and her superiority over Blacks. Hers turns into a Cinderella story. Chloe has absolutely no difficulty in returning to and in settling into the (rich) white world. Newly whitened, the young woman demands that “Chloe” never be spoken about again, and confidently proclaims, “I am Betty Ann.” The lavishly dressed Betty Ann instantly acclimates to her situation, moving easily through her mansion home and capably entertaining her family’s white elite friends. Her new home is as colossal as it is ostentatiousness and powerfully symbolic with its “monumental staircases,” a “maze of huge doorways, halls, and gigantic rooms,” and with uniformed house servants gliding “silently about their tasks,” all are cruelly emblematic of histories and myths of servitude.⁷³ Hence, it becomes fitting that this Big House, towering over the makeshift homes of the Black plantation workers, is the site of a showdown with Mandy.

Mandy seeks to punish both the Colonel and Chloe for their betrayals by sacrificing Chloe in a Voodoo ritual on the grounds of the Big House. There are the booms of the Voodoo drums, fire, and entranced dancing. In another unintentional commentary on identity for its time, Mandy sheds her feminine attire, donning a tuxedo and top hat to dress as the powerful male loa Baron Samedi, keeper of the crossroads. But all fail for the Black characters. Jim attempts to rescue Chloe from Mandy’s clutches but is mortally wounded. Mandy’s plan to kill through a ritualistic murder is dashed when Wade comes to save Chloe. Chloe, as Betty Ann, and Wade finally find love as a white couple.

Chloe stands out in its attention to racial violence. Films of this period were critiqued for failing to address such racism, as revealed in *The Harlem Liberator’s* column “Camera Eye” (1933): “Hardly a word appears about lynching, peonage, share cropping or chain gangs. And when these subjects are treated they are glossed over.”⁷⁴ However, *Chloe* provides rare attention to lynching and its devastating impact on families. Mandy’s Voodoo “sure is talking” when she returns to Louisiana, the state in which Sam met his fate:

Thar’ is. Thar’ is. That old hangman’s tree. Where them white folks killed my Sam and the bloodhounds tore him to pieces. Here I is, Sammy. Here is your Mandy come back to put curses on the Colonel and them white folks.

In the film, Sam’s death, as ordered by the plantation owner, the Colonel, is not disputed, but it is an afterthought: “I fired Sam. Don’t remember what for.” What The Colonel does claim to remember about Sam’s death years earlier is that Sam slugged him over the firing. For this, the Colonel says matter-of-factly, “Sam was lynched.” There are different ways of reading the Colonel’s account of Sam’s death. His coldness works to implicate him in a racism that holds Black life as inconsequential. Or, the reading is a literal one given the time—Black life was regarded as an absent value. It is this injustice that Mandy focuses on

throughout the film, “It won’t be long now Sam . . . ’Cause I’m a work my Voodoo. The thunder’s gonna growl and the lightning’s gonna rain. And the devil’s gonna walk on a white man’s grave.” However, the film does not go much farther in its interrogation of Blacks’ Jim Crow-era mistreatment. Mandy is depicted as Voodoo crazed, twisting her grief into a misguided obsession. At the film’s end, the Colonel orders the immediate arrest of Mandy, who is on the run, explaining, “We don’t want any lynching.” The line “don’t want any lynching” implies that if Mandy continues to flee, then the whites of the community will have to bother themselves with her lynching too. As the drama comes to an end, a doctor is brought in to officially confirm that it was not the Colonel’s daughter Chloe/Betty Ann who was drowned in infancy, it was Mandy’s daughter. In search of still more conclusive evidence, Mandy’s daughter is disinterred and examined with the doctor triumphantly reporting: “The hair is kinky.”

For all that she has done—kidnapping, Voodoo, attempted murder, gender role fluidity—Mandy does not die at the end of this movie. Reading this 1934 film (which was to invite disgust about the Black behaviors portrayed) through a contemporary lens, *Chloe* is sublime in its rebellion and subversion. Perhaps, similar to Clarence Muse’s efforts, Georgette Harvey sought to infuse a more progressive subtext into her role. Harvey recognized that Black actors were confined to stereotypical roles and sought to improve their labor conditions through her work as an officer in the Negro Actors Guild of America.⁷⁵ By the time she originated the role of Maria in the opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935), Harvey had also already traveled to perform across Europe and in Japan before spending over 15 years in Russia enjoying a seemingly affirming reception of her race, sexuality, and talents. She recalls her time in Russia with nostalgia in *The Guardian* article, “We’ve been to a marvelous party: when gay Harlem met queer Britain”:

At the peak of my career I had a large town house, jewels, sables, social position and immense popularity with the livelier members of Czar Nicholas’ court. Among my lovers was one of the most famous of the Russian courtesans. In the revolution I lost everything, including seventy-five thousand dollars . . . Homosexuality is a lonely life.⁷⁶

However, Harvey was not lonely for long, living with her long-term partner Musa Williams in Harlem for nearly three decades until Harvey’s death in 1952. It is possible that Harvey held fast to the favor she earned for her being her whole and full self abroad, bringing it with her to her U.S. performances.

Conclusion

Love was in the air in the 1930s, but this was the horror genre and the road to passion, expectedly, was full of deadly detours. Apes, Voodoo, natives, and zombies had a tendency to disrupt affairs of the heart. Haiti was cast as monstrous

alongside other fiends like Kong, Murder, and the Mummy, to ruin date nights across the 1930s. This was a serious, scary business as the mainstream (white) public would “find the enslavement of white Christians [particularly] by dark skinned natives extremely abhorrent. Furthermore, because the victims of Voodoo sorcery are most often female these early, largely racist narratives . . . would prey upon deep-seated racial paranoia.”⁷⁷ The lesson here was that in being a victim of some uninvited dark evil, sexual and racial purity within whiteness could be challenged but was often restored.

Thank goodness for white knights who rode in to save the day. Indeed, in Seabrook’s fantasy, there was nothing more magical than a white American man controlling a Black place and its Black people: “to hold undisputed sway in some remote tropical island set like a green jewel amid the coral reefs of summer seas . . . how many boys have dreamed of it.”⁷⁸ This “dream” of benevolence and control would become a suffocating horror trope for decades to come.

Indeed, no greater love hath man (or ape) than a pure white woman. But woe is the one who trades on and delivers evil; to be sure one can have no greater sin. Implicated in this sordid affair were the Klilis, Mandys, and the Juanitas. These three wicked women had done far too much to go unpunished. Interestingly, though all three lived by the metaphorical Voodoo sword, none died by it. Rather, men decided the fate of these women. Klili was strangled by a (Black-ish) man, Mandy was hunted down and jailed by white men, and the bullet in Juanita’s back was delivered by a white man. These women, with their black hearts, were further blackened by their connection to Voodoo. However, the most pointed disdain and contempt were reserved for Juanita, a white woman, who willingly submitted to and sided with the Black world.

Certainly, some would say that the horror has to be located somewhere and in these films, it just happens to be among Black people and in Black places. However, in the films of this period, the focus is not so much on horror (or love) as it is on casting Blacks as dreadful, and that is an especially important distinction. These are horror films in which it is not enough to locate horror in the monster (e.g., an ape), the monster has to also be blackened. Additionally, if that monster—blackened—has its way with native Black women, the effect is more than a chilling; rather, it speaks to the disgusting nature of Blacks. The Black evil being thrown around, the Uncle Toms, and the comic-Negroes, all are used as fodder for racial ridicule and to assure white supremacy. That is the real horror of these films.

In the next decade of the 1940s, progress continued to be slow for Blacks in horror films. Black roles called for buffoons and comic relief, bringing prominence to the “coon” or comical Negro performance in spooky films such as *The Body Disappears* (1941), featuring Sleep ‘n’ Eat, and *King of the Zombies* (1941), boasting Mantan Moreland. Still, there were glimmers of hope through Black film director, Spencer Williams. Williams’ “Black horror” films had monsters, the

devil, and a healthy dose of lessons in morality to go with them. But first, there would be another ape trope to contend with in Williams' half-man, half-ape film, *Son of Ingagi* (1940).

Notes

- 1 O'Reilly, Bill. "Inside Edition." *Haiti's Bad Press*. Ed. Robert Lawless. Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, 1992.20. Print.
- 2 Golden, Nathan D. *Brief History and Statistics of the American Motion Picture Industry*. Washington, DC: GPO, August 14, 1936. Print.
- 3 Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. London: Pearson, 2004. pp. vi, 3. Print.
- 4 When *Dracula* (1931) proved popular, it is reported that Universal Studios announced it was going to make "another horror film," marking the first time the term "horror film" was used. See: Jones, Alan. *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies*. New York: Rough Guides, 2005, p. 21. Print.
- 5 According to a report for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in 1934, when Universal Studios premiered the interracial relations-themed drama *Imitation of Life*, starring Black actress Louise Beavers, the studio refused to provide press passes to Black reporters as was the common practice for such race films. The paper proclaimed Universal's message was "the Black press means nothing to us." See: "Race Press Ignored by Big Film Interests: Louise Beavers 'On Spot.'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 15, 1934: A9. Print.
- 6 Roosevelt, Theodore. *African Game Trails: An Account of the African Wanderings of an American Hunter-Naturalist*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910.280. Print.
- 7 Hendricks, Bill and Howard Waugh. *The Encyclopedia of Exploitation*. New York, NY: Showmen's Trade Review, 1937.138. Print.
- 8 Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004.27, 29. Print.
- 9 Erish, Andrew. "Illegitimate Dad of 'Kong.'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2006. Web. June 20, 2010. <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jan/08/entertainment/ca-ingagi8>. One of the Depression's highest-grossing films was an outrageous fabrication, a scandalous and suggestive gorilla epic that set box office records across the country.
- 10 Berenstein, Rhona J. "White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness: Race, Gender and Disguise in 1930s Jungle Films." *Film History* 6 (1994): 316. Print.
- 11 Berenstein (317).
- 12 Berenstein (318).
- 13 *Ingagi* was just one of the hoaxes played against movie-goers and at Blacks' expense at the time. In March of 1930, a Black actor, Firpo Jacko, filed suit against "Dr." Daniel Davenport, a white filmmaker and purported African explorer, for unpaid wages. In the case, Jacko asserted that the "documentary" film *Jango* (1929), set in the Congo, was a hoax and that the "real cannibals" brought back to tour the United States to promote the film were really from Harlem. The lawsuit revealed that *Jango* was not filmed in the Congo, but in the Bronx, New York, and that Jacko the cannibal—who screamed "uga-uga-googie, woogie" at audiences, was really Jacko the janitor from Harlem. The suit also challenged the assertion that Davenport had ever been to Africa. Jacko's key witness was his landlord, Mrs. Montgomery, who was called to offer evidence that Jacko could not be a cannibal because he attends "church every Sunday." Jacko was awarded his \$700 back pay. See: "'Jango' Filmed in Wilds' of Bronx, 'Cannibal' Says." *Pittsburgh Press*, March 9, 1930: 15 News-Section-Editorial. Print. "Wild Cannibal Turns Out to Be Ex-Janitor: Salary Suit Reveals Harlem as Scene of Fake Movie." *Chicago Defender*, March 15, 1930: 3. Print.
- 14 Erish.

- 15 Everett, Anna. *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909–1949*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.243–244. Print.
- 16 “Ingagi Review Summary.” *New York Times*. NYTimes.com. Web. June 18, 2010. This was Congo’s one and only picture.
- 17 Erish; Erb, Cynthia. *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Cinema*, 2nd ed. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009, for discussions on copyright infringement concerns around ape films.
- 18 Snead (17).
- 19 Bogle, Donald. *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood*. New York, NY: Ballantine One World, 2005.62. Print.
- 20 Rony, Fatimah Tobing. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.177. Print.
- 21 Etta McDaniel plays the silent, nonplussed ape-bride. She is one of an implied string of many who will be needed to placate Kong. See: *King Kong*. Dir. Doran Cox. Perf. Fay Wray, Robert Armstrong, Bruce Cabot. RKO Radio Pictures Inc. 1933. Film.
- 22 Greenberg, Harvey Roy. “*King Kong: The Beast in the Boudoir—Or, ‘You Can’t Marry that Girl, You’re a Gorilla!’*” *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.344. Print.
- 23 Snead, James. *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*. New York: Routledge: 1994.8. Print.
- 24 Native, jungle, or Voodoo drums were not tinny but deeply resounding. It was the “frightening” bass that became associated with Blackness. The bass and Blacks in popular culture have a long tradition dating back at least to 1887 in Verdi’s *Othello*, when the composer specifies in the orchestral score that only those string basses with the low E string be heard in scenes with the Moor. See: Andre, Naomi. “Race and Opera.” University of Michigan. March 2009. Presentation.
- 25 Greenberg (340).
- 26 Humphries notes that parallels have been drawn between Kong’s (unseen) phallus and the very phallic-like image of the big black bolt, which secures the massive door that contains the ape. See Humphries, Reynold. *The Hollywood Horror Film 1931–1941: Madness in a Social Landscape*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006.82. Print.
- 27 Sontag, Susan. “The Imagination of Disaster.” *Commentary* (October 1965): 44. Print.
- 28 Greenberg (338).
- 29 Skal, David J. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. Revised ed. New York, NY: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2001.175. Print.
- 30 Young, Elizabeth. “Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in *Bride of Frankenstein*.” *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press: 1996.325. Print.
- 31 Gregersdotter, Katarina, et. al “Introduction.” *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. Eds. Gregersdotter, Katarina, et. al. London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2015.3. Print.
- 32 Tyler, Bruce M. “Racial Imagery in *King Kong*.” *King Kong Cometh!: The Evolution of the Great Ape*. Ed. Paula A. Woods. London: Plexus Publishing, 2005.175. Print.
- 33 Höglund, Johan “Simian Horror in *Rise and Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*.” *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. Eds. Gregersdotter, Katarina, et al. London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2015.225. Print.
- 34 *Behind the Planet of the Apes*. Dirs. David Comtois and Kevin Burns. Perf. Roddy McDowell. Image Entertainment, 1998. Film.
- 35 *Behind the Planet of the Apes*. Dirs. David Comtois and Kevin Burns. Perf. Roddy McDowell. Image Entertainment, 1998. Film
- 36 Greene, Eric. *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race and Politics in the Films and Television Series*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 1996.84. Print.

- 37 Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1938/1990. 179. Print.
- 38 “Haiti Country Profile.” *BBC*. BBC. 2010. Web. August 11, 2010. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1202772.stm.
- 39 “Living Vodou.” *Speaking of Faith with Krista Tippett*. American Public Media. June 28, 2007. Radio.
- 40 Thomson, Ian. “The Black Spartacus.” *Guardian News and Media*. January 31, 2004. Web. June 23, 2010. Guardian.co.uk. Thomson adds: “Most historians agree that Haiti’s slaves first rose up in rebellion under a Jamaican Vodou priest named Boukman. On the night of August 15, 1791, Boukman called on the spirits of ancestral Africa to punish the plantocracy. L’Ouverture was said to have taken part in this ceremony and within six weeks the island’s rebel slave armies had begun their 12-year struggle for freedom; that night, a thousand French whites were reportedly massacred and their plantations set ablaze.” See also: Steward, Theophilus Gould. *The Haitian Revolution, 1791 to 1804: Or, Side Lights on the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers, 1914. Print. Steward, a historian, AME minister, and Chaplain in the U.S. Army writes of Boukman, L’Ouverture, and others meeting under “the veil of pretended Vodou ceremonies” to organize the revolution. The role of Vodou in the uprising may have taken on mythic qualities over the years; however, it is agreed upon that Boukman, born in Jamaica, was a Vodou Priest.
- 41 Lawless (56).
- 42 Gelder, Ken. “Postcolonial Vodoo.” *Postcolonial Studies* 3 (2000): 95–96. Print.
- 43 Lawless Robert. *Haiti’s Bad Press*. Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, 1992.73. Print. shows that Vodoo, alternately spelled vaudou, vaudoun, vudu, vodun, and vodoun, really describes a type of dance emanating out of Africa. More, the naming and description of that dance, from the Dahomean (Benin), were penned by a White foreigner. Hence, the origin of the term may be a non-indigenous construction from its very start.
- 44 Lawless (109).
- 45 I use the spelling “Voodoo” just as the films discussed in this book do. In doing so, I work to distinguish fiction’s depiction of evil rituals performed by Blacks from discussions of the Haitian religion Vodou or the West African religion Vodun. American horror films have largely depicted a vulgar version of the Louisiana version of the religion, “Voodoo.”
- 46 Rhodes, Gary D. *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001.78. Print.
- 47 John T. Soister, et al. *American Silent Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Feature Films, 1913–1929*. McFarland, Print. 777.2012.
- 48 Cussans, John. *Undead Uprising: Haiti Horror and the Zombie Complex*. Strange Attractor Press: London. 2017. Print. 22.
- 49 Cussans. 23.
- 50 Seabrook, W.B. *The Magic Island*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929.42. Print.
- 51 Seabrook (310).
- 52 Seabrook (324).
- 53 Seabrook (93).
- 54 Rhodes (15–16).
- 55 L.N. “The Screen. Beyond the Pale.” *New York Times*, July 29, 1932: 8. Print.
- 56 Cited in: Rhodes (46). Later the line was changed to “zombies stole a White girl . . . the fury of hell broke loose.”
- 57 In another scene, near the end of the film, Neil visits a white doctor/minister, Dr. Bruner (Joseph Cawthorn), to get help for his entranced Madeline. Dr. Bruner advises

- that they visit his friend, a native witchdoctor and “great old fellow,” named Pierre (Dan Crimmins), for help. The audience’s introduction to Pierre establishes him as good, rather than the (stereotypical) wicked witchdoctor. He is seen traveling along a road by mule, coming upon a Black man herding an ox. Pierre senses danger enveloping the area (due to Murder’s recent misdeeds) and stops the man to give him a protective amulet. Pierre then provides the man with a second one, this time to protect the man’s ox as well. The witchdoctor, unfortunately, is portrayed by the white actor Dan Crimmins, who is made to look like a Black Haitian through dark make-up. Such a racist erasure is devastating to the character’s possibilities. See: *White Zombie*. Dir. Victor Halperin. Perf. Bela Lugosi. United Artists Corp., 1932. Film.
- 58 Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Films*. New York, NY: Continuum, 1993.
- 59 Seabrook (94).
- 60 Tony Williams sees Muse’s performance as a stereotypical scared-Negro performance. See: Williams, Tony. “White Zombie Haitian Horror.” *Jump Cut* 28 (1983): 18–20. Print. Rhodes (321) was the target of criticism from Johanne Tournier in the liner notes accompanying the laser disc release of *White Zombie* for being too effusive regarding Muse’s portrayal. Muse’s character is scared, and he is a Negro, and together the two carry the baggage of stereotypical treatment. However, in this particular representation, he plays his fear rather straight, and certainly far from the popular scared-Negro performances that have dominated film before, and which will take center stage in Chapter 3 through the performances of Stepin Fetchit and Sleep ‘n’ Eat.
- 61 As cited in: Noble, Peter. *The Negro in Films*. New York, NY: Arno Press & the New York Times, 1970.8. Print.
- 62 Soister, John T. *Up From the Vault: Rare Thrillers of the 1920s and 1930s*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004.183. Print.
- 63 Rhodes (178).
- 64 Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.175, 178. Print.
- 65 Muse, Clarence. “When a Negro Sings a Song.” *Celebrity Articles from the Screen Guild Magazine*. Ed. Anna Kate Sterling. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987.13. Print.
- 66 Schroeder, Caroline T. “Ancient Egyptian Religion on the Silver Screen: Modern Anxieties about Race, Ethnicity, and Religion.” *Journal of Religion and Film* 2.3 (2003). Web. November 8, 2009. www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol7No2/ancientegypt.htm.
- 67 The film was released under a number of titles in the U.S. and abroad—*Drums of the Jungle*, *Love Wanga*, *The Love Wanga*, and *Ouanga*. The Canadian release, *The Love Wanga*, is readily available for purchase today and is the same running time as the U.S. version. Hence, there is likely little difference between the two films. I viewed both versions of the film, but years apart, and could not secure the U.S. version to compare side-by-side against the Canadian. My notes and memory have the two versions as being the same. The film’s opening credits boast that *The Love Wanga* was filmed in its entirety in the West Indies.
- 68 Dayan (174).
- 69 Orbe, Mark and Karen Strother. “Signifying the Tragic Mulatto: A Semiotic Analysis of Alex Haley’s Queen.” *Howard Journal of Communications* 7 (1996): 113–126. Print.
- 70 *The Love Wanga* is the second zombie film in what quickly becomes a string of such movies.
- 71 Dayan (37–38)
- 72 The film industry’s content was regulated by the Hays Office, which presented “the Code” or rules for Hollywood on issues of morality in film. Forbidden by the Code in the 1930s: “Miscegenation (sex relationships between the White and Black races.)”

- Sexual perversion, semi-nudity, dancing representing sexual action, and “racial and religious prejudices” were also “immoral,” but none of these latter issues seemed to apply to representation of Blacks. See: Hays, Will H. *Annual Report of the President*. New York, NY: Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, 1936. Print.
- 73 Guerrero, Edward *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993.23. Print. Guerrero also observes that the Big House provided Depression-era audiences with an insider view of aristocracy.
- 74 As cited in: Everett (246).
- 75 Washington, Eric K. www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/georgette-harvey-musa-williams-residence/ [Accessed March 19, 2022].
- 76 Adams, Michael Henry. *We’ve Been to a Marvelous Party: When Gay Harlem Meets Queer Britain*. June 30, 2019. www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/30/gay-harlem-renaissance-1930s-jimmie-daniels-cecil-beaton [Accessed March 19, 2022].
- 77 Bishop, Kyle William. *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010.60. Print.
- 78 Cussan, 40.

3

HORRIFYING GOONS AND MINSTREL COONS

1940s

Horror had come into its own very quickly in the 1930s, and an array of film-makers jumped on the horror bandwagon, either specializing in horror or diversifying their portfolios by adding horror films to their oeuvre. This rocketing interest in the genre soon resulted in a horror film glut. Filmgoers who sought to get a taste of horror began to bend under the (often crude and formulaic) over-supply; in response, audiences turned scarce.

As 1940s horror films were greeted by rather anemic box office returns, the film industry responded to dwindling ticket sales with a two-tiered film production and distribution system. There were A-list movies, many of which are crime melodramas (later dubbed “film noir”), that enjoyed impressive budgetary support—films directed by John Huston, Alfred Hitchcock, Otto Preminger, Orson Welles, and Billy Wilder. Then there were “B-movies,” where horror was relegated, which saw largely unknown directors, garnered lower budgets and promotion, and were often released by lower-tier so-called “Poverty Row” studios.¹ The two types of films, A and B, at times were marketed as part of a double-bill so that when audiences queued up for a quality “A-film” like the Academy Award-winning *All the Kings Men* (1949), they might also take in a horror movie such as one of the many mummy “B-flicks” in circulation: *The Mummy’s Hand* (1940), *The Mummy’s Tomb* (1942), *The Mummy’s Ghost* (1944), or *The Mummy’s Curse* (1945). Frequently, two B-movies would make up the double-bill so that patrons might, perhaps, enjoy an evening of monster movies. Even with such clever double-feature packaging, horror continued to struggle. Perhaps the atrocities of World War II, the most repulsive of which targeted civilians, such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were far, far more horrifying and inescapable.²

As horror worked to gain momentum, it also had to stave off its own banality. The famed Universal Studios' iconic monsters—Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy, the Invisible Man, and the Wolfman—became embarrassingly derivative, with the studio teaming up with the comedy duo Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, who “meet” many of the monsters in slapstick films (e.g., *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* [1948]).³ RKO, the studio that produced Val Lewton's *King Kong* (1933), offered more original horror film fare, such as the Lewton-produced, Jacques Tourneur-directed *Cat People* (1942). What started as a sparsely budgeted B-movie about a romantically scorned, jealous white woman who transforms into a deadly black panther when she becomes emotionally aroused became well-regarded landing a place in the Library of Congress' National Film Registry. *Cat People* was a rare innovation for the time, as much of the horror fare of the 1940s was man-in-a-monkey-suit drek—such as Monogram Pictures' *The Ape* (1940) starring Boris Karloff as a scientist, who goes on a murder spree dressed as an ape after the “real” ape, Nabu (portrayed by Ray Corrigan in a monkey suit), escapes its circus confines.

While the horror genre was disintegrating, Blacks' representational treatment in the films, particularly in “Blacks in horror” films, was not faring much better. After 50 years of participation in the genre, Black actors were still relegated to roles such as jungle native or servant. This was despite the efforts of NAACP head Walter White to lobby Hollywood studios for greater and improved Black representation. White saw an opportunity, during World War II, in the U.S. government's desire to rally the nation while avoiding appearances of asking Black soldiers to fight for democracy abroad when they couldn't enjoy the full benefits thereof at home. The latter is a dilemma that begat the “Double V” campaign, put forth in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's largest Black newspapers:

The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetrate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces.⁴

White's efforts saw a modicum of success. A combination of political posturing, the liberal leanings of Hollywood creatives, and American wartime propaganda trumpeting a unified front led to an increased Black presence in films in the decade, even if just in small roles like a nameless “neatly dressed black couple” in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).⁵ This broadening of on-screen representation frequently occurred in war movies with large casts that could afford to have a token Black

character, like *Bataan* (1943), *Sahara* (1943), and *Crash Drive* (1943).⁶ Horror movies, on the other hand, tended to be small-scale affairs of an escapist, fantastic nature that, too, avoided topics like war and race. As such, the inclusionist trend did not carry over. More, the NAACP was less likely to protest Black roles (or lack thereof) in a reviled genre like horror than in a more respected, award-worthy genre like drama. Just as horror struggled to break out of its stale mold, so did its portrayals of the few stock characters it allotted for Black performers: servants and savages.

The most dramatic change to Blacks' portrayals in horror during the 1940s simply added insult to injury, as late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century minstrelsy was resurrected to create comedy-horror films in which Black people were presented as deathly afraid "coons"—absurd, anti-Blackness comic figures marked by their intellectual deficits, malapropism laden speech, and antics signaling cultural inferiority, such as chasing and stealing chickens, greedily eating watermelon, fighting, and bugging their eyes with fear. Unlike the native, who was often cast as an unnamed extra, silently creeping about the jungle in horror films, the roles relying on the scared comic-Negro trope (as they have come to be called) were substantial co-starring parts that were central to the plot. When horror paired with comedy, the genre turned to Black comic actors such as Mantan Moreland and Willie "Sleep 'n' Eat" Best to perform their very "best" coon antics. Film historian Thomas Cripps in his article, *The Death of Rastus*, attributed the persistence of this portrayal to protests against what were deemed more insidious Black stereotypes, embodied most famously by *The Birth of a Nation*. Of such protests, he wrote:

The result is not an elimination of the stereotypes but instead the continuation of the least objectionable of them. . . . In practice a compromise has been struck. The private censorship code of the motion picture producers of America proscribes all the vicious elements of the stereotype and tolerates the ridiculous elements. Thus, through the 1930's and 1940's, only racial comics such as Rochester, Willie Best, and Mantan Moreland (as Charlie Chan's valet) crept into American films.⁷

Monster Mash

The "Blacks in horror" films released over the course of the decade evidenced how dire things were for Black representation. *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) is set in the Caribbean on the fictional island of postcolonial St. Sebastian, on a sugar plantation, and in its surrounding jungle.⁸ For the Black characters in the film, St. Sebastian is an island built on death due to its past love affair with slavery. The film begins derisively with a white woman, Betsy (Frances Dee), casually

and uncritically dismissing the atrocities of slavery while in a conversation with a Black man, a descendant of slaves:

COACHMAN (CLINTON ROSEMOND, UNCREDITED): The enormous boat brought the long ago fathers and mothers of us all chained to the bottom of the boat.

BETSY: They brought you to a beautiful place, didn't they?

COACHMAN: If you say, Miss, if you say.

Though the film works to assert that slavery's history and effects remain at the fore for Black people and their existence on the island, this particular scene works to illustrate how filmmakers could not help but weaken any semblance of such racial insights with a postcolonial fantasy of primitive exoticism and beauty. St. Sebastian may be crying from Blacks' spilled blood (as *Ti-Misery*, the masthead salvaged from a slave ship, symbolically does in the film), but the film works hard to convince viewers that the Caribbean is still a very lovely place to vacation—for white people. Humphries explains Betsy's racist obtuseness in this way: Betsy “can only see beauty around her, beauty of the kind constructed by colonial discourse for the benefit of those who live off the fruits of slave-labour. . . . It would be difficult to represent and sum up social and economic blindness more cogently.”⁹ The way in which Betsy first sees St. Sebastian is reminiscent of *White Zombie* (1932) when the engaged couple Neil and Madeline are surprised that Haiti is not going to be the wedding paradise that they expected. Betsy's (like Neil and Madeline's) ability to enter Black spaces without regard to their people provides a startling reminder into the ignorance over and repression of cultures and histories.

I Walked With a Zombie features an assortment of Black Voodoo practitioners who spend quite a bit of time “frightening” whites by beating their Voodoo drums and engaging in black magic-fueled rituals. This restriction of Blacks to stereotype means that the film's most interesting turns focus on “the psychological problems of White people” rather than any kind of consideration of, or engagement with, the Blackness on the island.¹⁰

In *Zombie*, there is, of course, a zombie lurking around—Carre-Four¹¹ (Darby Jones). Carre-Four is a Black male skulking zombie who creeps around silently and ominously but is never really a threat except for when he is ordered to enter the home of a white plantation owner and snatch away a white woman. Of course, he does not fulfill this part of his mission, as Black men can only look (which is menacing enough) but they cannot touch. As it turns out, Carre-Four is not the only zombie on the island, but there is also Jessica, a white woman who may or may not be a true zombie. There is much exposition around Jessica's storyline as the white protagonists in the film battle to regain her soul and fully restore her whiteness, and as several white men also battle for her affection. By contrast, Carre-Four's existence does not merit a backstory, and no one is interested in restoring his soul.¹² There is also Alma (Theresa Harris), who keeps

up with the tradition introduced by her enslaved ancestors of mourning when a Black child is born, but making “merry at a burial.” In the film, Alma’s grief (and the grief gripping the island) is represented through Ti-Misery, the mast-head-turned-garden-water-feature on the plantation, that appears to be weeping when water flows through it. All of this is viewed “through the confused eyes of the film’s white protagonists.”¹³ If viewers are similarly perplexed, they have an omniscient Calypso singer portrayed by Lancelot Pinard a.k.a. Sir Lancelot to rely upon. Lancelot’s contribution to the film is to weave island gossip, stories about the main character’s actions, and ominous warnings about their fate into his Calypso songs.

What is clear in this film is that Blackness is so infectious that it imperils whites, particularly white women, who are weakened by their brush with it. In this film, two white women fall victim to Black Voodoo culture. The first becomes obsessed with the myths and power of Voodoo, and she in turn zombifies another white woman. *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther dismissed *I Walked With a Zombie*, snidely remarking that the film “drains all one’s respect for ambulant ghosts.”¹⁴

Two years later, in 1945, RKO (absent Val Lewton) introduced a sequel to *I Walked With a Zombie*, entitled *Zombies on Broadway*. This horror film took a



FIGURE 3.1 Only a Black man’s shadow can enter the White boudoir in *I Walked with a Zombie*

RKO/Photofest

comedic turn, as so many films did during the 1940s, by centering on the antics of Jerry Miles (Wally Brown) and Mike Strager (Alan Carney), who are an Abbott and Costello-like duo. The film is about the efforts of Jerry and Mike to find a real-life zombie for the opening of a New York club called the Zombie Hut. The duo travel to San Sebastian and are welcomed to the island with a song by none other than Sir Lancelot (an RKO regular who also appeared—and sang—in *The Ghost Ship* [1943] and *The Curse of the Cat People* [1944]), the Calypso singer who summarizes their coming fate through lively rhyme. The comedy in the film is performed largely by Jerry and Mike, with Mike even appearing in blackface (which fools the natives into thinking he is Black). As for the natives, they are half-clothed primitives who bang their Voodoo drums with creating a “death beat” that drives the white people crazy.

The actor Darby Jones is also back in the role of the silent, gliding zombie, though his name has been changed to Kolaaga and he has a new master in Dr. Paul Renault, played by Bela Lugosi. Lugosi’s presence provides a bit of humorous inter-textuality for horror fans as he delivers the line “You’ve seen me create a zombie [before],” thereby paying clever homage to Lugosi’s turn in the first zombie horror film, *White Zombie* (1932). Kolaaga, however, is portrayed as sinister, without comic effect. It is explained that Kolaaga was “taken” by Renault and is now being forced to kidnap victims for zombification, as well as do a little housekeeping around Renault’s spooky mansion. In this film, Kolaaga is violent. He actually does grab a white woman, delivering her to Renault, who opts out of turning her into a zombie after observing her beauty. Later, Kolaaga turns on his evil master, refusing his commands to kill others before ultimately killing Renault (with a shovel) instead.

The “Blacks in horror” film *White Pongo* (1945) stood out for its use of more than a dozen Black actors during a period when, overall, roles were decreasing due to the budgetary constraints of B-movies. Here, the majority of the Black performers are cast as extras—partially clothed natives with no speaking lines. They guide a team of white scientists across the “dark continent” and over land “unexplored by white men.” They are in search of a great biological find, a prized white gorilla, or “pongo,” believed to be the intelligent (and selfless) missing link. Colorism and allegories of white supremacy are at play as a violent black gorilla is cast as the pongo’s arch-rival. Initially, the black gorilla is accidentally trapped by white men but is tossed back into the jungle as undesirable. Later, it attacks the pongo but loses the battle, paying with its life. Metaphors of white supremacy continue as it pertains to the natives. They do not get to make a sound except for brief moments when they offer fawning sounds as they admire European clothes. And, they get to scream as the pongo stomps them to death. Only one very lucky adult male native, Mumbo Jumbo (Joel Fluellen), gets to say “Bwana” and offer himself as “#1 porter boy.”¹⁵

To view *White Pongo* as a B-movie is generous. The film is cheaply made, relying on a wealth of old stock footage of animals drinking water to pad a

convoluted, badly conceived script. However, *Pongo* looked like A-list flick next to its film doppelgänger *White Gorilla* (1945). The bulk of *White Gorilla* is a jumbled mix of stock footage and scenes from the 1915 silent, short nature film *Perils of the Jungle*. This messy movie is essentially a race-war film between a black gorilla, Nbonga, who makes a rare white gorilla, Konga, an “outcast” in the jungle because it is different.¹⁶ The two fight over the course of the film, with the black gorilla, “the monster with his huge chest filled with hate,” the instigator. Predictably, the film’s location was some African “bad country” where natives “hated the white man” and where whites are scared of the sounds emanating from the natives’ drums. When the white gorilla is killed by an interloping white man, the ape is eulogized at length, with the black ape, Nbonga, implicated in the mourning of a white warrior who was simply fighting on behalf of his race in “a battle for jungle supremacy”:¹⁷

You know I feel kind of sorry I had to kill that white gorilla. He seemed almost human. . . . His death seemed to cast a spell of loneliness over the jungle . . . a silent tribute to his passing . . . I can almost see him [the black gorilla] as he discovers the white outcast laying there as though sleeping. His efforts to make him do battle. And then the change . . . His bewilderment as he looks at the motionless figure. A sort of human emotion that comes over him. Then the slow realization, the outcast is dead. Then the animal instinct returns, the instinct to cover up and hide the remains of a fallen one from the scavengers of the jungle. A gesture for forgiveness as a chance of death call for the outcast for his race—the white gorilla.

In the end, “Blacks in horror” audiences came to know much more about that white gorilla than about Carre-Four, Kolaaga, and Mumbo Jumbo combined.

One notable exception to the decade’s troubling “Blacks in horror” portrayals of native tribespeople alternating between murderous savagery and toadying subservience is *The Vampire’s Ghost* (1945). A “Poverty Row” Republic Pictures release, *Vampire’s Ghost*, is an unusual genre film that foregoes standard vampiric trappings like fangs, bats, and capes while, too, eschewing Universal’s typical Gothic European setting in favor of the African wilderness.

The Black locals in the movie similarly transcend the cinematic standards of the day by staying steps ahead of the white protagonists by identifying who is leaving bodies drained of blood laying around. While the white characters sit around dismissing the naivete of the Black natives for believing that the “medieval tommymrot” of vampirism is to blame for the deaths, servant Simon Peter (Martin Wilkins) is observant enough to notice that a white newcomer, Webb Fallon (John Abbott), casts no reflection in a mirror. Simon Peter and a tribesman, Taba (Zack Williams), work to gather proof against Fallon using, of all things, bullet trajectory analysis to prove that the vampire should have been shot dead by a stray bullet but survived because he was already dead. Instead of fleeing from the whole

wicked affair in a bug-eyed fit, the two sleuths use their knowledge of folklore to proactively go after Fallon with a spear dipped in molten silver. When their plan is thwarted, Simon Peter spreads the word through the Black (native) community that Fallon is the murderer. When the vampire kidnaps leading lady Julie (Peggy Stewart) and goes on the run, the Black locals use their “voodoo drums” to track the couple’s location so that leading man Roy (Charles Gordon) can finally run Fallon through with the silver spear—courtesy of Simon Peter. So, while the Black citizenry in *Vampire’s Ghost* figures out the villain’s identity within the first 15 minutes of the 59-minute film, the disdainful-of-Blacks, trusting-all-whites, white characters defend Fallon’s innocence until the 47-minute mark, when his abduction of Julie cannot be ignored.

Reforming Hollywood, Reinventing the Black Image

Gearing up for a new decade of films, in December 1939, Spencer Williams and a who’s who of Black horror film stars, including Clarence Muse (*Black Moon*, *White Zombie*, *The Invisible Ghost*), Laura Bowman (*Drums o’ Voodoo*, *Son of Ingagi*), and Earl Morris (*Son of Ingagi*), met to discuss how to rein in the “derogatory types and stigmas” inflicted on Black characters in the film, across genres.¹⁸ Demanding change, however, was a tricky proposition as independent filmmaking was waning and Hollywood, a dominant entertainment employer, had already shown it could and would work around Black inclusion. Williams “knew they spoke from weakness, from the ranks of the Bs [i.e., B-movies], from still prevalent servile roles.”¹⁹ Many Black performers were already keeping quiet “about their dissatisfaction or anger over the lack of decent roles. Like the white stars, they knew bad-mouthing the industry got them nothing except a one-way ticket back to wherever they had come from.”²⁰ The other alternative was to forge ahead with the roles offered, acting as change agents when and where they could.

Several Black performers opted to speak up about their treatment by Hollywood. On December 28, 1940, actor Clarence Muse published his hope that the new year would be filled with improved imagery for Black film actors:

SOMEHOW, SOME WHERE, WE MUST HAVE A MAJOR NEGRO PICTURE. THIS IS a serious resolution . . . A great Negro story, big enough, good enough to be released by a major company like any other picture . . . Uplifting, daring, entertaining and true to Negro life in all its elements . . . I have resolved to do my best to encourage this . . . And if it happens . . . What a happy New Year!²¹

Despite these proclamations, little changed, but the push for change continued. After much deliberation, the NAACP attempted to corral Hollywood—its writers, producers, directors, publicists, casting directors, and the like—by getting

them to agree to a plan which would improve Blacks' standing in the industry. After significant resistance from Hollywood, which had thus far refused even to listen to the requests from Black actors or the Civil Rights group, in 1942, the NAACP finally got its audience with film producers and studio executives, urging them to liberalize the roles offered to Blacks.²² In a cruel twist, the industry argued that Black performers themselves were to blame for their plight. To illustrate, a Columbia Pictures studio representative said, "as long as there are colored persons . . . willing to play Uncle Tom roles or through buffoonery . . . to barter the dignity of their race" the portrayals will continue.²³

Absent what Cripps called a defined "Black aesthetic," it was difficult to identify what exactly constituted improved imagery.²⁴ The film industry had its "Code" which prompted them to consider whether the images they were creating were appropriately moral or exploitive. The Code was clear on what it found off limits; things such as lustful kissing, profanity, sexual perversion, and miscegenation. Imagining such a "Code" for racial imagery was difficult, though the best minds kept trying to develop some strategies for handling Hollywood.

Lawrence Dunbar Reddick, a historian and civil rights activist, was one who worked to forge a plan of action. Reddick earned a bachelor's and master's degree in history from Fisk University. In 1939, he earned a doctorate from the University of Chicago and that same year assumed the position of curator of the (today) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture as part of the New York Public Library. During his tenure there (1939–1948), he wrote and presented his ideas on the treatment of Blacks in all media, such as textbooks, radio, print, and film. In 1944, Reddick published his ideas for handling Hollywood in a lengthy scholarly essay in the *Journal of Negro Education*. Reddick suggested that censorship boards, such as the Hays Office which administered the Code, should be worked with to "include treatment of the Negro in films" as part of the codes.²⁵ More, to protect the interest of performers, Reddick proposed that "Negro actors in particular must be supported when they refuse to accept 'Uncle Tom' and 'Aunt Jemima' roles." He even asked that the government's Office of War Information (OWI) ban racist language such as "nigger," "darky," "pickaninny," "Smoke," "sambo," and "coon" from the film on the grounds that such language could be exploited by America's enemies.²⁶ Reddick continued to circulate his ideas on reform, Black actors continued to speak out, and the NAACP continued to call industry meetings. All met with mixed results. While some more liberal-minded industry insiders voiced support, the film industry was simply slow to progress. Thankfully, "Black horror" returned during this decade with Black filmmaker Spencer Williams Jr., leading the charge to introduce some of the genre's most compelling stories, unique characterizations, and thoughtful treatments of Black life and culture. Williams' films focused on the battle between good and evil, delved into Black religiosity, and centered their stories on women. Williams took it upon himself to effect change by moving forward with his own plan to offer up representations for Blacks, by Blacks.

Making Over the Ape Film

Williams' first contribution to the cause came in 1940 with a "Black horror" film he wrote and starred in. However, the film's title—*Son of Ingagi* (1940)—was cringe-worthy. Horror audiences had heard of these mythical "ingagis" before. In 1930, director William Campbell presented the infamous "Blacks in horror" film *Ingagi*, about apes or "ingagis" and the Congolese women who bear their children. *Ingagi* was originally offered as a real and true documentary recording the strange, beastly practices of Black women in the jungle. *Ingagi* ended with a native woman cuddling a half-ape, half-human baby.

Was Williams imagining *Son of Ingagi* as a sequel? Why would Williams imply a link with the earlier film through such a similar film title? The two films are not connected; however, *Son of Ingagi*, directed by white director Richard Kahn, has a few minor overlaps with the original film. *Son of Ingagi* is about a scientist who travels to Africa and brings back an ape, a "half-man, half-beast," as the film's promotional poster describes the creature. Indeed, *Ingagi* was about ape-humans. Additionally, the Williams script implies the notion of interbreeding; after all, where *exactly* did the ape—human offspring come from? Thankfully, the similarities end there, with *Son of Ingagi* taking a novel turn toward a focus on the Black middle class.

The film's first significant imagistic contribution is that the scientist who recovers the ingagi is both Black and a woman (a woman in STEM!). Dr. Helen Jackson (Laura Bowman) is an aging, wealthy, brilliant researcher boasting expertise in chemistry, anthropology, and animal behaviorism. Dr. Jackson is a neighbor and family friend to a young, up-and-coming newlywed couple, Robert and Eleanor Lindsay (Alfred Grant, Daisy Bufford). Here again, Williams breaks ground, depicting a very realistic, middle-class Black wedding.²⁷ The couple is serenaded in a performance delivered by their friends, portrayed by the real-life quintet the Four Toppers. The film also includes the portrayal of a wise and competent "prominent" attorney, Mr. Bradshaw (Earl Morris), as well as a detective, Mr. Nelson, played by Williams who brings some levity to the film.

On Robert and Eleanor's wedding night, the factory where Robert is employed burns to the ground, leaving him jobless and fretting over how the couple will survive. Dr. Jackson takes the pair under her wing, bequeathing to them her home and all of her possessions. After the scientist dies at the hands of her ape, the animal breaks free of his laboratory confines. It roams the house unseen, thereby frightening the Lindsays who have moved into Dr. Jackson's home. They phone the police to investigate the strange events in the house. Unbeknownst to the couple, in addition to a murderous ape, Dr. Jackson also hid \$20,000 in gold in the house. Though the ape in *Son* walks upright and wears pants and a tunic, the film does not explore the ape-human connection, dealing with the monster simply as a beast on the prowl. Thanks to an "all-star colored cast" and the film's setting in an all-Black community, the Lindsays' saviors are not white saviors. Instead, the Black community rallies around to support the Lindsays.



FIGURE 3.2 Dr. Jackson prepares to meet her end at the hands of her ingagi
Sack Amusement Enterprises/Photofest

Detective Nelson (Williams) arrives to solve the murders, which now includes that of attorney Bradshaw, who, while visiting the home, is strangled by the ape. However, the ape proves elusive as well as a trickster—when Nelson, while thinking over the case, makes a sandwich for himself, the ape steals it while Nelson’s back is turned, leaving the detective befuddled. Thus, Williams brings a bit of comedy to his performance, revealing some of the comedic skills that he would use in the (controversial buffoonish) role of television’s Andrew “Andy” Hogg Brown in the situation comedy *The Amos’n’ Andy Show* (1951–1953). However, in this film, Williams is no coon. He is shown both wise and serious and jovial and comical. Notably, Williams writes a woman as a hero. Eleanor discovers the ape raising the alarm—though she faints and has to be rescued by Robert since Nelson is knocked out by the animal. In the end, Nelson redeems himself by locating the hidden wealth and turning it over to the Lindsays so that they may happily pursue their lives, and the American dream, together.

Son could be thought of as a unique double “B” film—low budget, and for Black audiences, two rather deadly box office traits. However, the film did succeed in making an initial step toward recuperating the race film and Blacks’ portrayals in it. The effort spoke to Williams’ personal mission of changing Blacks’ treatment in entertainment film.



FIGURE 3.3 Spencer Williams Jr. (with hat)

CBS/Photofest

Taking on Hollywood, the Devil Can't Defeat Me

Well, let me see, there was once a Black cinema. Spencer Williams performed there and made relevant films. And there was an audience for that. . . . It was a culture—film culture, Black culture—where serious, relevant films were made.

—Charles Burnett, filmmaker²⁸

A native Louisianan, Spencer Williams Jr. entered into show business full-on in his mid-thirties, after a stint in the military and after taking on work around theater circuits as an aide, a bit comedy actor, and comedy writer for theatrical performances. He got his start in race films whose content targeted Black audiences but which were made by non-Blacks (not unlike the white-directed *Son of Ingagi*). Williams appeared in a diversity of genres, including musical shorts such as *Brown Gravy* (1929), westerns such as *Harlem on the Prairie* (1937), and crime dramas such as *Bad Boy* (1939). He was also a writer with writing/screenplay credits for films such as the 1929 comedy short *The Lady Fare*, as well as *Harlem Rides the Range* and *Son of Ingagi*, films in which he also stars.

In 1983, 14 years after Williams' death in 1969, some of Williams' films were found and recovered from a warehouse in Tyler, Texas (about two hours outside of Dallas), by film and video archivist G. William Jones of Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Williams had a special relationship with the city of Dallas, filming there and working in partnership with Dallas-based Sack Amusement Enterprise, led by Alfred Sack, for financial, distribution, and production support. Sack who produced/distributed over more than one dozen "race films," including several by Oscar Micheaux as well as Williams, permitted Williams to make movies outside of the Hollywood system, which would have excluded him anyway, while maintaining creative control.

That creative control paid off, as the 1940s was Williams' decade. He directed 12 films, all of them between 1941 and 1949. Notably, he wrote, produced (under his company Amegro), and directed *The Blood of Jesus*, a "Black horror" film, in 1941. The film, which marks Williams' directorial debut, has been hailed as "the most popular race movie ever produced."²⁹ *Blood* was not marketed as a horror film; rather, it shirked generic classification, being described at times as fantasy and other times as religious drama. However, if Sobchack is correct that the horror film deals with "moral chaos, the disruption of natural order," particularly God's order, and "threat to the harmony of hearth and home," then *The Blood of Jesus* is the quintessential horror film.³⁰

The Blood of Jesus is heavily inspired by Christian religiosity and centers on the theme of free will—choosing a path of righteousness or one of sin. Threat to hearth and home in a close-knit, rural town is introduced when the church-going, God-fearing "Sister" Martha (Catherine Caviness) cannot persuade her husband Razz (Spencer Williams) to attend church or to witness her baptism. Razz is fashioned as a sinner because he chooses to go hunting instead and, in a brief comic scene, hunts on his neighbor's farm, claiming two hogs as his prize. Chaos ensues when Martha, upon return from her baptism and while praying in their bedroom, is accidentally shot when Razz's rifle falls to the ground firing off a round. The rifle discharges, with the shot traveling through the bedroom wall and striking Martha and her picture of (a white) Jesus. She is mortally wounded, leaving Razz devastated. But this is horror, and disruption of the natural order is,

well, in order. Razz finds himself praying in sincere earnest over Martha, who is dead but who has not yet been assigned her place in Heaven or Hell. Interestingly, it is Martha, not Razz, whose faith is challenged. Here again, Williams distinguishes himself by placing a Black woman, just as he did in *Son of Ingagi* with Dr. Jackson and Eleanor, at the center of his narrative. Martha brings depth to the story as she is the antithesis of Razz, a louse of a husband, who would be expected to easily fall prey to the Devil. Hence, Martha is the one that must be rendered vulnerable to be sure that she is wholly righteous rather than *self*-righteous.

While in death, Martha is greeted by an angel who takes her to the Crossroads, the junction between Hell and Zion. Martha assuredly chooses Zion, but the Devil (James B. Jones, complete with horns and a cape) intercedes, sending in a “false prophet,” the charmingly seductive Judas Green (Frank H. McClenan) as “temptation” to entice the right-living Martha to witness a side of life she has never seen. He directs her attention away from Zion to a cityscape ablaze in bright lights, filled with lively secular music performed by swing bands and met by couples dancing to a “little jive,” with all enjoyed by droves of people. Judas becomes the “bête noire of the Black bourgeoisie” as his flash, smooth talk, and connection with the urban (versus the more modest rural) make him excessively evil.³¹ Judas’ terrain is markedly different from the far from sparkling rural life Martha is accustomed to; thus, he is able to lure her with an ostentatious lifestyle, while leading her down the path to Hell. In defining piety and sin in this way, the film makes no pretense; it is a straightforward view of religiosity, “all surfaces” in its treatment of good and evil.³²

Judas first takes Martha to the 400 Club, a classy venue for more well-heeled Blacks. However, Martha is there only briefly before the real plan is revealed. Judas secretly sells Martha for \$30 to a fellow named Brown (Eddie DeBase) who is at the club waiting to pick up this latest catch. Hence, Williams’ narrative, already a cautionary tale, adds an additional trafficking warning for naïve women metaphorically “just off the bus.” Brown takes Martha to a seedy, dangerous juke joint in which women receive money to dance with men (and perhaps a bit more).

While horror has attended to Black women before, often by way of the wicked Voodoo priestess, Black women infrequently get to be central and *feminine*. Black women are not eligible for the symbolic pedestal in film, upon which white women are placed by men of all races, to be romanced, gazed upon lovingly, and to see their bodies, emotions, and even their beauty protected. However, Martha, a Black character, finds herself placed atop a pedestal, pined for by Razz and the Devil. Razz longs for her, praying over her lifeless body unceasingly. The last time a Black woman had a man attend to her with such verve she was later strangled to death by him (i.e., Klili in *The Love Wanga* [1936]). More, Martha is also depicted as a Black Southern “lady”; hence, she is likewise seen as a real prize for the Devil. When Judas is sent in to tempt her, he does so by showering her with attention, thereby exploiting Razz’s failure to fully recognize the value of not just this woman, but what she represents as a lady.

Judas acts as a trickster, confusing Martha by conflating sex (sexiness, sexual attraction) with the feminine. This is a subtle and important difference, distinguishable in great part by comparing Judas' performance of masculinity, which is modeled on desire and sexual urges, with Razz's performance late in the film, which focuses on love and intimacy. In fact, Martha's dilemma is presented as a war over what kind of femininity she will embrace, the "lady" or the sexpot in fancy clothes and shoes (before she is "turned out"). Manatu argues that Black women have been, and continue to be, denied access to and participation in the feminine. As a result, Black women are not afforded the opportunity to fight for, or escape from, a feminine performance, including the proverbial pedestal.³³ Notably, the femininity that Martha chooses—to be a respectable, God-fearing lady—is what gets her marital love (Razz) securing her place on a pedestal of righteous adoration.

While trapped with Brown in the juke joint, Martha falls to her knees in prayer, begging God for forgiveness, and in return, a Black female guardian angel helps Martha escape her fate. Feeling restored and empowered, Martha (now in an angelic, flowing dress) flees back toward the crossroads. As Martha runs, the Devil's minions from the juke joint appear, chase her down, and attempt to stone her to death. The next sequence is one of the most dramatic and highly stylized in the film. Cripps calls the imagery in the film "unlike that in any other Afro-American movie."³⁴ Just as Martha arrives at the sign marking the crossroads, the sign is transformed into a towering cross bearing the image of Jesus. Martha, lying prone beneath the cross, is literally washed in the blood of Jesus as blood runs from Jesus' body, which is nailed to the cross, and over hers. As stunning as the scene is in appearance and symbolism, it is also meaningful as it speaks to Martha negotiating a complex liminal state. That is, she resides between the not quite dead or living, and also between compromised saint, but not quite a sinner. Martha reveals how traumatic it is to confront her condition of being separate from her physical body and being absent of her humanness/humanity.

Martha's final choice, to side with God, thereby expelling that which she does not want as part of her subjective self, is a lesson in rejecting the "improper" and "unclean," replacing them with the "clean and proper self."³⁵ Restored by the blood of Jesus, Martha suddenly awakens safe and well at home. She and the now God-fearing Razz are reunited under the watchful eye of the angel.

Williams took great care with his first film, striving for exacting detail to accommodate the most discerning audience members who might scrutinize his religious message. He presents the real-life Reverend R.L. Robertson and his Heavenly Choir while offering an authentic glimpse into the Black church, from sermons to songs to prayers. Indeed, the first three minutes of the film make clear that this is a production that is taking religion and its iconography quite seriously. The congregants talk of following the "10 original commandments accepted as civilized law" and that religion should be "practiced with honest sincerity." Bibles, crosses, and portraits of Jesus abound. Hymns such as "Good News" and "Go

Down Moses” are sung by the choir. Rev. Robertson performs an accurate riverside baptism, while the choir sings and parishioners pray and engage in praise and worship.

The Blood of Jesus popularizes several themes that would take center stage in more modern “Black horror” films beginning in the 1990s. Choosing between being Godliness/good and Satan/evil, being tempted by the fast way of (Northern) urban life versus more modest (Southern) rural life, and a woman as moral arbiter and savior figures prominently in films such as *Def by Temptation* (1990) and *Spirit Lost* (1997).

Hallelujah! Eloyce Gist

While Williams’ messages and film style would be oft-duplicated in horror, Williams’ own films did not emerge in a cultural vacuum. Oscar Micheaux’s *The Scar of Shame* (1927) used the urban, secular music, and all that comes with the lifestyle such music supports, as a warning to stay close to one’s own humble (Southern) roots. Following Micheaux’s lead, the wife and husband filmmaking duo Eloyce and James Gist made two circa 1930 films, *Hellbound Train* and *Verdict Not Guilty*, which took up themes of good/South and evil/North. *Hellbound Train*, here a “Black horror” film, is particularly seminal. Williams’ *Blood* closely resembles *Hellbound*’s story, which centers on a journey, and messages of choosing the path to righteousness. The Gists’ silent, short film’s iconography may have also informed Williams’ film as the two share Devil, crossroads, and damnation imagery. While it is unknown if Williams saw the Gists’ films, it is clear that Williams is surfacing in his films’ themes appearing in earlier films by Micheaux and the Gists.

Gloria J. Gibson provides the most insightful pieces of research into the Gists’ life, particularly Eloyce’s.³⁶ According to Gibson, Eloyce Gist was born in Texas in 1892, with Washington, D.C., becoming her home not long after the turn of the century. She attended Howard University. Eloyce’s thinking about religion is said to reflect her own beliefs in Baha’i and that of James, her Christian self-ordained evangelist husband. Eloyce worked in partnership with her husband, with his contributions to their filmmaking undisputed though not precisely known. However, the silent film *Hellbound Train* is viewed as being significantly Eloyce’s as the script is largely hers, as are several scenes that she directed. The Gist films were not for entertainment but used as a teaching tool to aid in their ministry. The duo drove across the country, from Black church to Black church, with their films and equipment.³⁷ When Gibson interviewed Eloyce’s 82-year-old daughter, Homoiselle Patrick Harrison, in the early 1990s, Harrison recalled how the couple screened their films: Eloyce would play the piano and lead the congregation in hymns. Then, the film would be shown, followed by a sermonette by James Gist. Tickets were either sold in advance, or a collection was taken at the close of the service, with the Gists and the church splitting the money.³⁸ The Gists’ films

were well received, even drawing the attention of the NAACP in 1933, when the organization contacted the couple to offer their endorsement of their efforts.

Thanks to the efforts of film scholars Gibson and S. Torriano Berry, who have been reassembling and digitizing the film's fragments, the film's story is fairly discernible. *Hellbound Train* begins with the title card "The Hell-Bound train is always on duty, and the Devil is engineer," followed by a message from the Devil, "Free admission to all—just give your life and soul. No round trip tickets—one way only." The film then shows a group of sinners queueing up for their train tickets: "no round-trip tickets, one way only [signed] Satan." The train, conducted by the Devil, has dedicated cars for all kinds of sinners, a storyline presented through title cards made by Eloyce.³⁹ For example, those who dance at parties and in clubs have a train car because "the dance of today is indecent," with Eloyce aligning dancing and music with the more sinful side of life. Those who sell alcohol are assigned to a distinct car as well: "there's room in hell for BOOTLEGGERS and their followers." Alcohol is depicted as especially dangerous. A woman is shown being encouraged to imbibe by a man, who then lures her into a private room. "Mislead by the whisper of a man," she is next shown, alone, watching over her newborn. There is yet another scene that attends to reproduction, this time abortion. A doctor tries to save a woman, but she still perishes. Here, the card reads as a forceful shout, "She has taken medicine to avoid becoming a mother. SHE'D better get right with GOD, for it's murder in COLD BLOOD."⁴⁰ Eloyce reveals more of her sinner list, such as gambling and murder, as well as being a crook and liar. The Devil has a car for "backsliders, hypocrites and Used to be Church Members."⁴¹ The implication is that this is a very long train with lots of cars to accommodate all evil-doers; none will avoid judgment and Hell.

Unlike Williams' film *Blood*, the *Hellbound Train* audience is not shown that a return to righteousness is possible after one has sinned. Rather, the sinful remain that way and embark on their train journey, with the train moving rapidly toward the "Entrance to Hell." According to Gibson,

the train bursts Hell wide open (it enters a tunnel), crashing and exploding into flames. The Devil circles the train to further torment the victims. . . . In the final scene a man, perhaps James Gist, states, "Thus I've demonstrated to you this picture which I painted as a vision from hearing a sermon in a revival meeting." Behind him is a large poster or flowchart of the hell-bound train's journey. This scene may have functioned as a segue to Gist's sermonette after the film.⁴²

After the death of her husband, Eloyce continued to tour, "traveling with the films, a projector, and an assistant for a while, but soon realized she couldn't shoulder the diverse responsibilities alone. The work of programmer, manager, and exhibitor was too taxing."⁴³ More, sound had made the silent film obsolete, making way for efforts such as Williams'. Eloyce died in 1974. The magnitude

of her importance to her religious community can be measured by the condition of her films. According to the Library of Congress, screening her films so frequently took their toll: “The movies were so widely shown that they literally fell apart along the splices and were received by the Library in hundreds of short fragments.”⁴⁴

The Gists’ and Williams’ religious-message/“Black horror” films act as a purposeful intervention into the film discourses swirling around Blacks in the 1930s and 1940s in their rejection of black magic themes. Horror films regularly gave dichotomous attention to Blacks’ religious practices in that they were depicted either as evil Voodooists or as (ideally) faithful Christians. Williams rejected such traps of pitting Black religions against the other by, like the Gists, sticking to Christian messages. Still, an earlier Sack Amusement film *Drums o’ Voodoo* (1934), written by playwright, screenwriter, and a leader of the Negro Theatre Unit of the Federal Theatre Project (NY), J. Augustus Smith, provided a template of how one could examine Voodoo and Christianity on somewhat equal footing.

In the film (based on Smith’s Broadway play *Louisiana* featuring an all-Black cast who reprise their roles for the film), believers in Voodoo and in Christianity co-exist in the same rural Louisiana community. The films’ opening title card initially casts Voodooists as evil with their incessant drumming “on the eve of a sacrifice.” However, no such event pans out. Rather, the evil introduces itself in the form of a cool slickster, the obviously named “Tom Catt” (Morris McKenny). Here, Catt is much like Williams’ Judas who is in pursuit of Martha, as Catt wants a young woman named Myrtle (Edna Barr) to work as eye candy in his juke joint. The problem is that Myrtle wants nothing to do with either Catt or his juke joint. Others in the community are opposed to Catt getting his claws into Myrtle, including her minister uncle (the quirkily named) Elder Amos Berry or Elder Berry (J. Augustus Smith), Ebenezer, the grandson of the local Voodoo witch Auntie Hagar, and Auntie Hagar (Laura Bowman) herself. Hagar works her magic to protect the minister’s niece. Importantly, she has the minister’s support, as he announces, “I believe [she] is the only one’round here that can drive Tom Catt out of this community.” In fact, Hagar has the support of everyone—Christians and Voodoo practitioners alike—who want Catt’s disruptive ways to end. While Catt has drawn people away from the Christian church, it is the magical work of Hagar that brings them back into the fold. At the end, stricken by Hagar, Catt is rendered blind, falls into quicksand, and dies. All is well again thanks to the two religious groups working together in harmony.⁴⁵

The Blood of Jesus with its focal Christian themes proved popular and profitable enough that Sack Amusement threw their support behind a second Williams film with a rural, Southern religions turn.⁴⁶ Williams’ next religio-horror film, *Go Down, Death* (1944), focuses on Big Jim Bottoms (Williams). Jim is the owner of a nightclub that is shown as the playground for men and women of low morals. The story parallels *Drums o’ Voodoo* in that Jim regards as his enemy Jasper, a young preacher (Samuel H. James) in charge of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, who is

“ruining Sunday business” at the club. Jim enlists three “fly chicks,” or prostitutes, to set Jasper up. As the minister presents the women with bibles and reads them scriptures, they surround him, press a drink in his hand, and quickly kiss him just in time for Jim to snap a picture.

Before Jim can “expose” Jasper and ruin his reputation, Jim’s (adoptive) mother Caroline, a devoted church-goer, uncovers the scheme, confronts her son, and demands the photos. Caroline also begs Jim to accept Christ in his life so that their family can all “be together in the hereafter.” Instead, Jim mocks her. While the spiritual *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen* is heard, Caroline talks aloud to her dead husband Joe asking him to talk to God about the wicked Jim. Caroline is shocked to see Joe’s ghostly image appear pointing out a safe in which Jim has stored the scandalous picture of the minister. Joe’s ghost opens the safe for Caroline, and she takes the pictures.

Williams’ use of Joe’s ghost is much like his use of Martha in *The Blood of Jesus*. They both return from the dead to speak to Black people’s experiences. So rarely is the living story of Black people spoken in popular culture that here Williams has it being told by the dead. The efficacy of such communication rises and falls, literally, on where the dead speak. In Williams’ films, the message of the dead or dying is, notably, delivered at home. Martha’s lessons of religiosity are delivered from her bed, at home, as she is attended to, watched, and prayed over by Razz.⁴⁷ Similarly, in *Go Down, Death* film, Joe comes to Caroline and is able to be heard only at “home” and during prayer.

Jim catches Caroline before she is able to get away with the photos and fights with her, accidentally killing her. The film’s title, *Go Down, Death*, comes from the 1926 James Weldon Johnson poem/funeral sermon of the same name, and it is this sermon that is delivered at Caroline’s funeral while Jim listens guiltily, having blamed Caroline’s death on a robber. In the sermon, words of assurance are offered to those who mourn her, which include a promise that Caroline has passed on to an afterlife.

During his mother’s funeral, Jim begins to get his punishment. When Jasper preaches, “Grief-stricken son—weep no more,” Jim hangs his head in shame and begins to hear a voice—his conscience talking to him. After the funeral, Jim’s mental condition worsens. The devilish, disembodied inner voice screams at him, “You killed, you killed, killed your best friend!” and “The Lord has no mercy for killers.” Jim runs in fright, but the torment worsens. As he falls to the ground, the voice promises, “I’m going to show you where you’re going home to . . . Hell!”

As is Williams’ trademark, illustrated in a hauntingly stylized sequence, Hell is revealed to Jim through shocking visuals of writhing undead tortured souls in a lake of ice and a horned Lucifer violently consuming souls. The sequence is borrowed from the frightening silent film *L’Inferno* (1911), an adaptation of Dante’s *Inferno*, the first part of the fourteenth-century epic poem *Divine Comedy*, directed by Francesco Bertolini and Adolfo Padovan. Williams’ budget constraints moved him to become creative, turning to one of the more frightening allegorical

presentations of good and evil. The film depicts a downward, spiraling journey to the inferno of Hell in which sinners endure never-ending tortures. The Devil is present, abusing and even eating the wicked. Soon after being exposed to the visions, Jim is found dead, having gone to the “Terrible Place,” a requisite and even celebrated element of horror.⁴⁸

However, these types of films were not sustainable. In 1968 and 1970, film scholar Thomas Cripps interviewed Alfred and Lester Sack, of Sack Amusement Enterprises, distributors of *The Blood of Jesus* and *Go Down, Death*. According to Cripps, before the war, *The Blood of Jesus* (by way of example) “had amounted almost to folk art among [Williams’] Southern rural clientele; its lack of artifice had seemed a charming flaw rather than a crippling wound.”⁴⁹ However, the Sacks revealed that the film’s setting in “those days . . . almost gone” was met with loud laughter in the North in the war years and beyond.⁵⁰ More, so-called “all-Colored cast films” were increasingly competing with mainstream films in which Black actors were cast as co-stars alongside whites. Unfortunately, in the horror genre, co-starring roles for Black actors meant performing as the comic-Negro sidekick. Williams would have to share his decade of achievement with the likes of Mantan Moreland and Willie Best, whose popularity was built on cooning.

“Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens”

Don’t they know colored people are just like other folks?

—Razaf (16)⁵¹

Film had a half-century of image-making under its belt; however, if one were to consider the depictions of Blacks during this time, the offerings resembled something out of the nineteenth-century minstrel stage. During the 1800s’ slavery and post-antebellum periods, theater performances had much to say about race relationships by offering an opportunistic depiction of the white slave master—enslaved Black human relationship. Whites were portrayed as the patient, paternalistic caregivers to their squirrely, inept but otherwise content human property. This racial relationship between superior whites and happy “darkies” was a powerful fantasy supplanting the reality of the brutalities of chattel slavery.⁵² These fantasies were initially played out on stage by whites in blackface who performed in black voice—a malapropism-laden, simpleton manner of speaking. While it was hard to imagine that Blacks would participate in their own subjugation on the theater stage, in the late 1800s, they were cast in the darkey role, with some appearing in blackface. To draw white audiences to Black performances, Black actors were described as, “true plantation slaves, not an ‘imitation’ like whites in blackface.”⁵³ Film simply lifted these kinds of performances from the theater stage (often also borrowing its actors) and placed them on celluloid.

For example, theater actor Harold Lloyd found fame in film, appearing in approximately 200 comedy films. One of his better-known films was the 25-minute silent comedy-horror film *Haunted Spooks* (1920). *Haunted* and films like it were dubbed “thrill comedy” films, which coupled frights with broad humor.⁵⁴ In this “Blacks in horror” film, a young man, “the Boy” (Lloyd), helps his new wife, “the Girl” (Mildred Davis), earn her inheritance, a sprawling mansion. The Girl cannot claim the mansion unless she lives in it for one year. The Boy chases off the Girl’s greedy Uncle (Wallace Howe), who “haunts” the residence in an attempt to drive the Girl away. The film features a cadre of Black actors (approximately 10) in the capacity of house servants who are told by the Uncle that “grinning ghosts of the dead scream from their graves and roam these rooms.” The film depicts the servants as degradingly gullible, spreading the tale of ghosts (through the use of title cards) in malapropism-laden black voice, “An’ de whole graveyard turns upside down! Gassly, spookey ghosts come heah to room dese rooms.” As the Uncle “haunts” the house, a child servant (Ernest “Sunshine Sammy” Morrison) dives into a bin of flour, emerging white and petrified. A butler (Blue Washington) is depicted as being so terror-struck that, otherwise frozen, he can only tap dance in place while sweating black ink that coats his face. The depiction of Black people was so abysmal that one could easily assume that the “spooks” in the film’s title was a hateful slur deployed to describe the Black characters rather than the non-existent ghosts.

Hollywood was notably prolific in presenting such comedy-horror offerings, with these films dominating the genre during this decade. The humor that Black performers affected, a “hybrid minstrelsy,” was still white-oriented, with Black actors employed to validate and veil the racism.⁵⁵ This was an era marked by an obsessive representation of Black people as “cultural inferiors,” burdensome to long suffering whites.⁵⁶ Black people were now increasingly depicted as being (lacking) Americans (either from the South or from New York, most often Harlem), rather than natives in Africa or the Caribbean. The representational shift was a bit of propaganda as the OWI’s Bureau of Motion Pictures claimed it was in the nation’s best interest to present a unified (though not integrated) America.⁵⁷ Still, Hollywood’s horror films continued to insult. For example, in the “Blacks in horror” film *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), Bob Hope as Larry talks of traveling to “Black Island” to (in a double-entendre joke) “get acquainted with the spooks.” The prevalence of such films was, in part, the outcome of incomplete censorship plans that requested the deletion of the most egregious, vicious stereotypes but overlooked those couched in humor. As a result, racist comedy-horror became a tour de force, and it all worked to reaffirm a white racial superiority.⁵⁸

A Sin and a Shame

I got an urge that I want to leave, but my legs won’t cooperate with me.

—Birmingham Brown, Charlie Chan’s *The Scarlet Clue* (1945)

Willie Best marketed himself as Sleep 'n' Eat. Nellie (Wan) Conley became Madame Sul-Te-Wan. Ernest Morrison was known as Sunshine Sammy. Mantan Moreland did not need such gimmicks, as his name sold itself. When Moreland's name appeared on a promotional bill, audiences could rest assured that they were going to hear his best one-liners and see him bug his eyes while quivering uncontrollably with fright. The characters that Best, Conley, and Morrison played, and what they did to their personal and professional reputations, as well as to understandings of Blackness, have been described in the most scathing terms. However, some of the most ferocious contempt has been reserved for Moreland. Film scholar James Nesteby described the roles that Moreland took as "the sunshine friend, the coon who turned coward at the first sign of distress, or the coon who could not motivate his feet when the rest of him was shivering."⁵⁹ The British film journalist and historian Peter Noble (181–182) wrote brutally of Moreland,

no Negro actor has ever rolled his eyes with such abandon as Moreland, no coloured actor has ever tried so hard to revert to the Stepin Fetchit subhuman characterisation. He is the accepted U.S.A. idea of the Negro clown supreme, and performs before the cameras like a well-trained monkey.⁶⁰

Born in Louisiana in 1902, Moreland began his career as a traveling performer, making his way to the vaudeville stage in his twenties. Appearing in over 100 films, Moreland's claim to fame was his comedy. He was credited with being a comedy craftsman, displaying an "arsenal of gestures and grimaces that actors had traditionally used to steal scenes and develop characters."⁶¹ His spirited performances were perfect for comedy-horror.

In the "Blacks in horror" film *King of the Zombies* (1941), set during World War II, Moreland plays Jefferson "Jeff" Jackson, a Harlemiter and valet to his white employer, Bill "Mr. Bill" Summers (John Archer). The pair, along with their pilot, James "Mac" McCarthy (Dick Purcell), crash land on an island in the Bahamas. There, the trio locates the mansion of Dr. Miklos Sangre (Henry Victor), an Austrian scientist. Sangre is also a "secret agent" for an unnamed "European government." He is using the power of Voodoo as an interrogation tool to drag war secrets out of an American admiral so that America's enemies (who communicate by radio in German) may have the militaristic advantage. Central to the scientist's scheme are black magic powers of Tahama (Madame Sul-Te-Wan), an aged Voodoo High Priestess who doubles as his cook.

Despite his diminutive size, Moreland is a scene stealer in this messy tale, widening his eyes while delivering one quick quip after another at the expense of his own Blackness. For example, just before crashlanding, he shudders, "Oh oh!!! I knowed I wasn't cut out to be no blackbird." When his character Jeff realizes he has survived the crash he proclaims, "I thought I was a little off-color to be a ghost." Jeff's purpose in the film is to be frenzied with fright, while the white



FIGURE 3.4 Mantan Moreland
Toddy Pictures Co./Photofest

characters around him are calm and analytical about their predicament, thereby reinforcing dichotomies of Black emotionality and white rationality.⁶²

Nearly every line delivered by Jeff is (albeit understandably) about the dangers on the island and the trio's urgent need to leave. However, Jeff is played as cowardly rather than reasonably cautious. Jeff tucks up close under his Mr. Bill for protection. In one scene, Jeff is assigned a bed in the servants' quarters, away from

Mr. Bill. As he is escorted away by the eerie butler Momba (Leigh Whipper), out of both fear and loyalty Jeff pleads, "Oh, Mr. Bill, does I has to? Can't I stay up here with you?" Jeff does not simply turn his humor on himself but implicates other Black people in lack by describing the Black zombies on the island as "too lazy to lay down."

In 1943, Monogram Pictures, the same studio that brought audiences *King of the Zombies*, introduced the sequel, *Revenge of the Zombies*. While the two films have generally the same premise, the narratives do not connect and the second film makes no mention of the first. *Revenge* is set in Louisiana, with Moreland back as Jeff. Madame Sul-Te-Wan returns, but this time in the role of Mammy Beulah, a cackling, elderly housekeeper. They are joined by a host of silent zombies that include James Baskett (Academy Award winner for *Song of the South* [1946]), as the overworked zombie slave Lazarus.

The premise of *Revenge* is similar to *King*, but it is more overt in its anti-German/Nazi propaganda. Dr. Max Heinrich von Altermann (John Carradine), who greets his German compatriots with a click of the heel of his boots, is experimenting with a drug made from "swamp lilies" which will help him create an army of zombies: "I'm prepared to supply my country with a new army, numbering as many thousands as required . . . an army that will not need to be fed, that cannot be stopped by bullet. That is, in fact, invincible."

When his white zombie wife goes missing, von Altermann assembles the Black people in his employ in his kitchen for interrogation. An interesting element about this scene is the disregard the Black characters are portrayed as having for the German. When von Altermann accuses his maid Rosella (Sybil Lewis) of knowing where his zombie-wife went because she is "always under foot listening and watching," Rosella responds in a defiant tone: "I ain't seed nothing, I ain't heard nothing." Next, a scornful Mammy Beulah chimes in, challenging keeper, "You sho' *you* don't know where she is master, you sho' *you* can't guess?" When von Altermann replies, "Would I be asking you if I knew?" Mammy Beulah snaps back, "Well, you might master, if you wanted to *pretend* you didn't know." The Black characters are not portrayed as stereotypically "sassy"; rather, they are powerfully oppositional. However, this scene is less about Black Americans' comeuppance and more about a U.S. film depicting the derision of a Nazi. In films of this era, Black people are not depicted as rising up in opposition to U.S. whites in this way and certainly not with impunity. Black zombies or Voodooist natives, then, were not the only monsters of the war era. Filmmakers distributed monstrosity a bit farther afield, and zombies became representative of a kind of anti-democratic social and mind control that more fascist regimes might find use for.⁶³

Mantan Moreland and Flournoy Miller, as Washington and Jefferson, respectively, teamed up in the Black-cast horror-comedy film *Lucky Ghost* (1942). It was directed by William Beaudine, a white man who, with over 350 films under his belt, was known for making B-movies in two weeks or less. The film was distributed by Ted Toddy's Dixie National Pictures, Inc. (later Toddy Pictures Co.).

Toddy, also white, backed several films that featured Moreland while building his fortune producing and distributing films featuring Black actors (e.g., *Harlem on the Prairie* [1937], *Mantan Runs for Mayor* [1947], and *House-Rent Party* [1946]).

Lucky Ghost is the tale of two down-on-their-luck men, Washington (Moreland) and Jefferson (Miller). We learn that the men have been in legal trouble with a judge telling them to “get out of town, and keep walking,” which the not-too-bright men do, literally walking for days on end. Washington cannot write and he does not know the days of the week but is a master at throwing dice. Jefferson plays the straight man to joke-cracking Washington, who throws out one-liners and engages in slapstick antics. Their comedy does nothing to distance Black Americans from long-lingering stereotypes. For example, the men have a built-in radar for chickens. As Washington enters a coop to steal chickens he is caught by the owner, who yells “Who’s in there!?” giving rise to the popular colloquialism offered by Washington: “Ain’t nobody here but us chickens!” As Washington flees the coop, the owner shoots him in the butt. In 1915, the Lubin Manufacturing Company produced a cartoon film, *A Barnyard Mix-Up*, which focuses on a “chicken-thieving Rastus’ who escapes the farmer’s buckshot but is finally laid low by an axe, although he is resurrected in an unusual manner by an explosion of dynamite.”⁶⁴ *Lucky* served as a reminder of how pernicious the at-risk-to-their-lives “Blacks love chicken” stereotype is.

The duo’s luck changes when Washington wins a stack of cash, a car with a chauffeur, and fine clothing in a craps game. His haul comes from two monied passers-by headed for an illegal afterhours club (inside of a mansion). Washington and Jefferson go to the club and while there Washington wins the entire club in a dice game. The club turns out to be haunted by a family who is displeased their “no good nephew” has turned their home, now owned by Washington and Jefferson, into a place where sinful “jitterbuggin’, jivin’, and hullabalooin’” is going on. Their hauntings provide Washington ample opportunity to alternately be frozen with fright or engage in a “feets don’t fail me now” routine.

Moreland’s trembling act as the “coon who turned coward” was not confined to comedy-horror.⁶⁵ In the mystery *The Strange Case of Doctor Rx* (1942), in the role of Horatio Washington, his hair turned white with fright. When he was cast in the *Charlie Chan* comedy-mystery film series as chauffeur Birmingham Brown from 1944 to 1949, he often delivered quips such as: “I got an urge that I want to leave, but my legs won’t cooperate with me!”⁶⁶

Cedric Robinson, in *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks & the Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film before World War II*, works to rehabilitate Moreland’s legacy,⁶⁷ describing him as “no fool” and as someone who employed a kind of subterfuge in which he teased and mocked whites for not being as superior as they let on. Robinson specifically cites *King of the Zombies* (1941) as a film in which Moreland actually attempts to rehabilitate Blackness. For example, Robinson sees in Jeff’s intellectual capabilities that are purportedly evidenced through Jeff’s use of words like loquacious, kosher, and prevaricator. Indeed, Jeff fires

off such multi-syllabic words, though in Jeff, whose speech is also littered with malapropisms, such talk is to be understood as misplaced and comical. As for Moreland's Birmingham Brown, Robinson finds promise there as well, observing that Brown turned the Chan household into something more "diverse, lively, daring, and comic."⁶⁸ But Moreland appears in a representational context that also includes simple-minded characters such as Sleep 'n' Eat, Stepin Fetchit. He is to be read as their contemporaries, not revolutionary, with Willie Best even substituting for Moreland as Chattanooga Brown in the Charlie Chan movie *The Red Dragon* (1946). Comical and prop-like, none were regarded as bringing precious equity and inclusion.

Such depictions accomplish a

view of racial harmony by presenting to its intended audience an image of Blacks as humorous (they can't be unhappy; they make us laugh), mistaken (you see, they do need us to guide them), and eager to please (we obviously merit their concern).⁶⁹

These films are also unique because the violence in them is so trivialized. In more traditional horror films, violence is ubiquitous but hardly inconsequential. When a mummy strangles or an ape pummels, these actions are understood as loathsome and fearsome. When Moreland's character is shot in the butt as he scrambles away or when Eddie Anderson's character, Eddie the chauffeur in *Topper Returns* (1941), is repeatedly head-butted by a seal and nearly drowned, the consequences of violence inflicted upon Black bodies (in this Jim Crow era, no less) are muted by their comedic impact.

Willie Best was the 1940s other comedy-horror icon. He, too, entered acting at an early age, "with the tall, thin Negro going through all the hackneyed rigamarole of the vaudeville black-face comedian."⁷⁰ Bogle writes, in partial jest, that Best was Stepin Fetchit's (Lincoln Perry) "step-chillun," with Best appropriating Perry's comic, shuffling, dull-witted moves and characterizations, and taking roles that might have typically gone to Perry.⁷¹ Best was not nearly as good a performer as Perry and could not get that sweet spot of the lazy, slow-moving coon with the same ingenuity. He simply was not as accomplished as an actor. In *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), Best appeared alongside Bob Hope, hanging his bottom lip while enduring lines such as, "You look like a blackout in a blackout. If this keeps up, I'm going to have to paint you white." Best was always the same, not quite funny, just simply a dimwit who played the sidekick that did not react to insult or, like Moreland, fire back with a witty zinger. Best notoriously drooped his lower lip, bulged his eyes, and shuffled through "Blacks in horror" films such as *The Monster Walks* (1932), in which he considered his kinship to an ape, and *The Smiling Ghost* (1941), in which he adds crossing his eyes and out-running a team of stampeding horses to his scared-Negro performance. Best would be called in again and again to do little more than quake with fear and jump at shadows in

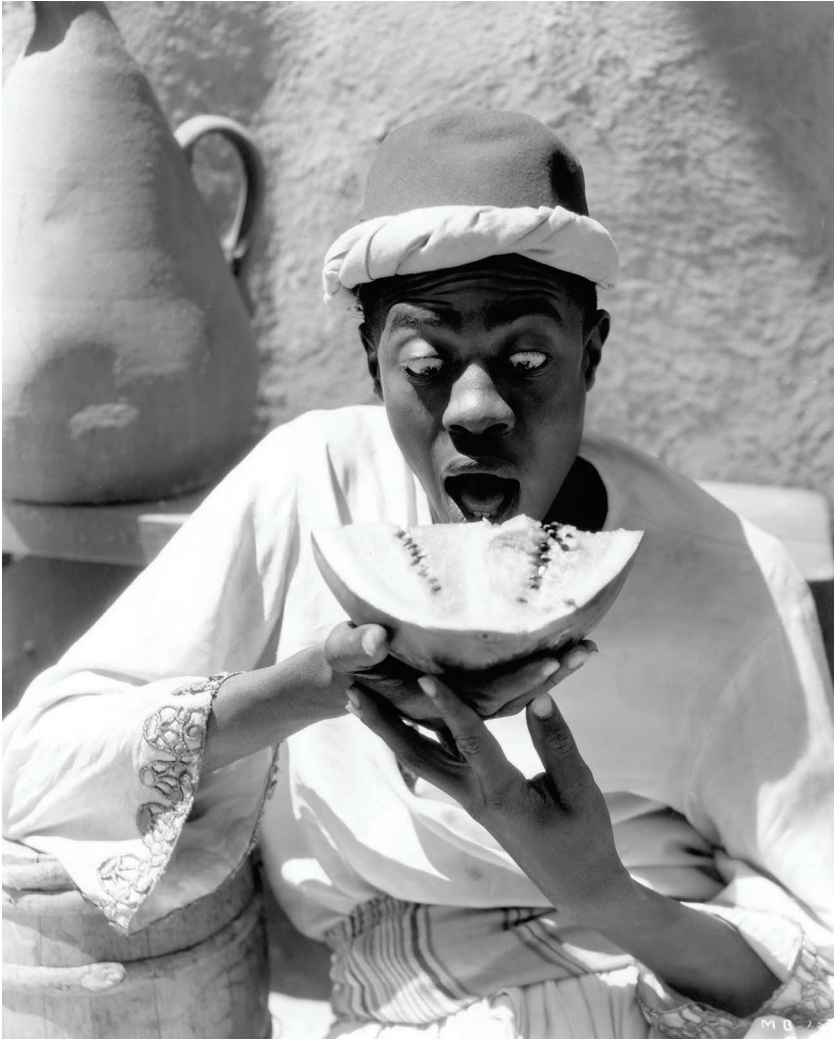


FIGURE 3.5 Willie Best

RKO Radio Pictures/Photofest

other comedy-horror films such as *The Body Disappears* (1941), *Whispering Ghosts* (1942), and *The Face of Marble* (1946).

Scared-Negro . . . Puppets?!

If I'm yella' you's colorblind.

—Scruno, *Spooks Run Wild* (1941)

Even *The East Side Kids* film series (1940–1944) with the young Scruno (Ernest “Sunshine Sammy” Morrison) got in on the scared-Negro act. In *Spooks Run Wild* (1941) as Scruno trips through a dark, haunted mansion, he is scolded by his pals, “The next time you come out of the dark, put a coat of whitewash on, will ya?,” to which Scruno replies, “I’m so scared I’m turnin’ white now.” In *Ghosts on the Loose* (1943), another William Beaudine quickie, Scruno, quaked and sputtered, “Who dat say who dat when I say who dat,” as Emil (Bela Lugosi) a Nazi spy stalked him.⁷² It comes as no surprise that Hollywood would move from infantilizing men to implicating children—real and cartoon alike—in the scared-Negro act.

George Pal created stop-motion films featuring wooden puppets or “puppetoons.” Pal’s most infamous films are his series of Jasper short films (1942–1947) starring the puppet Jasper as a “little pickaninny” (as Jasper was called in promotions) drawn like a blackface caricature—bug eyes, wide, bright smiling lips highlighted against coal-black skin—who lives with his “Mammy” in a decrepit shack. Jasper and those around him speak in a black voice. Across the series, Jasper’s love for watermelon is a constant, and the source of many of his troubles, sending him into horror film territory, with Jasper experiencing “frightening violence” highlighted by gloomy scenes, darkly lit, that mark the mood as ominous and foreboding.⁷³ In *Jasper and the Watermelons* (1942), Jasper steals watermelons out of a forbidden watermelon patch. The film then turns to a “haunting sequence with [the] frightened child chased by threatening figures.”⁷⁴ As the film changes from day to night, enormous watermelons appear singing, “Gonna be trouble in Watermelon land tonight,” as the melons turn into snarling monsters in pursuit of Jasper. The monster melons turn cannibalistic as they do their best to consume Jasper, all the while Jasper narrowly escapes each one, running and leaping and fighting his way out of their mouths. A swirling watermelon juice waterfall finally gives Jasper the edge he needs, as the rapids carry him back home to Mammy who offers him a slice of watermelon. In *Jasper and the Haunted House* (1942), it is not watermelon that gets Jasper in trouble but gooseberry pie. On Mammy’s order, Jasper is to carry the pie to Deacon Jones but ends up in a haunted house. Jasper’s shadow turns and runs, leaving Jasper behind. Here, in special effects, Jasper’s eyes are made to bug and flutter from fright at the speed of sound. There is a musical interlude in which a ghost plays a little jazz piano and haints dance around.⁷⁵ Eventually, Jasper escapes the home, and while running away gets stuck in a billboard that reads, “Next time try Spooks gooseberry pie.”

Jasper came out of the imagination of Pal, who was born in 1908 in Hungary and died in 1980 in the U.S. During his career, his animation work earned him an Oscar, as well as six other nominations. Pal claimed to have no racial animus in mind when he created Jasper and that he was “simply bringing to life a truly American Black folk character, and harbored no racial prejudices himself.”⁷⁶ Never mind that the series’ foundation was a soup of Black stereotypes with poverty, a single-parent/absent father home, Mammy, and an “idle, trouble-making”

Black male, who steals watermelons no less, at its center.⁷⁷ It mattered little what the maker's intent was, as Black audiences rejected and protested the series with *Ebony* magazine reporting on the repudiation in an article, "Little Jasper Series Draws Protest from Negro Groups."⁷⁸

Richard Neuert draws parallels between the Jasper films and, interestingly, those of Spencer Williams, writing:

[H]owever, it is worth noting as well that some of Pal's Jasper themes, such as urging rural folks to stay put, respect the old traditions, and avoid stealing, also turned up in 1940s live-action race movies like Spencer Williams' famous *The Blood of Jesus*, made by and for African Americans.⁷⁹

However, Williams' religious/horror-themed films were unmatched, becoming a sort of genre unto themselves, "pristinely Black in [their] advocacy, locale, point of view, social ethic, and . . . resolutely non-Hollywood folk technique."⁸⁰ There was nothing about Jasper that reflected on any semblance of Blackness, and it certainly did not take up the additional aims of advocacy or of privileging Black bourgeois values. Williams presented value systems, class positionings, rituals and behaviors, love relationships, and ideologies of uplift that had not been seen during this cycle of horror films. Pal's films failed to reflect on any of these values, opting instead to be symbolically devastating. In fact, nearly two decades after Pal introduced Jasper, Black protest groups were left wondering why such images were persistently being resurrected without trying to quash them. A Portland, Oregon, television station had to be cajoled by the Urban League in 1959 to cancel the series due to its obvious racist tropes. The Black press—the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Afro-American* (Baltimore), among others—reported that the Urban League wrote to Portland station KOIN about the portrayal of Jasper, which "serve[s] to perpetuate false notions about the peculiarities of Negroes as a race." The appeal to KOIN went on to say: "it is tragic that Jasper and his associates are continually presented in ways which solidify false notions and cater to an assumption of racial superiority on the part of white viewers."⁸¹

Conclusion

Spencer Williams' films were not wholly technically complex; after all, one film (*The Blood of Jesus*) did present the Devil as a man in a Halloween-type cape and horns costume. Some critics might even say that his oversimplified lessons in piety did not correspond with the deadly times within which they were delivered. Still, Williams literally stepped out on faith to create stylish, popular "Black horror" films steeped in (Southern) Black culture for Black audiences. His films proved that there are interesting Black stories to be told without falling back on racist clichés. Unfortunately, Hollywood turned a blind eye to such evidence as it continued to mine for formulaic, stereotypical narratives.

Still, a host of right-minded individuals and organizations would continue to appeal to Hollywood, asking it to be progressive in revolutionizing its storytelling and treatment of Black actors. Joel Fluellen (*White Pongo* [1945]) and Betsy Blair (actress and wife of Gene Kelly), in 1946, appeared before the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and proposed that the Guild advocate for its Black membership: “NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Screen Actors Guild use all of its power to oppose discrimination against Negroes in the motion picture.”⁸² In 1947, Boris Karloff (*The Mummy* [1932]), as a member of SAG’s anti-discrimination committee, noted the challenges SAG faced and the incremental change the organization was pursuing:

And if we insist that producers write roles for Negroes according to certain patterns, they may well leave out Negro roles altogether. However, what we plan to do is fight for the inclusion of Negroes in all crowd scenes. We plan to insist that in all scenes at least ten per cent of the characters be Negroes moving about ordinary business the same as other people.⁸³

In horror, the question became whether Black actors would ever get to play a monster without indicting the entire race as monstrous, or perhaps a brave savior character. The Gists and Williams began to answer these questions in the affirmative. While imaging Blacks’ whole and full participation in the horror genre was proven easy, the film industry continued to fail to act over the coming years for a number of social (and some financial) reasons.

Horror film exited the 1940s just as it had entered, under threat. Calling some of the films produced in the coming decade “B-movies” was terribly generous as horror filmmakers of the 1950s were lucky if they could hire actual humans to slip into rubber suits to play their monsters. Increasingly, horror sank into laughability as monsters became inflatable brains (e.g., *The Brain from Planet Arous* [1957]), rubber and papier mâché tree stumps (e.g., *From Hell It Came* [1957]), or mangy puppets on a string (e.g., *The Giant Claw* [1957]). This made it even easier for television, which began broadcasting nationally in 1948, to become a formidable competitor to film. Though television was much more strictly regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), if a viewer wanted to see the frightening fare, television had it, by either airing horror films or creating thriller programming such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–1965). If the comic-Negro was desired, television had that covered as well, with Black “TV minstrels”⁸⁴ appearing in programs such as *Beulah* (1950–1953) and *Amos’n’ Andy* (1951–1953).

As for horror films, invisibility and ridicule are the best terms to describe what lay ahead for Black actors over the next *two* decades (1950s–1960s). In the 1950s, science fiction and horror would wed to create monsters malformed by atomic energy bombs. Unlike Spencer Williams, who imagined a Black woman scientist, Hollywood could not do the same. Since Hollywood could not imagine Black

scientists in laboratories where bombs were created and chemical experimentation went awry, there could be no Black people; that is, unless some scientists needed to take an African safari. Otherwise, Black characters would pop up again for a bit of that hybrid minstrelsy in the 1960s (e.g., *The Horror of Party Beach* [1964]). It would not be until 1968, nearly 25 years after Williams' films, with *Night of the Living Dead's* Black lead character Ben, that the genre would finally catch up with Williams' vision.

Notes

- 1 Jones, Alan. *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies*. New York: Rough Guides/Penguin, 2005.24. Print.
- 2 According to Jones (24), the horror film took a particularly devastating hit in Britain, with only four films making it to the screen between 1940 and 1945.
- 3 Abbott and Costello would go on to "meet" *the Killer, Boris Karloff* (1949), *the Invisible Man* (1951), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1953), and *the Mummy* (1955).
- 4 Thompson, James G. Letter to the editor: "Should I Sacrifice To Live 'Half-American?'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31, 1942. www.newspapers.com/clip/33240765/james-g-thompsons-letter-to-the/.
- 5 Cripps, Thomas. "Film." In *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, edited by Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990.154. Print.
- 6 Cripps (Split Image 154).
- 7 Cripps, Thomas R. "The Death of Rastus: Negroes in American Films since 1945." *Phylon* 28.3 (1967): 267–75. www.jstor.org/stable/273665.
- 8 The film is loosely based on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and as a horror film with a non-horror literary heritage (i.e., compared to Shelley's *Frankenstein*), it has attracted its fair share of critical attention.
- 9 Humphries, Reynold. *The American Horror Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.48–49. Print. Later, in 2009, Humphries would hail *I Walked With a Zombie* as one of the most significant contributions to the horror genre. *Zombie* is credited for being "dense, complex, and multilayered" thanks to a "brilliant script" which also offers an "exceptionally subtle analysis of repression in every sense." See: Humphries, Reynold. "I Walked With a Zombie." *101 Horror Movies You Must See Before You Die*. Ed. Steven Jay Schneider. London; Quintessence, 2009.85–86. Print.
- 10 Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. Harlow, England: Pearson, 2004.111. Print.
- 11 In Vodou, the spirit Carrefour controls the "crossroads," or path to death.
- 12 Often, there was little exploration into Blacks' stories. They are simply natives or servants and are often not given names in films, or, worse, the actors who portray them receive no credit. As late as 1968, with *Night of the Living Dead's* Ben, little is known about the lives of horror films' Black stars. That would change with *Blacula* (1972), in which the Black character Mamuwalde's life history is carefully laid out. Later, over the course of two films, *Candyman* (1992) and *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995), the Candyman/Daniel Robitaille story emerges.
- 13 Hutchings (111).
- 14 Crowther, Bosley. "Old Black Magic." *New York Times*, June 13, 1943: sec. X3. Print.
- 15 In the last few minutes of the film, when Mumbo Jumbo has to explain to the White men that he saw the pongo carry off a white woman, his character is suddenly fluent in English and without an accent (no "me boy, you Bwana" type talk). In reference to the ape, Mumbo Jumbo seriously observes, "I certainly hope his disposition improves." It is a nice peek into what Fluellen could have brought to such a character. However, in

- this extremely low-budget film, Mumbo Jumbo's sudden, inexplicable fluency comes across as if the film's director, Sam Newfield, simply forgot that Mumbo Jumbo started the film speaking in very limited, broken English.
- 16 The film featured the famed man-in-an-ape-suit actor Ray Corrigan from the horror films *White Pongo* and *Nabonga* as the white gorilla.
 - 17 "A Battle for Jungle Supremacy" was a tagline in the film's trailer. See: "The White Gorilla." *YouTube*. YouTube, LLC. 2010. Web. July 26, 2010. www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_c47ZGZ5I8.
 - 18 Cripps, Thomas. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993.374. Print.
 - 19 Cripps (*Slow Fade* 374).
 - 20 Bogle, Donald. *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dream: The Story of Black Hollywood*. New York, NY: Ballantine One World, 2005.126. Print.
 - 21 Muse, Clarence. "What's Going on in Hollywood." *Chicago Defender*, December 28, 1940: 21. Print.
 - 22 Cripps (*Slow Fade* 376–378).
 - 23 Leab, Daniel J. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973.130. Print.
 - 24 Cripps (*Slow Fade* 376).
 - 25 On the point of treatment, Reddick identified 19 stereotypes he wanted buried: the savage African, the happy slave, the devoted servant, the corrupt politician, the petty thief, the social delinquent, the vicious criminal, the sexual superman, the superior athlete, the unhappy non-White, the natural-born cook, the natural-born musician, the perfect entertainer, the superstitious church-goer, the chicken and watermelon eater, the razor and knife "toter," the uninhibited expressionist, and the mental inferior.
 - 26 Reddick, Lawrence D. "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, the Press, and Libraries." *Journal of Negro Education* 13.3 (1944): 369, 382. Print.
 - 27 Fifty years after *Son of Ingagi*, films focusing on the Black wedding remain novel and are often hailed as positive, such as the romantic-comedies *The Wood* (1999) and *The Best Man* (1999).
 - 28 Hooks, Bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.167. Print.
 - 29 Cripps, Thomas. *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993.133. Print.
 - 30 Sobchack, Vivian. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.30. Print.
 - 31 Cripps, Thomas. *Black Film as Genre*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978.90. Print.
 - 32 Cripps (*Genre* 90).
 - 33 Manatu, Norma. *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003.53. Print.
 - 34 Cripps, Thomas. "The Films of Spencer Williams." *Black American Literature Forum* 12 (1978): 131. Print.
 - 35 Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.37. Print.
 - 36 See: Gibson, Gloria J. "Cinematic Foremothers: Zora Neale Hurston and Eloyce King Patrick Gist." *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*. Eds. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.195–209. Print. See also: Gibson-Hudson, Gloria. "Recall and Recollect: Excavating the Life History of Eloyce King Patrick Gist." *Black Film Review* 8 (1994): 20–21. Print.
 - 37 Gibson-Hudson (20–21).

- 38 Gibson (200).
- 39 Gibson-Hudson (20–21).
- 40 Gibson (203).
- 41 Gibson (203).
- 42 Gibson (203–204).
- 43 Gibson-Hudson (20–21).
- 44 The Library of Congress: American Memory, Library of Congress. 2010. Web. July 26, 2010. Out of sequence fragments for *Hellbound Train* are held by the Library of Congress; a fire destroyed the remaining associated materials/documents related to the Gists' lives and careers. Gloria J. Gibson (Hudson) made an effort to decipher the order of the fragments, as she discusses in detail; see: Gibson (195–209).
- 45 The summary of this film comes in great part from: Senn, Bryan. *Golden Horrors: An Illustrated Critical Filmography 1931–1939*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1996. Print.
- 46 Cripps (Films of Spencer Williams 132).
- 47 The Black filmmaker Charles Burnett would build an entire movie around modern rituals of watching over the dying, at their home bedside, in his haunting film of good and evil *To Sleep With Anger* (1990). In *Anger*, the almost dead Gideon (Paul Butler) struggles to return to the living, while an evil thrives, distracting and wreaking havoc among those who should be gathered at his bedside in prayer.
- 48 Clover, Carol. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.78. Print.
- 49 Cripps (*Making* 141).
- 50 Cripps (*Making* 134, 330).
- 51 Razaf, Andy. "A Colored Movie Fan." *New York Amsterdam News*, January 6, 1940: 16. Print.
- 52 Coleman, Robin Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. New York, NY: Garland, 2000.35. Print.
- 53 Coleman (45).
- 54 McCaffrey, Donald W. "The Golden Age of Sound Comedy." *Screen* 11 (1970): 27–40.33. Print.
- 55 Reid, Mark A. *Redefining Black Film*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.23, 25. Print.
- 56 Denzin, Norman K. *Reading Race*. London: Sage, 2002.18. Print.
- 57 Koppes, Clayton R. and Gregory D. Blacks. "What to Show the World: The Office of War Information and Hollywood, 1942–1945." *Journal of American History* (1977): 87–105. Print.
- 58 Cripps, Thomas R. "The Death of Rastus: Negroes in American Films since 1945." *Phylon* 28 (1967): 269. Print.
- 59 Nestebly, James R. *Black Images in American Films, 1896–1954: The Interplay Between Civil Rights and Film Culture*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982.222. Print.
- 60 Noble, Peter. *The Negro in Film*. New York, NY: Arno Press & the New York Times, 1970.181–182. Print.
- 61 Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coon, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York, NY: Continuum, 1993.74. Print.
- 62 Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Temple Press, 1993.123. Print.
- 63 *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), for example, recast the zombie mythology away from Black Voodoo to the purview of a fanatical "Oriental" priest from Angkor Wat, Cambodia, whose power could be used to raise a zombie army, tipping the scales of military power, and thereby bringing "the destruction of the White race."

110 Horrifying Goons and Minstrel Coons

- 64 Leab, Daniel J. "The Gamut from A to B: The Image of the Black in Pre-1915 Movies." *Political Science Quarterly* 88 (1973): 63. Print.
- 65 Nesteby (222).
- 66 *The Scarlet Clue* (1945).
- 67 Robinson, Cedric J. *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks & the Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film before World War II*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.376–378. Print.
- 68 Robinson (376–378).
- 69 Kliman, Bernice W. "The Biscuit Eater: Racial Stereotypes: 1939–1972." *Phylon* 39 (1978): 92. Print.
- 70 Noble (181).
- 71 Bogle (*Toms, Coons* 72); Bogle (*Bright* 118).
- 72 *Ghosts on the Loose* presents one of the oddest endings to a film. The character Glimpy (Huntz Hall), after fighting with the Nazis, comes down with the German measles, which are represented, seemingly comically, as dozens of tiny Swastikas all over his face.
- 73 Neuert, Richard. "Trouble in Watermelon Land: George Pal and the Little Jasper Cartoons." *Film Quarterly* 55 (2001): 18. Print.
- 74 Neuert (18).
- 75 The scene bears strong resemblance to the 1929 Mickey Mouse short *Haunted House*, in which Mickey calls for his mammy, in blackface, in tribute to Al Jolson's 1927 performance in *The Jazz Singer*. Mickey is then forced by a ghost to play piano while skeletons dance.
- 76 Neuert (16, 21).
- 77 Neuert (16, 21).
- 78 "Little Jasper Series Draws Protest from Negro Groups." *Ebony*, January 1947: 27. Print.
- 79 Neuert (23).
- 80 Cripps (Films of Spencer Williams 133).
- 81 "Oregon Station Drops 'Little Jasper' Series." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 4, 1959: C1. Print.
- 82 Bogle (*Bright* 278).
- 83 "Boris Karloff Joins Fight For Race Equality." *Atlanta Daily World*, September 30, 1947: 1. Print.
- 84 Coleman (81).

4

BLACK INVISIBILITY, WHITE SCIENCE

1950s

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

—Ellison, 1952¹

It looked like something from outerspace, and it seemed like a weird nightmare, not part of me.

—Mamie Till Bradley, mother of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was murdered by white racists²

Something was wrong. In the sleepy, affable small town of Santa Mira, the idyllic 1950s peace was being disturbed by a dangerous “them” which worked to intrude upon the community’s “us.” The town began reacting swiftly, albeit controversially, to the threat. When interstate buses delivered outsiders to Santa Mira, the interlopers found themselves ominously met by the town’s sheriff, immediately placed into the back of his patrol car, and taken away, never to be seen again. Control and conformity were Santa Mira’s new preoccupation; hence, its inhabitants would no longer tolerate visitors (outside agitators) who possessed the potential to ask questions and to influence others with their differing agendas. With each passing day, its citizenry tightened the reins, eliminating all manner of variance. A swing/jazz band who had arrived just months earlier to play in one of the town’s popular restaurants, thereby marking Santa Mira’s flirtation with progress—“We’re on the way up”—was, in this new climate, discharged. The

band was replaced by a narrowly pre-programmed jukebox. On the whole, this was a lamentable America, one that was repressing its citizens' humanity: to be "mechanical" in this way was to be "a walking zombie!"³

The horror/sci-fi film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*' (1956) fictional town of Santa Mira served as a metaphor for the many threats that 1950s America struggled with—change, (atomic/cold) war, foreign invasion, communism, and racial integration. It evidenced, as did many films of the 1950s and 1960s, a "strong resonance between the elements in the film and various anxieties existing in the broader culture."⁴ In the film, that the notion of equilibrium through homogeneity happened to be delivered by otherworldly (illegal) aliens did not obscure the fact that Americans were happy to secure insularity and stability by any means necessary. *Invasion*, a horror film without any focal Black characters, evidenced how some Americans came to believe that while the road to cultural fascism could be unpleasant—a sort of standing in front of the schoolhouse door to ward off individualism—the end was certainly justifiable.

Invasion stands today as not only a fan cult classic but also one of America's most celebrated, socio-politically savvy (scary) films.⁵ The film is a tale about how extra-terrestrial seedpods land on Earth, bringing with them the ability to fully duplicate humans, then kill them, to produce soulless, emotionally neutered clones, or "pod people."⁶ Perhaps unintentionally, *Invasion* can also be regarded as the bellwether for the treatment of anything deemed as a threat to white conformity in horror films of the 1950s and 1960s. Pointedly, there was little representational variation in the horror genre over the two decades as Black characters were often rendered as invisible as Santa Mira's outsiders.

The Invisibles

As the 1950s emerged, Black characters were a very scarce commodity in horror. What had in the past constituted "Black" labor, such as African natives toting safari equipment, domestic help, or plantation workers, became less necessary in an era of film preoccupied with more technological, scientific, and extra-terrestrial threats and less with domesticity. Coming out of the real-world horrors of World War II, the potency of science to both create and destroy rendered the Gothic period movie monsters of the 1930s and 1940s frightless and fanciful. In the 1950s, horror skewed toward science fiction to generate scares for the Atomic Age. Within the scientific realm, notably, white female characters (not Black African natives) would assume the role of aides. For example, in the 1957 film *The Giant Claw*, a (laughable) gargantuan monster bird with an anti-matter energy screen is menacing Earth (the U.S. in particular). Though science's most deadly invention, the atom bomb, cannot exterminate this alien, scientists remain undaunted, working to theorize a solution. In this film, there is little need for Black attendants toting luggage or dishing up food. The bird presents a dilemma for the learned and the spaces that such people work in are aseptic high-tech

laboratories or research centers. In this work context, the Black African unskilled (and in the case of natives, the unwashed), presumably, serve no purpose.

In the film, “Miss Caldwell” (Mara Corday), a white female mathematician and systems analyst, takes on the duties of a hostess. In spite of her credentials, she is unable to map the basic flight pattern of the bird. Instead, Caldwell becomes one who takes orders and affably tolerates sexual harassment—she is referred to as “mother, dear mother” and ordered by a workmate to “kiss me and be quiet,” which she happily does. This kind of notably “severe repression of female sexuality/creativity,” writes Wood, not only attributes passivity, subordination, and dependence to the woman, but “in a male-dominated culture . . . woman as the Other assumes particular significance.”⁷ Though her principal role in the film is to look beautiful and to serve as a sort of housemaid, bringing the studious men refreshments, Caldwell is also able to compile technical notes and to monitor instrument panels—tasks presumably well beyond the reach of a Black staffer.

The distance between white and Black labor was perhaps best illustrated in the horror film *The Alligator People* (1959). Set in “primitive, savage” Louisiana, in a plantation home that even a “conjure woman knows is evil,” the film tells the story of a white scientist whose medical experiments turn humans into alligators, and who is now working to reverse the effects with radioactivity. This film includes appearances by two Black characters, Toby the butler (Vince Townsend Jr.) and Lou Ann the maid (Ruby Goodwin). The odd experiments are conducted in a laboratory, which is a separate structure from the plantation house. Toby and Lou Ann’s purview is the home where they clean, cook, and tend to other domestic affairs; only whites—human or human—alligator hybrids—are permitted to enter both the house and the lab. In their brief appearances, Toby and Lou Ann do engage a white hired hand, working to control an uneducated laborer, Mannon (Lon Chaney Jr.), a violent, dirty, drunkard whose erratic behavior (e.g., attempted rape) threatens the research. However, their encounters are limited to when Mannon comes to the house or its front yard, as that is the confined purview of the pair. Mannon, by contrast, moves about at will, including entrance to the lab, a place that is out of bounds for the two Black domestics.

The Killer Shrews (1959) similarly revolves around scientists, opening with a white charter boat captain, Thorne Sherman (James Best), and his Black first mate, Rook Griswold (“Judge” Henry Dupree), delivering supplies to a research facility on a small island. Upon landing, the pair is greeted by a team of white scientists who have accidentally unleashed a pack of large, mutant shrews (infamously, dogs in masks and fur coats). They invite the newcomers to the facility, but Rook, instinctively knowing his place, declines and heads back to the boat, unaware of the danger that awaits. The white scientists are not concerned enough with Rook’s well-being to warn him and instead enjoy a smoke and a drink in the safety of their lab while Rook is torn to shreds. As a Black character, he does not belong in the scientific arena and is relegated to the cinematic “kids’ table” while the adults converse among themselves. Only when Thorne decides to return to

the boat does the lead scientist's daughter, Ann (Ingrid Goude)—a zoologist who, adhering to her prescribed female role, vows to abandon the field and “live normally, like normal women do” if she makes it out of the ordeal alive—reveal that the island is crawling with man-eating creatures. By this time, of course, Rook is already dead, but not even Thorne seems to care.

Even in the general absence of racial diversity, the use of racial symbolism was rife throughout the decade of the 1950s. The film *Bride of the Gorilla* (1951) similarly links difference to aberration. Here, the character Barney (Raymond Burr) is a rubber plantation foreman overseeing the management of a residence built deep in the Amazon jungle. Barney is a cruel manager, who reminisces fondly, “Oh, when they had slaves!” Filmmakers knew such jungle films had racial implications, and this one was no exception, with lines such as: “White people shouldn't live too long in the jungle.” According to Thomas Cripps in *Making Movies Black*, a writer for the Maryland newspaper the *Afro-American*, Carl Murphy, “was called in to advise on . . . *Bride of the Gorilla* [thereby] establishing a Black stake in issues other than the use of ‘nigger’ in the dialogue.”⁸ Indeed, slurs are absent from the film, but so too are substantive appearances by Blacks. This would become a recurring theme in horror during the decade, an unintended consequence of pressure from the NAACP and other Black activist groups to curtail negative media portrayals of Blacks. While those demeaning roles died down, little arose to take their place.

In *Bride of the Gorilla*, Barney becomes covetous of his boss' wife Dina (Barbara Payton) and kills his boss to have her. The murder is witnessed by Al-Long (Gisela Werbisek), a witch, who curses Barney. Barney is plagued by hallucinations in which he believes he is transforming into a gorilla. The film features a short cameo appearance by the famed Black actor Woody Strode in the role of Nedo, a local policeman. Here, in his very brief appearance, Strode plays it straight. He is stoic and professional. His actions are largely centered on quickly searching Al-Long's room to see if she has hidden magical evidence related to the boss' murder, thereby lending credence to the frightening power of Voodoo. Alarmed by the witch's powers, Nedo firmly scolds her: “I don't believe in Black magic . . . But you keep away from my house. I don't want witches near my children.” He then swiftly exits the scene (and the movie). The brevity of Strode's appearance is unfortunate, as it evidenced Black performative potential—appropriate fearfulness without playing bug-eyed spooked. Still, halfway into the twentieth century, Black inclusion was still a remarkable rarity.

Another film during this cycle, *The Bride and the Beast* (1958), has apes and Black primitivism as its themes. However, (perhaps thankfully) Black characters are absent. *The Bride and the Beast* stars no Black actors but still successfully manages to cast the “dark continent” and that which comes out of it as creepily grotesque. In the film, Dan (Lance Fuller), a big game hunter, marries Laura (Charlotte Austin). Their marriage license cost \$6.00, which prompts Dan to inexplicably enthuse, “I could buy six wives for that in the middle of Africa!” Dan

introduces Laura to Spanky, an African gorilla that Dan has captured and keeps in the basement of his mountaintop home in the U.S. In making Spanky's acquaintance, Laura inexplicably exhibits an odd sexual attraction to the beast, gazing lustily upon the gorilla and, later, dreaming about the animal. In one shocking scene, Spanky visits Laura in her bedroom, where beast and beauty embrace, followed by the animal stripping Laura of her clothes. It should come as no surprise that Dan kills Spanky on the spot. As we know, the "Black" species, man, ape, or zombie, or monster, must not look, touch, or enter a white woman's bedroom. Under hypnosis, Laura's strange animal attraction is explained: In a previous life, Laura was herself a gorilla, the queen of the gorillas to be exact. Laura and Dan, joined by their "houseboy" Taro⁹ (played by the white actor Johnny Roth performing in brown face), whose vocabulary is limited to addressing Dan as "Bwana," make their way to Africa for Dan to resume his hunting. Here, monster (black gorillas) and place (Africa) are overtly racialized. While in Africa, Laura's attraction to all things African—a sort of jungle fever—deepens, and Dan tries to cure her of her obsession. For the (white) audience, the horror of the movie arises from the freak show spectacle of perversion that, when tied to a white woman, is outrageous and revolting. Conversely, when the same involves Black women (as in the pseudo-documentary *Ingagi*), the result is plausibility and fascination. The film ends with an ebullient Laura being carried away, into the depths of the jungle, in the arms of a black gorilla. However, the scene provokes unease, showing Dan as the real victim, losing his love to a form of grotesque miscegenation in which black animals and Black people are all the same.

Black Is, Black Ain't

The 1957 "Blacks in horror" film *Monster from Green Hell* evidenced how Black actors could be effectively employed in the horror genre. The film is a standard horror/ sci-fi B-movie—low budget, with comical special effects. The film opens by asking the question, what happens to life in the "airless void above the Earth's atmosphere" in a "flock of cosmic radiation?" To find out, the U.S. space program sends a monkey, wasps, a crab, spiders, and a guinea pig into space via two unmanned rockets. Disaster strikes when a rocket, and its cargo, is lost "just off the coast of Africa." Dan (Robert Griffin) and Quent (Jim Davis), two white American scientists working on the space project, soon get reports of mysterious wasp monsters wreaking havoc on central Africa. The brave duo set off to do something about the animal terror. In Africa, the men meet up with a white doctor, Dr. Lorentz (Vladimir Sokoloff), and his daughter Lorna (Barbara Turner), who treat the Black African natives with "real" medicine and whose additional mission is to disabuse Africans of their superstitious ways, which include traditional medicine and prayers to non-Judeo-Christian gods. "From this perspective it can be argued," writes Gregersdotter et al. in their study of animal horror, "that Western epistemologies of empire have imagined the animal and the colonised

to inhabit the same subordinate position.”¹⁰ The film takes a predictable turn, complete with the launching of a safari through the jungle staffed by shirtless, loin-clothed, silent natives walking in single file carrying baggage on their heads.

However, among the natives is a man named Arobi. Arobi is played by Joel Fluellen, a Black actor who, like actor Clarence Muse and scholar Lawrence Reddick, was a vocal advocate for complex, respectable roles for Blacks in Hollywood. Fluellen’s influence is clear, with his character Arobi nearly stealing the movie (assuming one is paying attention to such a character). Arobi is an upright and articulate character who is a far cry from an earlier horror turn by Fluellen as “Mumbo Jumbo,” a bowing, mush-mouthed servant in the “Blacks in horror” film *White Pongo* (1945). Arobi is always impeccably dressed in Western safari clothes—starched khaki shorts, a safari hard hat, a pressed shirt, knee socks, a utility belt with ammo, and a rifle. Though Arobi is often instructed by the scientists to work or “do,” his capabilities lean toward a trained technician and tactician—his is the important job of rigging and strategically placing explosives. He is also often consulted regarding the plan that they are pursuing. While the native guides are subservient to the white scientists, Arobi is an essential member of their team, earning everyone’s regard as he contributes advice in professorial tones. Establishing a hierarchy, Arobi does not sleep in the thicket or outer perimeter with the Black African natives. Instead, he is camp-side, though does not rest fully adjacent to the white scientists—there is, after all, a white woman on the team.

The movie concludes with the group watching the demise of the monsters and a coda dialogue. It is Arobi who delivers the moving, closing opus: “The death of the creatures will bring about the deliverance of my people. The Gods have been kind. They’ve taught us, as Dr. Lorentz taught us, to have faith.” His speech evidences a continued reliance on white wisdom. However, it also functions to restore some cultural value to Africa and Blackness. Arobi shirks monotheism to thank the “Gods” (plural). Because, indeed, it is not (white) science that succeeds in killing the mutants and saving the continent. Rather, it is Africa itself, in the form of one of its volcanoes, which destroys them, thereby restoring nature’s balance.

To be sure, *Monster from Green Hell* is not without its problems, and the problems are significant. Arobi aside, it is still a movie that embraces Black imagistic annihilation. For example, one of the swiftest, most uneventful deaths comes a mere 171 seconds into the film. A Black man named Makonga (uncredited), from one of the African villages, is found dead. His demise is unseen, and it is simply stated that the man met his fate at the hands of a monster in the jungle—“green hell”—who injected him with a massive amount of venom. The scene functions to set up what is lacking in Blackness and what is superior in whiteness. Makonga’s body is brought to Dr. Lorentz, whose role is to bring Africa into scientific and religious enlightenment. Makonga is autopsied in the shadow of a large cross hanging over his body in the doctor’s makeshift hospital. Six months after his death, the monsters have multiplied and are rampaging, but there is no sign of

any form of African government, military, medical centers, industry, or modern cities—there is only the jungle and, as the film describes it, Africa’s “turmoil.” In a microcosm of the colonialism that gutted many African nations and left them dependent on their colonial masters even after independence, it is the Americans, whose experiments exposed the continent to danger in the first place, who fly in (literally, in the film they offer a plug to TWA airlines) to act as a savior. Dan and Quent enter Africa, in a manner that Sontag would call “strongly moralistic,” knowing what is best for the continent.¹¹ As for the Black characters, apart from Arobi, there are only male Black African natives serving as pack animals and as the hapless victims of the monsters. These roles—load-bearers and victims—are often not mutually exclusive.

“I Do Love De White Women”¹²

Filmmakers continued to press a trend in offering up what Gonder calls “racially coded uncouth monsters,” with some adding both overt (*The Bride and the Beast*) and covert (*The Killer Shrews*) anti-miscegenation messages for good measure.¹³ *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) is to the 1950s what *King Kong* was to the 1930s, an obviously metaphorically raced, anti-miscegenation film. The film presents a team of white scientists/archeologists traveling through the Amazon in search of a primordial, black sea-land creature—the Gill Man (Ricou Browning/Ben Chapman). As in *The Giant Claw*, the team includes a white female researcher whose main purpose is to act as eye candy and to shriek with fright when the Gill Man is spotted. Of course, she becomes the obsessive object of desire for the monster, who repeatedly attacks the team in an attempt to get at her. The researchers are led on their expedition by a crew of Brazilian men who, like the Africans in *Monster from Green Hell*, meet their desultory, gruesome demises quite early on in the film. The deaths of these men—the Black African natives—are immaterial as only the loss of a scientist would be “a useless waste of experience and ability.”¹⁴ However, it is the monster itself that evokes a most troubling racialization.

In this film, the creature is violent and single-minded in its desire for the white woman. The Gill Man is King Kong, Gus from *The Birth of a Nation*, and Sleep ‘n’ Eat’s characterizations rolled into one impossible body. Bodily, the monster resembles a racist caricature—its lips are exaggerated, with the lower lip hanging low, and its skin is dark. It is seemingly feeble-minded. Its movements are shambling except for a swift, adept move it displays when stealing away the white woman. The monster permits a counter-image to white evolution which is pictured as modern, intellectual, and civilized. That is, the film tells us that whites—with men at the top of the hierarchy—have evolved, while all else has remained static and immobile in their progress. Hence, the film also speaks to where (the exotic, dangerous Amazon) and among which populations (the Brown/Black Brazilians) primitivism can be located. When the monster meets its expected

demise at the hands of the white scientific elite, it is understood that such an Other had no place in, and could make no contribution to, the (white) world and that its mere presence, even in its own non-white world, is a nuisance—a continuing white man's burden.

Patrick Gonder, in his essays “Like a Monstrous Jigsaw Puzzle: Genetics and Race in Horror Films of the 1950s” and “Race, Gender, and Terror: The Primitive in 1950s Horror Films,” presents a close and detailed reading of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, arguing that the film's function is not merely to reinforce white superiority and non-white inferiority, or monstrosity. Rather, this is a film that also “taps into racist fears of desegregation”¹⁵ and miscegenation as the black monster, in leaving its proper place in the water and attempting to integrate among those on land, is a Darwinian reminder of why segregation is necessary.¹⁶

Life and art coalesced around the sexual threat to white womanhood. In August 1955, 14-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Till was lynched while vacationing in Mississippi under the false claim that he whistled at a white woman. The brutality of the boy's murder was horrific as he suffered beatings and blunt force trauma, the gouging of his eyes, and a bullet to the brain. His mutilated body was further abused when tied to a 100-pound piece of farming equipment and then sunk in a river. Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, demanded that the world not look away, but to see her son and her grief to evidence the horrors Black citizens were facing in their own country. She opened her son's casket, insisting that the Black press take pictures and print them in their periodicals.

Goldsby (250) wrote about the imagistic impact of Till Bradley's decision:

In a stunning move that recast the scope and direction of the case, she authorized a four-day memorial service open to all, and allowed the Black press to photograph her son's corpse. Images of Till's mutilated body ran in such nationally circulated magazines and newspapers as *Jet*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *Crisis*.¹⁷

The photographs of the heinously abused, bloated body of a child were the ultimate in horror imagery. In rapid succession, there were historic high-profile cases reasserting rights and justice for Blacks. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) and the case of the nine African American students who attended Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas (1957) were direct challenges to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which assured segregation in schools. Even here, the safety of white women was invoked—would young white women be safe from Black men in the integrated classroom? While the murder of Till and the on-screen death of a man in a rubber suit are hardly aligned, as Mamie Till wisely concluded, images can powerfully inform. “White men not only lynched and tortured African American men in real life,” writes Butters, “but they lived out

these fantasies through violent cinematic attacks on Black men,” whether they were real, in fiction, or metaphorical.¹⁸

Here We Go Again: Voodoo and Comic Negroes

Horror films again adopted Africa and the Caribbean as their settings, thereby concealing the brutalities meted out by whites upon Black Americans seeking equality and human rights during the Civil Rights movement. The strategy was a return to the themes seen in horror films of the 1930s. As a result, zombies, Voodoo, and the jungle would get their second wind through films such as *Serpent Island* (1954), *Voodoo Island* (1957), *Voodoo Woman* (1957), and *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957). But there would be few or no Black characters of significance to appear in such films. Rather, for much of the 1950s and well into the 1960s, as evidenced by the film *Voodoo Bloodbath* (1964), “almost all of the horror films with a discernible racial component kept the Black presence contained within narratives featuring exotic island locales, white interlopers, and uninhibited natives (‘savages’) practicing voodoo and experiencing zombification.”¹⁹

For example, the horror film *Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957) had no Black characters, but that fact did not stop it from implicating Africa, a land that “time has forgotten,” in evil Voodoo. In the politically tinged film, which perhaps could be read as a critique of colonialism, it is revealed that in 1894, a crew of Americans sailed to the continent of Africa to loot its diamonds. The sailors succeed in locating the bounty and get it loaded on their ship just as (unseen) Voodoo-practicing Black African natives curse the men, making them zombies and sinking their ship. As zombies, the sailors are now trapped, watching over the diamonds forever. Over the decades, other treasure seekers try to recover the diamonds from their watery grave but are killed by the zombies. Unlike the dominant representations of zombies, these white American zombies have no “master”; that is, these white zombies are not under the control of Africans. Rather, they are fairly autonomous creatures who are merely trapped in their undead bodies. Finally, it is an aged white woman (the wife of the American sea captain who was zombified) who explains that if the diamonds are lost at sea forever, then the zombies can go to their final resting place peacefully, which is exactly what brings this whole affair to a close.

The Disembodied (1957), meanwhile, casts Allison Hayes (later of *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* [1958] fame) as the villainous Tonda, a white American woman whom Black African natives somehow accept as their “Voodoo queen.” The reason for positioning a white woman in this part likely had less to do with avoiding a negative Black stereotype than avoiding having a Black actress in a lead role, especially one who is portrayed as sexually irresistible to both Blacks and whites alike. To avert any semblance of miscegenation, the native whom Tonda passionately kisses in one scene, Suba, is played by a white actor in brownface (Dean Fredericks). Suba’s native wife, Mara, likewise is portrayed by a white woman

(Eugenia Paul), even though Mara and Suba never share a scene together while he is alive; the mere concept of an interracial screen coupling was powerful enough to dictate casting choices.

It is never explained why the Black tribespeople would accept a white woman as their religious leader, much less how she gained enough knowledge to fulfill that role in the first place. By Hollywood logic, the allure of white femininity smoothes over such details. Rather than worrying about particulars, we are to be entranced by Tonda's gyrating ritual dance, her hand grasped around a dead chicken's neck as she's surrounded by her (genuinely) Black subjects, who lend credence to the otherwise ridiculous proceedings. To their credit, the filmmakers at least attempted to provide an air of authenticity by hiring an African drummer named A.E. Ukonu to choreograph the routine, which would later be described as "more of a bump and grind number instead of a voodoo dance."²⁰

When not bumping and grinding, Tonda is a conniving, murderous seductress who uses a combination of feminine wiles and Voodoo mysticism to attain her goal: killing her husband in as convoluted and indirect a manner as possible. Typical of Hollywood horror, Voodoo is portrayed as a force for evil and destruction. The one time when it is used to save someone—when Tonda heals filmmaker Joe (Robert Christopher), critically injured in a lion attack—it's in exchange for someone else's life: native Suba.

The lone Black character of import in the primary cast is Gogi (Paul Thompson), a loyal guide whose purpose is to explain local customs to the white Americans and how virtually everything they encounter can lead to death. As with many Black allies of white interlopers in jungle movies like *Disembodied*, Gogi's loyalty is rewarded with death. After his demise, another Black local, Kabar (Otis Greene), gets to deliver a couple of lines while assisting white hero Tom (Paul Burke), only to suffer the same fate as Gogi for his efforts. The remaining Black cast members are bloodthirsty followers of Tonda who, toeing the line when it comes to cinematic Voodoo, are more than willing to partake in human sacrifice at her behest.

Returning to Africa often meant that horror continued to indict Blackness in rather novel ways. 1953's *Bwana Devil* had the potential to examine the effects of British colonial rule in Kenya and the road to resistance led by Kenya's Kikuyu, a Bantu ethnic group who suffered hunger, due to British food rationing, as well as overwork in deplorable conditions, humiliation, beatings, and executions at the hands of their colonizers. Resistance in the form of a revolt against colonialism culminated with the 1952 Mau Mau movement in which an independent Kenya was sought. Instead, the film cast Kenya as an inherently savage land, even implicating Kenya's wildlife, specifically its lions, in a tale of racist victimization. In the film, Kenyan lions have decided that the British are their preferred snack, a tale that would later be revisited on a grander, still Eurocentric scale in 1996's *The Ghost and the Darkness*, starring Michael Douglas and Val Kilmer. *Darkness* won an Academy Award for sound editing; nonetheless, film critic Roger Ebert

described it as “African adventure that makes the Tarzan movies look subtle and realistic. It lacks even the usual charm of being so bad it’s funny. It’s just bad. Not funny.”²¹

Conclusion

As the 1950s ended, America was in flux. The post-war economic boom, birth of rock ‘n roll, and rise of suburbia masked underlying schisms, deep-seated fears, and rising tumult. The Cuban Revolution established a communist stronghold just 100 miles from U.S. shores; women’s traditional roles were being reconsidered as the FDA was on the cusp of approving the oral contraceptive pill; and the Civil Rights Movement continued to heat up, with desegregation and voting rights battles making their way through the courts while front-line “sit-ins” began to take root across the country. The cinema was also a battleground, where the fate of Blacks was similarly up in the air. There was hope that the civil rights victories of the 1960s would hasten a more equitable share of higher profile, higher quality roles for Black performers, but as the 1950s (and earlier decades) evidenced, expectations of a sudden, wholesale shift toward more representative casting would need to be tempered by the reality that the ingrained American social and racial caste system would not buckle easily to the wishes of those who traditionally have not wielded the power. As such, Black performers in the 1960s would face many of the same obstacles as in the previous decade. As with the struggle for civil rights, there were times when progress would seem like an illusion, but patience would lead to small, incremental, and sometimes seemingly negligible advances that, by the end of the 1960s, would pay off in something revolutionary.

Notes

- 1 *Invisible Man* was published as a whole in 1952, and it has been often reprinted. I cite the March 1995 edition here: Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York, NY: Vintage International, 1995.3. Print.
- 2 Metress, Christopher. *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002.227. Print.
- 3 Ellison, Ralph. 1952. *Invisible Man*. New York, NY: Vintage International, 1995.94. Print.
- 4 Phillips, Kendall R. *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005.7. Print.
- 5 For its cinematic innovation, *Invasion* has been inducted into the United States National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board. Library of Congress. January 25, 2010. Web. June 17, 2010. It took 47th place, out of 100, on the American Film Institute’s (AFI) list of the most-scary films.
- 6 The term pod is used to describe cookie-cutter suburban enclaves inhabited by bored individuals (see: Duany, Andres, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York, NY: North Point Press, 2000. Print).

- 7 Wood, Robin. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." *Movies and Methods: Volume II*. Ed., Bill Nichols. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.195–220, 198–199. Print.
- 8 Cripps, Thomas. *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993.257. Print.
- 9 Roth also portrays the gorillas in the movie. Presumably Taro is another exotic trophy of Dan's.
- 10 Gregersdotter, Katarina, et al. "Introduction." *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. Eds. Gregersdotter, Katarina, et al. London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2015.10. Print.
- 11 Sontag, Susan. "The Imagination of Disaster." *Commentary*, October (1965): 45. Print.
- 12 In the spoof comedy-crime caper film *The Gristle* (2001), the Black male character "Tar" (Michael Dorn) mocks the continued, obsessive concern over threats to white womanhood by Black men by offering this line, in faux-racist blackvoice, to a group of white men.
- 13 Gonder, Patrick. "Like a Monstrous Jigsaw Puzzle: Genetics and Race in Horror Films of the 1950s." *The Velvet Light Trap* 52 (2003): 39. Print.
- 14 Humphries, Reynold. *The American Horror Film: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.63. Print.
- 15 Gonder (Monstrous 39).
- 16 Gonder, Patrick. "Race, Gender and Terror: The Primitive in 1950s Horror Films." *Genders* 40 (2004). Web. June 18, 2010. www.genders.org/.
- 17 Goldsby, Jacqueline. "The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996): 250. Print.
- 18 Butters, Jr., Gerald R. *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002. xvii. Print.
- 19 Schneider, Steven Jay. "Mixed Blood Couples: Monsters and Miscegenation in U.S. Horror Cinema." *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*. Eds. R. Bienstock Anolik and D. L. Howard. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004.78. Print.
- 20 McGee, Mark Thomas and R.J. Robertson. *You Won't Believe Your Eyes! A Front Row Look at the Science Fiction and Horror Films of the 1950s*. Duncan, OK: BearManor Media, 2013.242. E-book.
- 21 Ebert, Roger. *Review: The Ghost and the Darkness*. 1996, October 11. www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-ghost-and-the-darkness-1996 [Accessed March 22, 2022].

5

A NIGHT WITH BEN

1960s

A Ways to Go

When it came to the treatment of Black characters, there was not initially a discernible shift between the horror films of the 1950s and the 1960s. The 1960s opened the same way the previous decade had, with white male scientists looking to intervene in nature's progression and with Black performers continuing to suffer measures of invisibility.

The Horror of Party Beach (1964), a "horror-musical" attempt to exploit the popularity of 1960s beach party movies, is much like *The Alligator People* in its treatment of Black people. Blacks do not figure in the narrative, except for a feisty, doting, not-too-bright servant named Eulabelle (Eulabelle Moore) who is never seen outside of the home of her employer, a doctor/research scientist. When toxic waste monsters begin killing off young white beachcombers, it is Eulabelle who enters the scene to assert no less than three times to the doctor who has been asked to help solve the mystery that there must be some wicked Voodoo magic at work: "It's the Voodoo, that's what it is!" It is not. Still, superstitious Eulabelle functions to implicate Black religion as evil, even going so far as to carry a Voodoo doll around with her to curse the monsters, or, as she puts it, "one of dem zombies." The real culprit is illegally dumped radioactive waste that has reactivated dead bodies trapped in various shipwrecks, thereby bringing them back as a half-human/half-sea monster.

However, Eulabelle's character does take an interesting turn. It is Eulabelle who discovers that common household sodium can do away with the radioactive sea monsters. However, the manner in which Eulabelle discovers the compound reaffirms the fiction that Black people have no place in a laboratory. In the film, with all that is going on, Eulabelle is frightened to be alone in the dark. She dares

to venture down to the doctor's lab, where he is working to create a chemical weapon to kill the monsters. While she is adept at carrying trays, cleaning, and looking after the home upstairs, in the lab, Eulabelle is a clumsy disaster. She breaks beakers and spills chemicals, and then shrieks out an apology. By happenstance, her accident with the chemicals leads to a solution—sodium. However, Eulabelle does not possess the intellectual capacity to say “sodium” (even after hearing it referenced), so she refers to it as the “whatcha call it.” *The Horror of Party Beach* proved troublesome on two fronts. First, as typical, it functioned to reinforce the belief that only whites had the acumen to be in positions outside of laboring service. Second, in 1964, when the Civil Rights and Black Nationalism movements were complementing each other, it seemed regressive to see such a character featured.

The dirt-cheap made-for-TV monster movie *Curse of the Swamp Creature* (1968) likewise hewed close to the traditional racial hierarchy. It was more or less (emphasis on “less”) a remake of 1957's *Voodoo Woman*, with the Texas swamps substituted for the African wilderness. In both films, a mad scientist experiments on Black locals in an effort to create an indestructible monster slave, only to have the Black community rise up against the madman. The similarities between the two movies reveal just how very little progress had been made in Black representation over the decade. The Black characters are alternately victims and intimidating Voodoo practitioners whose numbers threaten to overwhelm the whites and whose Voodoo customs are portrayed as mysterious and dangerous. The swamp-dwelling American Blacks in *Swamp Creature* even communicate with each other through long-distance ritual drumming, as if they were in an African jungle. It should be noted, however, that the Black characters in *Swamp Creature* are presented in a more consistently sympathetic light than in *Voodoo Woman*, which features a malevolent tribal leader who participates in the experiments with the mad scientist by volunteering his own people as guinea pigs. *Swamp Creature* has no such cooperation and even throws in a scene not included in *Voodoo Woman* in which a villainous white man tries (unsuccessfully) to rape a sympathetic Black woman, uttering the racially charged line, “There's nobody here but us chickens.”

As shown in *The Horror of Party Beach* and *Curse of the Swamp Creature*, there were at least some attempts, consciously or not, by “Blacks in horror” films to increase the prominence and/or status of Black characters during the decade, as modest as those attempts might have been. Such efforts even found their way to, of all places, Germany, where, less than 20 years after the end of Nazi rule, 1964's *Cave of the Living Dead* (1964) featured a major Black character named John (John Kitzmiller). In many ways, the film, imported to the U.S. in 1966 under the title *Night of the Vampires*, is a throwback to the Gothic horror of yesteryear with its European castle setting, shot in black and white, with Old World vampiric villains. John's role is itself a throwback—a servant—but he shows signs of advancement beyond similar Black roles of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. While he is subservient toward his browbeating white boss, a professor who turns out to

be one of the undead, and to the white protagonist couple Frank (Adrian Hoven) and Karin (Karin Field), he does not bow to just any white people. When the village bully picks a fight with John in a local tavern, John stands up for himself and fights back, even though he is eventually bested and thrown out of the bar. Even with the professor, John is not such a bootlicker that he would go along with his boss's shenanigans; he warns Karin that the professor's abode is "evil" and chips in when Frank battles the professor's vampire coven during the finale. Although John admits to being scared, his trepidation is not played for humor. In fact, it is hedged by an earnest, if awkward, attempt at racial harmony in which John asks Frank if vampires like Black blood, to which Frank replies, "I'm not sure, John, but I sure like your Black skin."

Still, despite some examples of good intentions like this, Black characters in 1960s horror often were little more than background set decoration, as they had functioned throughout many of the horror films of the 1950s. For instance, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), hailed as a genre classic that pushed boundaries and disseminated progressive commentary on religion, women's rights, and the disconnectivity of modern society, had nothing to say about race outside of whiteness. Aside from a fleeting face in a party scene and a non-speaking taxi driver, it included only one Black character important enough (barely) to have a name: Diego (D'Urville Martin), the elevator operator in the apartment building where Rosemary (Mia Farrow) and Guy (John Cassavetes) live.

New World Disorder

The 1960s was a time of social upheaval for Blacks around the world. The institutionalized subjugation of dark-skinned people, be they domestic or foreign, proved to be an untenable form of governance. In the wake of World War II, in which the Allies fought both physically and ideologically against tyranny by breaking up the imperialistic regimes of the Axis powers, the American and European victors were faced with the hypocrisy of their own policies sanctioning inequity and oppression. In the U.S., the wartime "Double V" campaign had aligned Black Americans' freedoms with those of people in foreign lands for whom America was fighting; the subsequent Civil Rights Movement would make historic strides in the 1950s and 1960s, though not without bloodshed and the sacrifices of scores of citizen-activists. In Europe, the Allied nations similarly had to contend with pushes for rights—this time from colonies who demanded autonomy and an opportunity for self-governance without the yoke of a colonial master. Longtime colonizing nations like Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands faced a crisis of identity, as summarized by historian Dane Kennedy:

The problem for the imperial powers was that their nationalist opponents espoused the very principles of freedom and self-determination that they themselves had advocated in their war against the Axis powers. This

brought to a head the inherent contradiction of liberal imperialism—that coercive means and liberal ends could not coexist. By instigating such ultra-violent, extralegal measures against their colonial subjects, the European empires exposed the ideological bankruptcy of their own rule. Moreover, their actions attracted increasing scrutiny and condemnation in an international arena that granted unprecedented voice to those newly independent nation-states that had just emerged from colonial subjugation. Using their collective power in the United Nations General Assembly and various UN committees, these countries promoted a new and subversively universal interpretation of human rights, one that came to classify colonialism itself as a violation of those rights.¹

But colonizing nations, despite being battered from years of brutal warfare, were not willing to let go of their possessions so easily. In many cases, the oppressed colonists had to overcome additional years of fighting, coercion, and human rights violations, including torture and mass murder, before winning their independence. The first to gain their freedom were in Asia, the Middle East, and northern Africa in the 1940s and 1950s, while most of the colonial regions with the highest percentage of Blacks—sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean—emancipated themselves later, in the 1960s and beyond. The colonizers' extralegal means were justified in their minds, as Kennedy puts it, “because they considered their enemies uncivilized, even savage, a condition that was thought to negate any need to abide by the moral restraints of conventional warfare. This rationale was deeply rooted in the imperial experience, and it had justified plenty of past atrocities.”²

As they had for decades, horror movies during this era continued to portray a sense of Black savagery, the same sort of imagery that colonizing nations used to rationalize their brutality and to put forth the narrative that these untamed natives were not capable of self-rule. As Hollywood was purging itself of the most egregiously stereotyped Black American roles, Black characters from Africa and the Caribbean remained viable targets, their foreign nature seemingly separating them from the Black American push for more dignified on-screen representation. More, global news of the often violent push for independence throughout Africa (violence endorsed by the influential Martiniquan author, philosopher, and psychologist Frantz Fanon as a necessary solution to end colonialism) continued to color the popular vision of Africa as a lawless, blood-stained land, making it and other “wild” foreign Black environments suitable for setting a horror movie.³

Given that the majority of colonized territories at the end of World War II fell under the dominion of the United Kingdom, it should come as little surprise that most of the horror films of the 1960s about the dangers emanating from foreign Black lands would come from Britain. One, *Curse of the Voodoo* (1965), was a particularly inflammatory portrait of Black vengeance that echoed the cross-cultural, cross-racial conflict going on in Africa at the time. Released as *The Curse of Simba* in the U.K., the movie opens as so many sensationalized cinematic portrayals of

Africa begin: with a documentary-styled voiceover that, with its haughty, assured weight, carries an air of authenticity. The voiceover makes no bones about the film's opinion of Africa, incorrectly and dismissively calling it a "country" and labeling it, its people, and the beliefs they hold as backward and malevolent: "where primitive tribes still practice evil religions which weave a dark web of death around all who sin against their gods."

One such sinner is Mike Stacey (Bryant Haliday), a white big game hunter in South Africa who ignores warnings from both Black porter Saidi (Dennis Alba Peters) and his fellow white hunters to refrain from killing a lion on the land of the lion god-worshipping, "black magic"-practicing Simbaza tribe, or else incur a tribal curse. Mike, who refers to the African porters accompanying his safari as "boys," attaches similar racially tinged disdain to his dismissal of the tribe: "The Simbanzas are just a backwards tribe that will come and carry your bag for two cents a day like all the rest." Even the more moderate British hunter Major Lomas (Dennis Price), who refuses to hunt the lion for fear of supernatural retribution, expresses a sense of white supremacy, proclaiming that "These people are further from civilization than Stone Age men."

The racial pecking order is thus established from the start, but that doesn't preclude the Simbaza from striking out against Mike after he bags a lion. The tribe's witch doctor (Danny Daniels) aggressively tosses a spear at the white hunter's feet, targeting him for the curse. When Mike flies to England to reconcile with his wife, Janet (Lisa Daniely), the Simbazi capture Saidi, who is caught in the tribe's crosshairs because Mike strong-armed the porter into accompanying him on the lion hunt. They tie up and torture Saidi, using him as a sort of human Voodoo doll to convey the curse across thousands of miles. First, Mike feels Saidi's pain; then, he begins to hear sounds of lions roaring; finally, he has visions of African tribesmen stalking him in the urban jungle of London. Mike falls ill, and Janet visits a Black expert on all things African (Louis Mahoney, credited merely as "African expert"), who diagnoses it as a case of "praying a man to death" and advises that the only way that Mike can break the spell is to "return to the scene of his crime, seek out the man that cursed him, and slay him."

Mike thus flies back to Africa and does just that—shoots a Simbaza tribesman in cold blood. He then chases the witch doctor who cursed him through the wilderness as if he's tracking a wild animal. After running out of ammunition, Mike hops into his jeep and runs his prey down. The film ends with an ignominious shot of the witch doctor's corpse stuck in the wheel well of the jeep. Despite being a wholly unlikeable character—a brash, condescending, womanizing alcoholic who brings the curse upon himself—the audience is supposed to sympathize with Mike's plight. His white privilege is that of racial superiority; it is out of the question that he NOT come out victorious against Black, "primitive" tribesmen practicing an inherently "evil" religion. The tribesmen are not presented as human beings whose culture and religion have been violated and, by Fanonian logic, would have just cause for vengeance; rather, they are portrayed

as being as much animal as human. The image of the witch doctor wielding his rudimentary weaponry (a spear) in a vain attempt to fend off the jeep bearing down on him feels like an encapsulation of colonial rule, which similarly reduced technologically overmatched native populations to uncultured, sub-human status and left them trampled underfoot.

Despite a tepid response at the box office for *Curse of the Voodoo*, British B-movie producer Richard Gordon followed it up with another Voodoo-themed film that similarly revolves around a Black supernatural menace: *Naked Evil* (1966).⁴ This time, the “Voodoo” is actually Jamaican Obeah, another African diaspora religious practice that, despite, distinct differences from the more tightly defined Haitian Vodun, tends to get lumped in the same sinister basket.

The poor treatment of Obeah in popular culture closely parallels that of Vodun (Voodoo). William Seabrook’s 1929 bigoted travelogue *The Magic Island* (see Chapter 2) melded with the racist, violent narratives circulated by the U.S. Marines during the U.S.’ 19-year occupation of Haiti. The result was a foul presentation of Voodoo. Similarly, in 1932, Joseph Williams, a Jesuit missionary, published *Voodos and Obeahs: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft*, drawing parallels between the two, while offering that the wicked “black” magic of Obeah can be countered by Christian-influenced “white” magic. The real fear of Obeah, however, was not spiritual but political, as Bilby and Handler explain their journal article, *Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Life*:

Obeah could be used as a mechanism of social control. It could become a vehicle through which tensions and antagonisms were channelled and manifested in slave communities, for example, when enslaved persons believed they were bewitched and their lives threatened; and, thus, ultimately it could threaten the stability of colonial and plantocratic authority.⁵

With Obeah’s perceived threat actually to whiteness, it was placed in legal crosshairs. Jamaicans found to be Obeah faithful could be flogged, imprisoned, or even executed:

Obeah was first made illegal in 1760,⁶ as part of a sweepingly repressive act passed in the aftermath of Tacky’s Rebellion, the largest uprising of enslaved people in the 18th-century British-colonised Caribbean. . . . Along with prohibiting enslaved people from holding weapons and restricting their ability to congregate, the law made Obeah a crime punishable by death if done by any “Negro or other slave.”⁷

Jamaica’s 1760 “Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves” aligned Obeah with witchcraft, defining it as “the wicked Art of Negroes going under the appellation of Obeah Men and Women, pretending to have Communication with the Devil and other evil spirits.”⁸ Even after the abolition

of slavery, colonial powers used stories of Obeah “superstitions” as evidence that the people of the Caribbean were not civilized enough to govern themselves.⁹ Jamaica’s 1898 Obeah Act outlawing Obeah is still on the law books today, a living, breathing vestige of colonialism that has been enforced as recently as the mid-1970s with the arrest of a Black woman Obeah believer.¹⁰

Given its continued bastardization of Voodoo, it is no surprise that horror cinema in both British and American marketing materials would align Blackness with the titular evil. For example, the British movie poster positions a Black character’s face squarely between the words “Naked” and “Evil,” while American print ads boast the taglines “Black death stalks the night!” and “Satan’s Black exorcist!”

In the U.S., distribution difficulties saw the film released in multiple years, by multiple distributors, on multiple platforms, and under multiple titles. Eventually, in 1978, American producer Sam Sherman, best known for his work with director Al Adamson (including the Voodoo movie *Nurse Sherri* [1978]), acquired the rights to air it on television in the U.S. Sherman retitled the film *Exorcism at Midnight*, no doubt trying to take advantage of the popularity of *The Exorcist* (1973) and its clones (while also slipping in a piano score reminiscent of *The Exorcist*’s signature theme “Tubular Bells”). Additionally, he shot a new 10-minute opening in color (despite the movie being in black and white) that added a nonsensical explanation of why the previous distributor had tinted the scenes alternately yellow, blue, and red—a marketing ploy the black and white-averse former distributor had dubbed “EvilColor.”

Exorcism at Midnight relates *Naked Evil* in its near entirety via flashback, telling the story of a drug-dealing Jamaican gangster named Lloyd (Dan Jackson) in the town of Middlehampton, England, who kills off members of a rival Jamaican gang using Obeah. He has commissioned Amazan (Brylo Forde), a Jamaican caretaker at a local hostel housing Black and Brown college students from nations of the British Commonwealth, to create death charms called “obis” to deliver to the victims, triggering their demise. Police investigating the deaths gain insight from a local white priest named Father Goodman (Olaf Pooley), who conveniently spent 15 years living in Jamaica and opines that “With an obi, the driving power is pure evil.”

Although *Exorcism at Midnight/Naked Evil* presents Obeah in a malevolent light, it counters the villainous Amazan and violent gangsters with a major, relatively well-rounded Black character with whom we are to sympathize. Danny (George A. Saunders) is a bright young physics student at the college who delivers the obis to the rival gangsters, but only because he needs the money he is paid to support his pregnant girlfriend, Beverley (Carmen Munroe). In a rare scene of intimacy between Black characters in horror during this era, the couple lies in bed contemplating their future as a family and playfully discussing their ages and the gender of their baby. (This scene would be cut from *Exorcism at Midnight* to make room for the newly shot opening.) Later, when a rival gangster attempts

to break into Beverley's apartment to kill the couple, they briefly take on the traditionally white roles of leading man and lady, fighting for survival against a villainous foe.

Although well intentioned, there is a sense of condescending Otherness in the school personnel's attitude toward Danny and the other Exceptional Negro students, whom the head of the hostel, Benson (Basil Dignam), labels "scholarship boys, the pick of the Commonwealth." Benson's secretary, Janet (Suzanne Neve), calls out the Jamaicans in particular in an anthropological take on their folksy, happy-go-lucky demeanor: "Our Jamaican bunch are as happy as the day is long. Never a dull moment." Benson's assistant, Dick (Anthony Ainley) chimes in as if describing animal behavior: "Do you know they can study with the record player at full blast?" As if on cue, a group of Jamaican students begins singing at the dinner table.

In *Exorcism at Midnight/Naked Evil*, Amazan eventually targets Benson with an obi, raising the stakes by introducing white victims into the equation. When Father Goodman intervenes, it becomes a case of the "civilized" Western Christian belief system of the colonizers versus the "primitive" Third World belief system of the colonized. Here, Obeah represents the Christian concept of Satan, as Goodman resorts to exorcism rites to eradicate the influence of Obeah, playing hero by saving both white (Dick) and Black (Danny) from the evil.

Although the U.S. wasn't the colonizing force that the U.K. was, American films like *I Eat Your Skin* aligned with the colonizing sense of cultural and racial superiority that came with a First World country's depiction of the Third World.¹¹ Director Del Tenney followed up *The Horror of Party Beach* with *I Eat Your Skin* in the same year (1964), but the bottom of the market for black-and-white B-movies fell so quickly that Tenney couldn't find a distributor for what was then titled *Voodoo Blood Bath*. It was not released until 1971 when it was renamed *I Eat Your Skin* in order to pair it on a twin bill with the rabies-themed shocker *I Drink Your Blood*.¹²

Reflecting a mid-1960s mindset of turning a blind eye to the U.S.' racial and cultural dynamics, the film's narrative is defiantly racist and out of date. White playboy novelist Tom Harris (William Joyce) is coerced by his literary agent, Duncan (Dan Stapleton), into traveling to Voodoo Island, a private Caribbean island owned by a wealthy (presumably European) lord, in order to get inspiration for his latest book. The island residents reportedly practice Voodoo, including human sacrifices, and there are rumors of zombies, which Duncan thinks can be fodder for an adventure story. Tom agrees to visit only after Duncan mentions the "virgin natives, just waiting for some sophisticated swinger like you to come along and pluck them off their tropical vines."

Upon his arrival on Voodoo Island, Tom immediately runs into the only white woman on the island, Jeanine (Heather Hewitt), the daughter of a scientist conducting experiments to find a cure for cancer. Jeanine is skinny dipping when Tom runs over to fend off a lurking, machete-wielding, bug-eyed Black zombie

brute straight out of *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), who is seen as a threat to the nubile white woman. A white plantation overseer, Charles Bentley (Walter Coy), joins in helping to scare off the zombie. Charles then explains a zombie is a man who went mad and killed his family. “These are very simple people,” Bentley explains. “A deranged mind, a homicidal maniac; it’s quite beyond their comprehension.” He sheds further light on the situation, saying that the naive natives believe that sacrificing specifically a white (as always) blond woman can help them avoid misfortune. The most prominent, malicious Voodoo worshipers, Robey (Vanoye Aikens) and Guarita (Rebecca Oliver), are Black, while the ones who assist the white heroes are lighter-skinned Hispanics.¹³ The masked Voodoo high priest commissioning the natives’ actions turns out to be Bentley, who is also forcing Jeanine’s father to turn the island folk into zombies to fulfill his “dream of conquering the Earth with an indestructible army.” After killing Bentley, the protagonists (all white) escape on a speedboat. Jeanine’s father triggers an explosion that blows up the entire island—and all of its expendable native inhabitants.

In several other horror films during the 1960s, Black characters were marginal in their appearance but were still the source of terror, death, and destruction. *The Plague of the Zombies* (1966), from British horror leader Hammer Film Productions, opens with a shot of three Black men, shirtless with beaded necklaces and horned water buffalo headgear, banging on African drums. The camera pans over to two white men in masks performing a Voodoo ceremony, a shift that is representative of the movie as a whole, as Blacks are the source of the titular Voodoo “plague” yet occupy little screen time. The Black men, then, are the equivalent of a devil on one’s shoulder whispering evil thoughts that send the action into motion.

In the film, Voodoo is defined simply as “a form of witchcraft” practiced in the Caribbean, which heroic medical professor Sir James Forbes (Andre Morell) terms “disgusting.” Forbes is investigating a series of mysterious deaths in a small town that turns out to be the work of local magistrate Clive Hamilton (John Carson). It is revealed that Hamilton learned Voodoo while visiting Haiti, and he has put it to nefarious use by killing the townsfolk and raising them from the dead to build a small army of tirelessly laboring, never complaining, zombies to work in a nearby mine. The trio of Black drummers seems to exist solely for the purpose of providing ambiance for the Voodoo rituals; they appear to live in the dungeon-like mine, awaiting their white master’s return and subsisting solely on his approval. They are speechless and work like automatons, but unlike the zombies, they are alive and have free will—and yet still choose not to use it. Presumably, they perish along with Hamilton and the zombies when the mine goes up in flames at the end of the film.

Another Hammer production, 1966’s *The Witches* (released in the U.S. as *The Devil’s Own*), also begins with Black characters who set the stage and then scarcely reappear later. Hammer Film Productions, one of the oldest (1934) and most celebrated (U.K.) film companies, focused on crime and adventure stories until one

film dramatically changed its focus, prompting it to wisely lean into the horror genre. The sci-fi/horror hit *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955) is about an alien virus which, if not stopped, will mutate humans, thereby ravishing earth. The film brought acclaim and profits to Hammer, who quickly pivoted to produce more horror. The late-1950s saw Hammer become known for “pre-Quatermass” crime thrillers and “post-Quatermass” horror. The horror that came out of Hammer were instant classics—still highly regarded today: *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *The Abominable Snowman* (1957), *Dracula* (1958), *The Mummy* (1959), and *The Hound of Baskervilles* (1959), to name a few.

If Hammer learned about shifting public tastes around horror, it ignored the lessons that came out of 1960s British New Wave film that adopted a documentary style, often using real, identifiable locations (rather than studio sets) and real people (as extras) to bring authenticity to the films. It stayed with its tried and true formulas, thereby turning away from the rising, youth-driven counter-culture expressions that offered commentary on socioeconomic status and power. Instead, the company put out more horror, such as *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966). What Hammer did have in common with British New Wave was its symbolic annihilation of Black people. While the social rebellion was topical, the films were not rebellious enough to be inclusive, as Jeffrey Richards observes: “racial minorities were largely absent from New Wave films, as they were from British cinema in general in the 1960s.”¹⁴

In the instance of *The Witches*, the Black characters on the receiving end of symbolic annihilation are a witch doctor and his followers in Africa who menace a British school teacher, Gwen Mayfield (Joan Fontaine), as she works on a missionary assignment. Although Gwen does not believe the locals’ claims that the witch doctor can eat one’s soul, she is intimidated enough to pack up her things and attempt to flee. However, the witch doctor, clad in a startling full-body mask, breaks through the door of the schoolhouse and traumatizes her so badly that she suffers a nervous breakdown, marked by recurring visions and flashbacks, that lasts several months.¹⁵ Her trauma apparently gives her a sense of resilience to make it through the primary challenge presented in the plot: a coven of virgin-sacrificing witches in the English town where she gets a new teaching job. Although Voodoo is not the principal malevolent force in *The Witches*, the U.K. poster implies that it is, featuring an African mask and idol as the most prominent images (and the only ones in color in the otherwise black-and-white artwork).

Some films of this era did, however, present exoticized Blacks in a relatively good light—or at least a sympathetic light compared to the hubris of the white characters whose disdainful actions are a recipe for cinematic comeuppance. Significantly, *The Leech Woman* (1960) presents a Black female principal character as adept and central to a white scientist’s experiments. The greedy Paul Talbot (Phillip Terry) hopes to create a pharmaceutical fountain of youth, a drug that will not only stop but also reverse the aging process. Enter a 152-year-old Black woman named Malla (Estelle Hemsley), a former slave who bears, as she explains,

“the brand of the Arab slaver who stole me and my mother from Africa and sold us across the sea 140 years ago.” Malla’s Africanness makes her mysteriously magical as, upon meeting Paul’s wife, she (correctly) declares: “You will never divorce your husband. You won’t have to. He will die. His death will give you life . . . you are the one in my dreams of blood.” She also happens to have Nipea, an organic drug concoction that can slow the aging process. A smart, tough negotiator, Malla insists that Paul pay for her return to her African homeland, and only then will she provide him with the drug. Incidentally, there is a second substance that when mixed with the Nipea reverses the aging process, restoring the old to youth. The drug is housed only in Africa among the Nando people, a “savage, proud race . . . who have an undying hatred for Europeans.”

Paul pays for Malla’s passage, but he and his older wife, June (Coleen Gray), who is in her late sixties, approximately 10 years old than Paul, secretly follow Malla to Africa to secure the second ingredient of the drug—the fountain of youth. They discover that Malla’s tribe performs a ritual in which they kill to extract the pineal gland from men, mixing the secretion with the Nipea powder and ingesting it to reverse the aging process. Going through the ritual, Malla becomes the gorgeous “young Malla,” played by popular actress Kim Hamilton. The film then shifts its attention to June escaping Africa (with stolen Nipea) and leaving all Black characters in the film behind, for a return to the United States. In the U.S., June—who is aged and deemed unattractive—kills the white people around her to extract their glands so that she may concoct the fountain of youth drug for herself. The shift to the U.S. is a necessary one, as June cannot prey upon African men, injecting their fluids into her body. The film carefully avoids any blood-mixing and miscegenation implications.

To *The Leech Woman*’s credit, it was a very rare “Blacks in horror” film during this time, to cast a *Black woman* in a central role. More, she is a feminist, asserting the value of women while protesting against ageism, noting that men’s gray hairs are unfairly respected as a sign of intellect and maturity, while aging women are scorned or neglected. It is poetic justice, then, that the age-reversing formula appears to work only using male pineal glands, a marked reversal of fortune from the typical virginal female sacrifice of other jungle films. Malla was one of the more substantial Black characters of the genre during this film cycle and was a marked improvement over the kinds of representation Blacks were experiencing in films such as *The Alligator People*.

While, at times, horror movies of this decade reflected on and displayed the imbalance of racial power in the colonial era, they failed to *directly* address colonialism or the systemic racism it propagated. The British production *The Oblong Box* (1969), on the other hand, contains perhaps the most pointed repudiation of colonialism in horror cinema during the 1960s. Granted, coming at the end of the decade after many former British colonies had already gained their independence, it had the advantage of hindsight, so the film’s portrait of Africans being wronged by the British was not as controversial as it would have been a decade or

two earlier. In *Box*, Vincent Price stars as Julian Markham, the British owner of a plantation in Ghana who witnesses a local tribe capture his brother Edward (Alister Williamson) and perform a ritual that curses him with a disfigured face. When the brothers return to England, Julian keeps Edward locked in a room in their family mansion due to both Edward's appearance and his declining mental state.

As the plot meanders through a series of twists, turns, betrayals, and murders, the underlying mystery is what happened in Africa to warrant Edward's curse. From early in the film, there is an understanding that the tribespeople were not simply being malicious; they had reason to target Edward. When Julian's lawyer, Trench (Peter Arne), asks Julian why Edward was cursed, Julian implicates colonial exploitation: "Sin and retribution. We sinned out there in Africa alright. Plundering their land, and we're still stealing their wealth, though they're too innocent to know it. Yes, Edward's fate can only be our punishment, our kind of retribution." In another conversation with his fiancée, Elizabeth (Hilary Heath), Julian explains why he wants to get rid of all his African properties: "I've seen too much of what Africa can mean, and what we have come to mean to Africa." Eventually, when Edward consults an African named N'Galo (Harry Baird), who has witch doctor abilities, Edward discovers that the reason he was cursed is due to a crime that Julian had committed: inadvertently trampling a young Black boy to death while riding his horse through the plantation. The child victim is apt, given that the film—and at the time, Great Britain as a whole—tends to treat Africans as childlike and naive, as the "too innocent to know it" comment indicates.

Any such problematic portrayals of Black Africans and British in *The Oblong Box*, of course, pale in comparison to their portrayals in the similarly themed *Curse of the Voodoo*, which casts the Africans as villains for inflicting the curse.¹⁶ *Curse of the Voodoo* ends with an African man being killed, while *The Oblong Box* ends with the two sinful white men being punished: Edward is killed and then resurrected inside the coffin by the vengeful N'Galo, so that he is buried alive. Julian ends up inheriting his brother's disfigurement curse—the curse of the colonizer.

In a more lighthearted showcase of just deserts for white pomposity, the British anthology *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* (1965), from Hammer rival Amicus Productions, centers one of its five stories around white British jazz musician Biff Baily (Roy Castle) on a gig in Haiti (or some close approximation thereof). Upon his arrival on the island, Biff proceeds to play the "ugly European" role, making fun of a waitress' jewelry, which displays the Voodoo deity Dambala. Black British singer Sammy Coin (Kenny Lynch), who has been working in the country for a while, explains to Biff, "Voodoo is the one thing you don't mess around with here." Ignoring Sammy's warnings, Biff sneaks into the jungle late one night to observe a Voodoo ceremony. Enraptured by the music he hears, which can be described as shunning the focus on "scary" bass drumming in favor of a slightly more classical melody, Biff writes down the tune in hopes of

recreating it later to make a hit song, but he is caught by the Voodoo worshippers, who admonish him for transcribing “the sacred music of the great god Dambala.” Perhaps the music that has caught Biff’s attention evidences a real national tension in which there is difficulty in “reconciling the expectations of domestic (Haitian) and foreign audiences.” The result was an attempt to appeal to both with Haitian music written and infused with the classical resulting in something that was “culturally unique and musically universal.”¹⁷ The leader of the group warns Biff, “The god Dambala is a jealous god. If you steal from him, he will be revenged.” Once again failing to heed the advice, Biff returns to England and performs the music, triggering a series of supernatural but tame events (mostly wind), culminating with Dambala himself showing up in Biff’s apartment, extending his arms as if to strangle the musician. When Biff faints, Dambala simply grabs the sheet music from Biff’s pocket and leaves. The comedic tone of the story and the relatively minor nature of the white culprit’s infraction informs the mild nature of the revenge.

The “British King Kong” movie *Konga* (1961) follows the same pattern of cocksure whites, in true colonial fashion, twisting the goods or knowledge of respectable Black “Third World” residents for selfish ulterior motives. In it, British botany professor Charles Decker (Michael Gough) crash lands in Uganda and is taken in by a “quite friendly” tribe. The film takes pains to paint the tribespeople as positively as possible, and the white people as progressives, with Decker confidently informing his female assistant, “Don’t ever be fooled by the word ‘primitive’ as applied to so-called witch doctors. This one knew things that made me seem backward.” Upon his return to the U.K., Decker even presents a film about the tribe to his students, explaining their daily life and habits, including food and ornamentation, and explaining that “The Bugandas have extreme regard for decency, and their women are always clothed in public.” However, although Decker marvels at the secrets of animal growth that the tribe’s witch doctor taught him, he uses it for personal gain by taking a chimpanzee he names Konga back to England and growing it to gorilla size, then hypnotizing it into killing off his enemies (goodbye to his progressivism). In typical mad scientist fashion, his experiment veers out of control, as Konga grows to the size of a building, running wild in London before being killed by the military.

The most direct cinematic portrayal of the strife that accompanied African decolonization during the 1960s came from the horror-adjacent Italian “mondo” documentary movie *Africa Addio* (1966) (“Farewell Africa”). “Mondo” (Italian for “world”) films were exploitation documentaries of debatable authenticity that showcased people, practices, and violence (including on-screen death, both human and animal) from around the world that would shock the sensibilities of Western viewers, thus earning the nickname “shockumentaries.” They exploded in popularity after the release of their namesake, the Italian travelogue *Mondo Cane* (1962) (“A Dog’s World”), which inspired scores of imitations that often trafficked in cultural fetishism, xenophobia, and the promulgation of racial,

ethnic, and gender stereotypes by presenting small, aberrant segments of a society that were held up as representational of the society as a whole.

Coming from *Mondo Cane* directors Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi, *Africa Addio* was an expansion of the duo's global exploration with a political slant, this time focusing specifically on Africa during the process of decolonization. This topic was tailor-made for the exploitive mondo format, as Africa was rife with war, violence, and human rights atrocities during the fight for independence. Even before the wartime violence, Africa had long been a source of Western fascination about the foreignness of its "primitive" peoples and wild, deadly animals, as exploited by *Ingagi* and the like.

Compared to cheap imitators, Jacopetti and Prosperi's mondo films were more artfully shot and more well intentioned as reflections of humanity rather than shallow exploitation. As author Mark Goodall explains, "These films were created as cinematic, poetic and useful commentaries on human behaviour in some of its wildest and weirdest formations."¹⁸ That said, Prosperi has admitted in retrospect, "We wanted to shock the audience," using quick cuts and alternating between scenes of explicit violence and "soft scenes" of nudity and other quaint slice-of-life stories to generate greater effect and to give the viewer time to absorb (and recover from) the material.¹⁹ Any intentions of artistry, journalism, and anthropological veracity from Jacopetti and Prosperi aside, the fact stands that they provided the raw material, lacking nuance and sufficient historical and sociopolitical perspective, that allowed not only the more exploitive copycat films to procreate but also the pair's own films to be manipulated by foreign distributors looking to appeal to the basest human emotions and prejudices. As Danny Shipka observes in his overview of the mondo genre:

What makes the mondo film interesting is that it was able to be as reprehensible as each individual country that distributed the film wanted it to be. That's because the entire tone of a mondo film is wrapped up in the narrative. The pictures tell the story but the narration gives it context. Every country was allowed to record its own narration, which could downplay or magnify the cultural differences to suit the taste (i.e., bias) of a particular country.²⁰

The impact of the twisting of narrative text, whether intentional and through the loss of linguistic subtleties in translation, is apparent in one particular voiceover early on in *Africa Addio*, which, in one version, plays with inflammatory condescension:

Europe is in a hurry to leave, and on tiptoe, even if, all things considered, it has given far more than it has taken. Europe, the continent that nursed Africa, can no longer manage this big Black baby that grew too quickly, keeps bad company and what's more, hates it because of its white skin. And

so it is abandoned, still cranky and immature, just at the moment when it needs Europe the most.

A softer version tones down the racially tinged, colonial apologist sentiment to state instead:

For years, Africa asked Europe to leave, but Europe refused. Then, Europe called herself “Africa’s nursemaid,” but Africa grew up too fast and too troublesome. So now, suddenly, Europe abandons her so-called baby just when it needs her the most.

While it is difficult to pin down which translation belongs to which version—the film having been released on multiple occasions in multiple different cuts in the U.S. and other countries—the latter, softened sentiment is perhaps a reflection of the edits made in the American version that resulted from, according to Jacopetti, “fear of riots from the Black population.”²¹

Even if the narration was toned down for the American release, the marketing spin was ratcheted up to draw in audiences—particularly during its re-release in the U.S. in 1970, which showcased the ease with which *Africa Addio*’s lurid content lent itself toward unabashed exploitation. It was cut by more than 40 minutes by exploitation distributor Jerry Gross to leave primarily the gruesome content and repackaged with the grindhouse-ready title *Africa Blood and Guts* and with taglines like “Big! Black! Ugly! Brutal!” and “This is Africa like it is, baby . . . where the name of the game is blood . . . and you kill or be killed!”²² The *Blood and Guts* movie poster features a Black African man with a menacing smile and an eye patch that paints him as a pirate-like villain. In his hands is an automatic rifle, not the spear of violent Africans of yesteryear’s cinema. The volatile decolonization period gave birth to the “new” white-threatening African native: not a backwoods, loincloth-clad, spear-chucking, Voodoo-practicing tribesman, but a modern, machine gun-wielding, raping, looting warlord, and ethnic cleanser, as seen later in horror films like *Congo* (1995) and *Primeval* (2007) and actioners like *Tears from the Sun* (2003) and *Machine Gun Preacher* (2011). The paranoia about Black retribution against whites in postcolonial Africa would be captured a decade after *Africa Addio* in the “rape-revenge” exploitation movie *Albino* (1976), in which a white Rhodesian police officer seeks vengeance against Black “terrorists” who rape and kill his fiancée. The leader of the criminals is a Black albino played by a white actor (Horst Frank) in white-blackface.

On its surface, *Africa Addio* carried with it some level of sociopolitical and journalistic import, such as capturing possibly the only recorded footage of the slaughter of thousands of Arabs during the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution. But any such moments of significance are undermined by gratuitous nude scenes, awkward attempts at comedy (like a woman observing lions having sex), obviously staged exhibitions (including a full-on musical routine), tongue-in-cheek narration that

can easily be misinterpreted, nauseatingly prolonged, and repetitive scenes of animals being killed, and nasty scenes like horse-riding fox hunters chasing a “Black house boy” with a fox carcass tied to him. Although the movie pays lip service to the evils of colonialism, it spends practically its entirety railing—in *The Birth of a Nation*/mourning-the-end-of-slavery style—about how bad things are since the end of colonial rule. Scenes of Black lawlessness and retribution—reminiscent of *The Birth of a Nation*’s portrayal of Reconstruction in which Blacks run amok—abound, including:

- Hordes of Blacks squatting in a former white-owned house, now run down and torn to pieces.
- Black men watching a white stripper, as the narrator comments, “For centuries, many Black men yearned for the white woman . . . She remained an unattainable dream, but now, for the price of a drink, liberated Africans can make that dream come true.”
- Depictions and descriptions of countless incidents of Black Africans committing murder, rape, and cannibalism.

While *Africa Addio*’s introduction states that “the camera doesn’t take sides” and Jacopetti has insisted that the film was “totally objective,” the overwhelming gloom and doom message lends the distinct air of colonial sympathizing.²³ As a result, the critical backlash accusing Jacopetti and Prosperi of racism spurred them to follow up *Africa Addio* with their attempt at an “anti-racist” movie, *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971), a high-concept, scripted “documentary” that envisioned them as time-traveling filmmakers exposing the horrors of slavery in the antebellum American South. The result, a grueling, non-stop procession of explicit recreations of atrocities, came off as reveling in Black pain and thus was even more inflammatory and reviled than *Africa Addio*. The film accomplished little more than confirming the filmmakers’ arrogant naivete about racial matters, particularly those in America—such as a scene in which a mammy figure ensures the other female slaves are prepared to sexually pleasure their master; she beats a 13-year-old “bitch” because she is upset that the girl is still a virgin, prompting the child to seduce one of the documentarians.

Splattered Screens

As the 1960s dawned, the chaos around the world began reflecting itself on screen, as more pronounced, explicit on-screen violence started to proliferate. An increasing sense of social upheaval propelled by decolonization, countercultural movements, protests, riots, and disillusionment over political assassinations, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the continued racial inequities following the Civil Rights movement manifested in an edgy cynicism in cinematic offerings of all genres. This edgy cynicism was brought to bear particularly in horror,

where graphic displays of violence were amped up and put on full, bloody display in cherry red Eastmancolor. This, combined with the loosening (and eventual demise) of the decades-old Hays Code governing cinematic content in the U.S., opened the floodgates for onscreen displays of brutality and sadism during the decade, a time when modern horror cinema was born. Reflecting the social turmoil of the day, the evil of (specifically) man began to supersede creatures of both supernatural and scientific origin in horror films. Man became the monster, and he did not need special powers to terrorize communities; he only needed a desire to kill.

For much of the 1960s, this nihilistic shift had little impact on Black roles, which were still stuck in the past, reserved for the wilds of Africa and the Caribbean. While horror cinema was undergoing an upheaval worldwide, from groundbreaking American studio productions like *Psycho* (1960) and gruesome indies like *Blood Feast* (1963) to twisted international fare like the UK's *Peeping Tom* (1960), France's *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), Italy's *Black Sunday* (1960), Brazil's *At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul* (1964), and Japan's *Blind Beast* (1969), such modernization did not apply to racial casting. Blacks roles remained sidelined, where their marginalization ironically often kept them safe from horror's newfound bloodlust.

There were occasional instances, however, where Black characters became central enough to the plot that they were put in harm's way. In the influential, female-centric thriller *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), the only Black character of note (outside of an unnamed food stand vendor) is, like the film's leads, a woman. However, this slice of enlightenment comes from within the confines of the old standby Black role: the servant. Maid Elvira (Maidie Norman) displays some level of growth from the sycophantic cinematic servants of yore; she is assertive enough to bad mouth the unstable, alcoholic ex-child star Jane (Bette Davis) to her sister Blanche (Joan Crawford), advising Blanche to sell the house and get help for the mentally ill Jane. Later, when Jane binds and gags Blanche and locks her in her bedroom, Elvira intervenes, showing no sign of subservience in demanding that Jane open the door to Blanche's room or else face the police.

The Elvira character is, according to Thomas Cripps, one from the Sidney Poitier school of Black paragons, a perfectly virtuous representation of the race that affirmed the not-so-radical concept that Blacks could be upstanding members of society; such roles were "a calculated marvel of precise, already won political goals" that "seemed to ratify . . . the recently achieved status quo that had arisen from blacks themselves beginning in 1942," even though, paradoxically, "color seemed weightless in the plot."²⁴ However, this elevation in weight of the role (despite being "the help") thrust Elvira into the conflict between the two rival sisters, where she is caught in the crossfire. In decades past, a Black servant would not have been important enough to warrant a death scene, but Elvira, in a dubious sign of "progress," is allowed the honor of an on-screen demise. Although Jane has ample opportunity to kill Blanche, the true object of her ire,

instead she kills Elvira, thereby providing a demented sense of purpose for Black characters that would become a regular occurrence for decades to come as horror movies become even more violent.

In *Spider Baby, or the Maddest Story Ever Told* (1968), modern horror violence ran headlong into the antiquated practice of Blacks playing spooked and abused characters for comic effect, all embodied by a familiar face: Mantan Moreland. The film tells the story of the Merrye family, stricken with Merrye Syndrome, an inherited disease resulting from inbreeding that causes mental devolution. One family member, Virginia (Jill Banner), is obsessed with spiders, and believing she is one, uses ropes as her web and butcher knives as her stingers. An aging Moreland, cast simply as “deliveryman,” opens the film and is dead within its first five minutes. In the opening scene, he climbs the porch of the secluded, decrepit mansion home of the Merryes and peers through a window, calling out to the home’s inhabitants. The window slams shut, trapping him so that his head and torso are dangling in the house while his legs flail outside the house on the porch. Virginia appears with a butcher knife in each hand. She throws her “web” on the deliveryman, entangling him. Gleefully, Virginia yells, “Sting, sting, sting!” as she slices him with her knives. The attack reeks of comic affect. A shot of the porch shows the deliveryman’s legs kick about in a slapstick manner. An interior shot reveals his upper torso pinned by the window and Virginia with his severed ear as a souvenir. The scene is easily standard horror fare, except Moreland resurrects his classic laugh-riot, bug-eyed performance.

Here, Mantan Moreland may be regarded as one of the most explicit bridges between “Blacks in horror” films of the 1930s and 1940s and modern Black representations in horror. Moreland had been central to the creation of films about zombies (and other monsters), such as *King of the Zombies* (1941) and *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943). However, appropriately enough for the time, the return of Blacks in horror was in a (far from funny) zombie film released in the same year as *Spider Baby: Night of the Living Dead* (1968). *Night of the Living Dead*, which is worth discussing in some detail, would introduce one of the single most dramatic, provocative changes regarding Black American’s participation in horror.

A Night With Ben

It was the night of April 4, 1968. Hours earlier, film director George A. Romero had heard, along with the rest of the world, that Civil Rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Romero was already anxious as he was driving from Pittsburgh to New York City with his²⁵ low-budget, independently produced horror film *Night of the Living Dead* in the trunk of his car. Would he be able to secure a distributor for a movie that pressed the horror genre to new limits with its graphic, gory violence and bleak plot? *Night of the Living Dead*, a “Blacks in horror” film, presented as its star a Black character Ben (Duane Jones). Ben heroically and singularly

survives a relentless, night-long attack by cannibalistic ghouls only to be shot dead in the bright light of day by a posse of white vigilantes who then spear his body with hooks to lift it onto a bonfire to burn. Certainly, in the context of the King assassination, this film might be seen as too inflammatory to secure backing. However, soon after his arrival in New York, Romero did acquire funding for the film from Walter Reade Organization/Continental, and (appropriately) on Halloween 1968, *Night of the Living Dead* opened in theaters, thereby making film history for its dramatic reformation of the horror genre.

Night of the Living Dead is a zombie movie the likes of which had not been seen before and which has been copied thousands of times since. It has been credited with revolutionizing and solidifying the zombie subgenre in horror.

Night of the Living Dead opens in a cemetery in a small town just outside of Pittsburgh. There, siblings Barbra (Judith O'Dea) and Johnny (Russell Streiner) are visiting a grave. A man in a suit slowly approaches the pair, and from a distance, he appears to be normal. However, as the man nears, it is clear something is wrong with him—his walk is not slow, rather it is shambling; his stern face is not solemn, rather it has the empty look of the undead. The man attacks Barbra, and Johnny runs to her rescue only to be killed when the man pushes him down, his head striking a gravestone during the frenzied scuffle. Barbra flees the scene distraught and panicked, unable to help her brother as the “ghoul” or zombie chases her. Crumbling mentally from her inexplicable encounter, Barbra stumbles into a farmhouse, taking refuge there. Soon after, she is joined by Ben (the only Black person in the film), who is also trying to survive attacking zombies.

As Barbra slips into catatonia, Ben assuredly takes charge. He gets busy boarding up the farmhouse, blocking the zombies who are trying to gain entry. He locates a shotgun in the house and beats back the horde of zombies with bullets to their brains, blows to their skulls, and fire. It is Ben's last stand, and he is winning. However, unknown to Ben and Barbra, a small group of survivors have locked themselves in the cellar of the house and are hiding in silence from what they believe are zombies traipsing in the house above them. Eventually, the group emerges. There is Tom (Keith Wayne) and Judy (Judith Ridley), a young couple. There is also the Cooper family—Harry (Karl Hardman) and Helen (Marilyn Eastman), and their young daughter, the ill, zombie-bitten young Karen (Kyra Schon), who remains in the cellar. Almost immediately an argument ensues between Ben, a highly competent, take-action kind of guy, and Harry, a sulky, angry man who wants authority and respect. Harry proposes that the group seals themselves in the cellar until help arrives. His suggestion is met with opposition all around. Tom sides with Ben and begs Harry to reconsider basement isolation—what Ben calls a “death trap” with no exit. Helen wonders why Harry must always be “right and everyone else wrong.” For Helen, who knows Harry best, the issue is not necessarily the soundness of either plan, but that her husband wants to be boss. Ben Hervey, in his 2008 book *Night of the Living Dead*, argues: “Ben is no saint either; though he is more heroic, honourable and charismatic

than Harry, he can also be less reasonable.”²⁶ For example, when Harry continues to hide away in the cellar, leaving everyone who sided against him to die, Ben counters by refusing to let Harry take food with him to his worsening child.

A news report on television reveals that the undead are everywhere. In one of many sound bites, scientists speculate whether the rise of the undead may have something to do with a probe sent from Earth to Venus that returned tainted with radiation. Unlike many horror films—particularly ones involving zombies—before and since, *Night of the Living Dead* did not implicate Blackness in the evil that is happening. These zombies are not Black and do not emerge from predominately Black places such as Africa, the Caribbean, or some Louisiana bayou; nor do they rise as a result of some Black Voodoo ritual. Rather, *Night* used the 1950s film habit of placing the blame on (presumably) white scientists and alien invasion.

The news reports broadcast that shelters are being set up for any remaining survivors. With the zombies still surrounding and attacking the house, Ben devises a plan for the group to get away in a nearby, but gas-less truck. Tom and Ben—the men—work as a team to get the truck to a nearby gas pump. At the last minute, Judy runs to be by Tom’s side as he fights his way to the truck to gas it up. The plan goes awry and the gas-soaked truck explodes, with Tom and Judy in it. Their death is a shocking twist—surely, this young couple will be the face of America’s future by surviving. No. The zombies have Tom and Judy’s charred bodies as a perverted barbeque dinner.²⁷

Seeing the scene, Harry cowers inside the farmhouse, leaving Ben locked out to fight off the zombies. Here, the film cleverly sandwiches its hero, Ben, between two different kinds of monsters, both possessing diminishing humanity. This, too, is a unique turn in the film as the representation of monstrous difference typically functions to highlight the favorable, enlightened traits of white characters.²⁸ Here, the film reminds us that humans and monsters are not far apart and, indeed, can be one and the same. But the scene’s tension is heightened by its racial component.

As Ben begs for Harry to open the door, Harry refuses; he is both petrified of the zombies and upset with Ben. Harry alternately peeks out at and then hides from Ben. Eventually, Ben forces his way into the house. Once inside, Ben and Harry momentarily unite as they focus on repairing the breach in the house that Ben was forced to make. Still, Ben is irate, screaming, “I ought to drag you out there and feed you to those things.” And it is assumed the younger, taller, more fit Ben could follow through on his threat. But Ben does not. Still, all is not forgiven or forgotten. Instead, as soon as the repairs are made, Ben turns on Harry, battering him for trying to leave Ben to die. The racial anxieties in this scene are heightened as Ben does something that had not been done before by a Black character in a horror film: Ben beats Harry to the ground, picks Harry up, and then beats him down again, leaving Harry bloodied. Indeed, up until this moment in 1968, it was rare for any film to depict a Black man successfully exacting vengeance against a white man (an exception being *The Oblong Box*).

Ben, who is no longer in immediate danger, beats Harry because he is tired, scared, frustrated, and angry. It is a reaction that is plausible, but the race of the men amplifies the drama.

Much later, after Ben offers to carry Karen (Harry's daughter) a mile to safety, Harry is more interested in getting Ben's shotgun and the power it promises. Helen warns Harry to leave Ben and the gun alone: "Haven't you had enough?" But, Harry cannot leave it alone, grabbing the shotgun and turning it on Ben. Ben is able to wrestle the weapon from Harry, shooting and mortally wounding him. Harry staggers to the cellar to find his daughter has died. The zombies begin to overrun the house, and Johnny, Barbra's now undead brother, and the zombie horde smash through windows and doors, taking her away to be consumed. Harry dies in the cellar. Karen reanimates and begins to dine on her father's corpse. She then discovers her mother cowering in the cellar, still alive. Karen brutally stabs her mother repeatedly with the edge of a shovel, so that she may snack on her as well. Ben is forced to "kill" them all, and with the zombies rampaging through the house above, he seals himself in the basement (a nod to Harry's original plan) until dawn. As day breaks, Ben emerges from the cellar to the sound of human voices. The town's police and a posse of locals are rounding up the zombies and killing them. As Ben makes his way outside, he is suddenly shot in the head by the posse members, who mistake Ben for a zombie.

The filmmakers have been unwavering in their assertion that the casting of a Black actor as the star was happenstance—"he just turned out to be the best person for the part"—and that race had no import in the script, as evidenced by there being no mention of Ben's race in the film.²⁹ Though Romero was keenly aware that his film would be the "first film to have a Black man playing the lead role regardless of, rather than because of, his color," he also asserts that "even when Duane gets shot at the end, we weren't thinking any Black and white connotations." It was decades later when he realized "what it really meant."³⁰

If it took Romero years to understand what Ben's role meant socioculturally, some audiences seemed to understand its import right away. In the months after *Night's* release, Romero was repeatedly peppered with questions about those "rednecks" who killed Ben—were they real people (as some of the extras in the film were "real," such as news reporter Bill Cardille playing himself in a cameo appearance), were they acting, or simply being their dogmatic, quick triggered selves? In a 1970 review, Romero explains, "most of the people were actually from the small town we shot in . . . we had quite a bit of cooperation from people in the city—the police and city fathers . . . [they were] happy to have guns in their hands."³¹ Of course, labels of white "militia," "posses," "rednecks," and even "small-town" police bring up connotations of racism. As a result, the disgust the audience is prompted to feel about the characters is heightened and turned into real contempt and hatred, as it is understood that these are real people from Pittsburgh's real backwaters. More, in interviews, though Romero is careful not to alienate those who helped him so much by volunteering for his movie, he

admits to not doing “much of anything” by way of directing their acting, as such “metaphorical fantasy confronts a barely filtered reality.”³² This collision between fantasy and reality becomes all the more real when in Tom Savini’s 1990 remake of the film, Tony Todd (of *Candyman* fame) is cast as Ben. Todd recalls the real suggestion of bigotry on the part of the extras playing the posse:

Everybody in town wanted to be a zombie. And we shot in Washington, PA, which is not the most liberal place in America. You’ve seen *The Deer Hunter*. Strange things happen in Pennsylvania. And so, I’m surrounded by a bunch of zombies who were rednecks in another life . . . I knew it was going to be fucked up because they were all waiting to try to tackle me for real. Some of the tension you see is real, genuine stuff.³³

In the original *Night*, uniformed police are rooting out zombies with German shepherd police dogs, further aligning them with all too familiar images of police dogs being commanded by their police handlers to attack Civil Rights activists. The police appear alongside “deputized” civilians dressed in flannel and denim accessorized by guns, bullets, and cigars. They rather talk matter-of-factly of destroying the zombies—“Beat ’em or burn ’em, they go up pretty easy.” The extraordinary danger the men pose is represented in the emotionless, perfunctory manner in which they take Ben out. Ben is hit with a bullet and knocked out of the frame, only to be seen again in a second long shot of his body slamming to the floor. The Sheriff matter-of-factly says, “Good shot” and, “That’s another one for the fire.” Hervey writes, “That’s it: there’s no drawn-out death scene, no blaze of glory for this hero.”³⁴

Contrary to Romero’s claims that race had not been considered, the actor Duane Jones (who by day worked as an English professor) rejected the idea that Barbra would somehow come out of her stupor to rise up and save him and herself from the zombies. For Jones, such an ending “would have been read wrong racially.” Jones believed that “the Black community would rather see me dead than saved . . . in a corny and symbolically confusing way.” Ben’s death was shocking but was perhaps one of the most realistic moments in the film as he is shot dead by his “natural enemies, Pittsburgh cops and rednecks.”³⁵

Those who walked out of the theater before the credits rolled missed the handling of Ben’s body. A series of grainy still images are flashed under the credits. They look like they could be the weathered photos of Emmett Till, shot in the head, being loaded onto the back of his executioners’ truck to be transported to the Tallahatchie River, where his body would endure more abuse. But these are images of Ben’s lifeless corpse being impaled by meat hooks and lifted for transport to a pyre. Ben’s body is then pressed down into the fire with wood and other debris piled on top of him. His is the only body in the heap. In the end, “our hero is not only dead but also obliterated. There will be no record of his struggle, no burial or memorial, no hope of justice.”³⁶



FIGURE 5.1 Ben being thrown onto the pyre in *Night of the Living Dead*

Ten/Photofest

There is much to be said about *Night's* production, symbolism, and power. Richard Dyer, in his famed essay "White," draws attention to the color symbolism in the film, such as the black and white photography, in an era of color, to heighten and complicate understandings of good and evil. The night is dark (black), but the light of day brings more evil in the posse (white).³⁷ *Night* was also initially accused of presenting a "pornography of violence" with its unflinching scenes of zombies

disemboweling their victims and then eating the entrails, prompting the Motion Picture Association of America to take a closer look at its rating system.³⁸ And there are those who have written about the warring dysfunctional “family” in which the characters are unable to work together even in a disaster that transcends race and class³⁹ (a situation that would play out in countless subsequent zombie movies and in real life during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020). However, less is known about *Night’s* reception among Black audiences—that is, apart from the fact that Blacks supported the film in great numbers, contributing to its popularity.

Night’s impressive box office earnings—it cost approximately \$115,000 to make but grossed \$90,000 in the first weekend of its release—could be attributed to, in great part, its popular reception among Black audiences.⁴⁰ Kevin Heffernan points out the contribution of Black movie-goers to the box office success of *Night* in his book *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business 1953–1968*, and his journal article, “Inner-City Exhibition and the Genre Film: Distributing *Night of the Living Dead*.” He observes: (1) on the whole Black film-goers represented 30% of first-run audiences compared to 15–20% of the general population; (2) theaters in Black neighborhoods contributed to *Night’s* success, as these theaters often struggled to get films (especially during the 3-D boom when it proved too costly to upgrade their theaters) and so *Night* was eagerly welcomed and for longer runs; (3) a film such as *Night*, with its implicit attention to race issues, straddled the fence as both a “prestige social problem film” and an “exploitation item”; and (4) Black audiences lined up to see a film with a proud, smart, resourceful African American as its protagonist and star.⁴¹ Heffernan also notes that when theaters in African American communities (e.g., in cities such as Philadelphia) secured first-run films (which was an infrequent occurrence), they were often horror films.

Indeed, if the Black press’ attention during the 1950s and 1960s to the genre was any indication, horror had favored status in Black communities. In newspapers such as the *Chicago Daily Defender*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *L.A. Sentinel*, short articles and feature stories were frequently presented on horror films, notably when *no other* films or genres were mentioned. The *Daily Defender* was particularly prolific. For example, the *Daily Defender* ran an article in 1957, “Horror Films Debut Soon,” promising that

folks who like the blood-chilling type films will be well-satisfied soon with the arrival of a new series called “Shock.” Fifty-two horror films from the archives of Columbia and Universal-International promise a whole year of blood-sucking entertainment . . . watch out for these films—they’ll give you a terrible treat.⁴²

A 1960 article in the same newspaper proclaimed,

a triple bill of harrow films now playing the Royal Theatre are filling movie-goers with chills and chuckles that some have seldom experienced

before. *A Bucket of Blood*, *The Giant Leeches*, and *Orders to Kill*, make up the electrifying screen program.⁴³

In yet another 1960 article, the *Daily Defender* detailed some horror clichés in promoting the film *Paranoia* at Chicago's Oriental Theatre:

[M]any great horror films revolve a plot around a beautiful victim who is alone and vulnerable to murder . . . another technique in scary movies is letting the viewer believe the victim can escape . . . one of the proven ingredients for horror is trying to drive the victim insane.⁴⁴

Such stylized writing about horror films continued into the 1970s:

Two excellent films of horror and suspense, shock and shiver that are scary and nervous even in quieter moments in their stories will open a first run double-feature program on Friday, (April 17) in over 30 neighborhood, suburban and drive-in theatres all over Chicagoland . . . Beware, however, this double-feature is not-for-the-weak-of-heart. Others who doubt the occult, who are nervous and fright-prone are doubly warned.⁴⁵

Being aware of horror films' promotion and popularity in Black communities is essential to understanding how, generally, the genre advanced due to Black viewership, and how, specifically, *Night* saw such success. By the time *Night* hit theaters, Walter Reade/Continental was ready to capitalize on the often mistreated Black market. "Many of the theaters that showed *Night of the Living Dead*," writes Hefernan, "were in the inner city and served a predominately African American audience," in part because neighborhood theaters or "nabe houses" which catered to Blacks struggled to secure films.⁴⁶ These theaters embraced non-blockbuster, indie, and eclectic programming. For example, *Night* was paired with the Sidney Poitier drama *For the Love of Ivy* (1968) in its first run at one Black nabe theater in Philadelphia, and at another, it was on a double-bill with a 1968 Jim Brown crime film called *The Split*.⁴⁷ In such theaters, *Night* was put into heavy rotation.⁴⁸

Night of the Living Dead was inducted into the U.S. National Film Registry in 1999 and has been the basis for countless zombie movies, including a string of sequels and derivatives, while earning cult-classic status among fans.

Dawn of the Dead

In the next three entries in his "Dead" series—*Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *Land of the Dead* (2005)—Romero would feature Black men in pivotal central roles. *Dawn of the Dead* is set weeks after the undead first arise and reveals that the zombie plague has permeated every corner of society. Here, the desperation of the situation is revealed early on when zombies are seen wreaking

havoc in the highly populated city of Philadelphia (300 miles from Pittsburgh, the zombies' origin story location).

Unlike *Night's* colorblind script, *Dawn* explicitly addresses race, even if it is not the primary focus of the film, as predominately white, male teams of SWAT officers (an urban version of the rednecks depicted in *Night*) sweep through a tenement, again caring little about distinguishing between zombies and the building's Black and Brown human residents: "Blow all their Puerto Rican and nigger asses right off!" A violent racial/ethnic and zombie cleansing then commences.

Enter the Black hero, Peter (Ken Foree), a SWAT member who steps out against his white peers, demanding they end their slaughter of innocent (Black and Brown) citizens. When a member of the squad does not immediately stop, Peter kills him, just as he would a zombie, ceasing the man's kind of hyper-masculine, racial-domination performance. Peter is outside of, and above, both. Peter befriends another tactical officer, Roger (Scott H. Reiniger), a white male who possesses a similar distaste for the kind of violence they witness. Peter and Roger decide to try to escape the zombie/police madness by finding a refuge that is chaos-free. They join up with two others with the same intentions—a white couple, Stephen (David Emge) and his mistress Francine (Gaylen Ross), who are reporters for a news station and have access to the station's helicopter. Later, it is revealed that Francine is pregnant.

As the four fly out of the city to avoid the crowds, the issue of race is raised again, fleetingly, when Peter comments that he has left "some brothers" behind, to which Francine questions, "Real brothers or street brothers?" Staring wistfully out the chopper window, Peter replies, "Both," then elaborates on his two "real" brothers: "One's in jail, the other's a pro ball player." The dichotomous fates of his siblings are reflective of what, by the early 1970s, was widely seen as the only alternatives for low-income, inner-city Black residents to escape poverty and urban decay: a pie-in-the-sky lottery ticket like athletics (or popular music) or a life of crime. It is a bleak outlook on life that continues to resonate today and, regardless of Romero's intentions, falls in line with his brand of stark social commentary.

Eventually, the group finds a safe haven in a shopping mall, where the film takes root as a critique of American consumption and consumerism, as well as an engagement—thanks to the presence of the pregnant Francine—with the feminist movement and sexual revolution. By setting the film in a shopping mall, Romero continued to bring impressive change and innovation to the horror genre. After decades of mad scientists, entranced women, plots of science gone awry, and settings of old dark house laboratories, horror had become "dull and routine."⁴⁹ The mall setting was thrillingly novel—the concept of an indoor shopping center still new enough that, in the movie, as the survivors approach the mall, one of them asks, "What the hell is it?"

In *Dawn*, theirs is a life of materialism, occasionally interrupted by interloping zombies. Likewise, Blackness does not interrupt (much). In one scene, jungle



FIGURE 5.2 Peter readies to battle zombies in *Dawn of the Dead*

United Film Distribution Company/Photofest

drums are the soundtrack as the group explores a gun shop crammed with African safari pictures. While the drums and the “African” music typically signal Voodoo, there are no Voodoo zombies here, despite Peter’s (inexplicable) aside that his grandfather was a Voodoo priest—a comment seemingly designed just so he could deliver the iconic line “When there’s no more room in Hell, the dead will walk the Earth.” Instead, this is a film about economic exploitation, which,

according to Romero, means all Americans have become zombies mindlessly consuming—cannibalizing—commodities, most of which are not essential for sustenance and survival. One could not blame Black Voodoo for that.

Peter's life becomes dull routine, which, in a very unprogressive way, includes watching Francine “keep house,” in an apartment that the group has set up in the mall. The smart and talented Francine is “Caldwell'd,” as seen in *The Giant Claw*, cooking and cleaning for the men (although she demands to be consulted on plans and to be allowed to learn to shoot and to fly the helicopter). The banality of Peter's existence is best illustrated by the light banter he engages in with his buddy Roger, who has been bitten by a zombie; that is, until Roger eventually succumbs and Peter must shoot him.

Eventually, the group's relative peace is disrupted by a biker gang who wants in on the mall's bounty. The gang breaks into the mall, and swarms of zombies follow, overwhelming the place. The bikers become zombie food, and Stephen is killed and turned into a zombie. Peter and Francine—who, after months in the mall, is quite advanced in her pregnancy—are the only survivors. Francine flies herself and Peter away from the mall in the news station helicopter. The film ends by inviting the audience to worry about the pair's fate. They are low on fuel and have no idea where they should go. However, there is another unknown the film does not broach—can Francine deliver her baby alone? Will Peter, a trained officer, assist? What will their future be together? It is in these questions that Peter's Blackness and maleness and Francine's whiteness and womanhood are most obvious.

Day of the Dead

Romero's third entry, *Day of the Dead* (1985),⁵⁰ lacked the political and, to some extent, the racial innovation of the two earlier *Dead* films. The film's time period is after “all the shopping malls are closed” (a reference to *Dawn of the Dead*), and it is set in an underground military bunker in Florida in which grotesque experiments are being conducted on the zombies by civilian scientists under the bullying direction of the military. Above ground, things appear rather hopeless, with little life left as the zombies have taken over. The remaining remnants of government and military hope that the experiments will reveal a way to end the zombies' reign.

The film focuses on a zombie, Bub (Sherman Howard), who seems to be evolving and can sense the wickedness in the morally devolving, callous scientists and military personnel around him. At the end of a set of medical tests by a team of scientists, an undead soldier is fed to other zombies. The scientists have gone mad. Similarly, the military men are a 1980s version of *Night's* rednecks and *Dawn's* SWAT team members. The soldiers are revealed to also be a trifecta of sadistic, racist, and sexist. They are eager to torture and kill humans and zombies alike. The men threaten to rape the lone female scientist, Sarah (Lori Cardille), and bully and even murder the other civilians on staff because they are different.

The requisite Black character in this film is John (Terry Alexander) a civilian contract helicopter pilot who hails from the West Indies. In this context, John is a triple minority—Black, non-military/scientist, and foreign, as marked by his West Indian accent. John is also learned and civilized, but unlike *Night's* Ben and *Dawn's* Peter, he does not proactively put his skills to use in helping the group survive. Opting for a more *laissez-faire*, “soon come” Caribbean philosophy of life, John opts to stay out of the affairs of the scientists and the military, prompting Sarah to comment, “I haven’t seen you do anything dangerous since we got here.” What could come off as lazy or apathetic, however, ends up being a strategic approach that removes him from the line of fire as the two sides grow increasingly antagonistic toward each other. To top off his tropical demeanor, John has fashioned a makeshift, but idyllic living space in the bunker apart from the rest of the survivors, which he calls “The Ritz,” complete with a replica of a beachside cabana that he uses as a reading room. He easily shares his quarters with a forthright white radio operator named William (Jarlath Conroy), a living arrangement that alludes to a more enlightened definition of masculinity that is not associated with the soldiers, who bunk with their guns.

In the film, when things go wrong, John is forced into action, as he, Sarah, and William must fight a two-prong battle against the zombies, who overrun the bunker, and against the soldiers, whose bloodlust is quickly outpacing that of the zombies. Everyone is assumed to be expendable in this film except for John because he is the only one who knows how to operate the helicopter, which can ferry survivors to safety. Though the military men need him, their contempt for him is palpable as it was John who mocked the soldiers’ violent, primitive behavior and it was John who remained unbowed by their escalating threats to his life. When he refuses to leave Sarah and William to face imminent death in the bunker at the hands of the zombies, John is to be beaten into submission—a clear allusion to slavery. However, John fights off the soldiers, rescues Sarah and William, and saves the day by flying the three of them away from the bunker and to a remote, deserted island that only he seems to know about. The film concludes with John peacefully fishing on a beach, joined by Sarah and William.

At a 2010 horror convention in Indianapolis, the actor Terry Alexander and the director, George Romero, talked about the character John and, specifically, this final scene that depicts the three characters enjoying quiet survival. In noting the resourcefulness of the character John, Romero quipped that though there have been hundreds of other zombies-take-over-the-world films produced over the decades, perhaps audiences should believe that “Terry is *still* on that beach fishing,” a hypothetical that Alexander enthusiastically embraced.⁵¹ Romero’s comments about the character John give subtle credence to Dyer’s analysis that “the point about Ben, Peter, and John is that in their different ways they all have control over their bodies, are able to use them to survive, know how to do things with them.” Though whites lose control while they are alive, and often “come back in the monstrously uncontrolled form of zombieness,”⁵² these Black men,

particularly John—who, unlike Ben, lives and, unlike Peter, is the one who actually pilots the group to safety—remain self-possessed while carrying on.

Land of the Dead

In 2005, Romero offered the fourth entry in the Dead series, *Land of the Dead*. Here, Romero's political depth returns as he works to critique classism. In *Land*, there are three classes. The first is the upper class, consisting of wealthy (mostly white) humans who live in an exquisite waterfront, glass and steel high-rise which is protected on three sides by the city's three rivers (recalling Pittsburgh, PA's—the location of the first *Dead* movie—three rivers, the Allegheny, Ohio, and Monongahela) and on the land-facing side by electrified barricades. Their lifestyle is maintained by a second class of people, professional foragers who scour the city's ruins, while fighting off zombies, or “stenches,” for commodities—food, fine wines, textiles, and other supplies. The foragers live, as do most of the surviving citizenry, in a chaotic, brutal wasteland. This second class is starving, dirty, and living and dying in the streets. The third, though perhaps not the “lowest” class, then, are the zombies, who roam free and, as humans die or are caught outside the fences, have plenty to eat.

One zombie, a Black man called “Big Daddy” (Eugene Clark), turns out to be especially evolved (even more so than Bub in *Day*) and cognizant of humans' continued brutalization of zombies. He becomes a leader of a revolutionary zombie faction, learns to communicate through grunts and roars, and discovers how to use weaponry to bring down his human oppressors. He even teaches his compatriots to take up arms such as knives and machetes. In a pivotal scene, Big Daddy evidences a high order of rational thinking as he discerns his zombie army can get to the high-rise—an ostentatious symbol of exclusion recognized as such even by the zombies—by walking on the rivers' bottom instead of risking electrocution by the fences. Indeed, the zombies invade, and Big Daddy seeks a particularly brutal revenge against the wicked owner of the high-rise. The film ends with a group of surviving humans, stars of the film, respectfully yielding the city to Big Daddy while the humans look for a new place to live. In return, Big Daddy seems to acknowledge this truce as he leads his increasingly conscious zombie army.

On the whole, Romero's films can be celebrated for their complex and even positive treatment of Black male characters. Part of these characters' depth perhaps comes from Romero's belief that race did not figure prominently in the casting of actors Duane Jones, Ken Foree, or Terry Alexander.⁵³ However, their characters are certainly not free from the histories and politics that their skin color hails. Romero's Black characters are revolutionary in terms of cinematic representations of race in America, whether human heroes or zombies. More, these Black male characters *are* notably depicted as different from the white people who surround them. Ben, Peter, John, and Big Daddy are all self-assured in their racial and gendered identities, and while they seek survival among others, theirs is not

necessarily a message of integration but of co-existence—a subtle, but important difference. Their difference becomes clearer when, as Dyer insists, the characters' Blackness is understood in contrast to whiteness. Through such an examination, it is obvious that the heroism of these four characters comes, in part, because they cast themselves as outside of the racial hierarchies and other dominant norms. It is through their rejection of these constraints and resistance to domination that it is "possible to see that Whites [or at least those invested in Whiteness] are the living dead."⁵⁴

Conclusion

The decades of the 1950s and 1960s brought new meaning to the old saying "one step forward, two steps back." Hollywood was not ready to give up on a vapid formula of locating evil in Black places or among Black people. Recall, it is the Black maid Eulabelle in *The Horror of Party Beach* who randomly pronounces that a toxic waste monster must be the work of (Black) Voodoo. As such, in keeping with the impulse to understand evil and the monstrous as Black-inspired, Hollywood went back to Africa, defiantly avoiding Civil Rights-era Black America, for its horror. Africa, specifically tribal Africa, was an easy film target because it seemingly looked different from the U.S. due to its lack of a dominant, identifiable Christian tradition or dominant capitalist practices.⁵⁵

When seen—and it is important to note that Blacks were rarely seen during these two decades—the representations of Blacks and Blackness did not press boundaries, as Black servants carried the representational weight. Rare, inspired performances came from Joel Fluellen as the intelligent and resourceful Arobi in *Monster from Green Hell* (1957), Estelle Hemsley (old Malla) and Kim Hamilton (young Malla) as the commanding and clever Malla in *The Leech Woman* (1960), and Duane Jones as the authoritative and driven Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). These roles evidenced what could be done with Black American talent in horror films.

Nevertheless, on the whole, the horror genre was making narrative progress. Horror's recuperation included attending to the stories and issues that were already entering into Americans' homes by way of television news broadcasts (unless, of course, it showed America's racism toward its Black citizens; then invisibility was the solution). Narratives that queried capitalist, patriarchal rule, militarization, and social inequities and fears found their way, in a rather sophisticated manner, into theaters. The sort of sociopolitical metamorphosis that the horror genre was undertaking would finally make depictions of racial diversity virtually compulsory in the 1970s.

Night of the Living Dead was, by any measure, the breakthrough, mainstream "Blacks in horror" film that was all about a critique of the status quo and about upheaval. Certainly, there had been Black stars (importantly, men and women alike) in horror films in earlier decades, thanks to the contributions of Spencer

Williams, Oscar Micheaux, and the like. However, the presentation of Ben was ground-breaking, different and important, if for no other reason than that his encounter with and treatment of whites was so novel. There was no lusting after white women or bugging one's eyes or shuffling. Nevertheless, *Night* was an unrelentingly pessimistic film on all levels. *Night* became a fictive reminder of Norman Mailer's 1957 assertion in his essay "White Negro" that

any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk . . . In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood . . . Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war.⁵⁶

It matters little if the makers of *Night* were purposefully inscribing or encoding a racial message; the take-aways are what is central. Black characters carry with them their history, culture, and experiences. For example, in *Night*, the allusion to lynching through the murder of the immediately presumed monstrous Ben is quite stark. The film audiences who witnessed Ben's demise were reminded that Blacks' social, political, and economic disenfranchisement and violent victimization were a dreadful history from which it was difficult to escape. Together, Emmett Till's and Dr. King's deaths "exposed the limits of [America's] ideology of domestic order,"⁵⁷ and the fictional hero Ben was added to that reminder. The second key take-away here is that there was a real revolution going on in America with the Civil Rights movement and the subsequent Black Nationalism movement, but for nearly a decade and a half, a genre built on violence and atrocity turned a blind eye to these exact things happening on American soil by largely excluding Black people from the films.

In the coming decade of the 1970s, the real-world revolution and the theater revolution would align explicitly with horror centering itself on themes of Black empowerment. However, most notable was the reality that the genre took up a radically different tack than what *Night* offered. While *Night* revealed the difficulties in us "all just getting along," the 1970s focused on Black Power, nationalism, and self-reliance rather than the challenges of racial integration and cooperation. This would be a decade of "Black horror" rather than "Blacks in horror." The 1970s would even produce a few critically acclaimed stories, such as the Black horror (Black-written, directed, cast, storyline) film *Ganja & Hess* (1973).

Heffernan makes a strong claim for the "incalculable" influence of *Night* on the coming 1970s horror films, noting that the film's artistic elements anticipated the trends which would become staples for Blaxploitation horror of the 1970s. More, according to Heffernan, *Night* revitalized the "inner-city nabe box office," importantly providing a home for Black horror films such as *Blacula* (1973) and *Abby* (1974) until such theaters were finally forced to close their doors for good in the mid- to late 1970s.⁵⁸

As the 1970s took shape, some white horror films would continue with the nuclear threat theme (e.g., *The Hills Have Eyes* [1977]) and critiques on the (bourgeois) family unit (e.g., *The Last House on the Left* [1972]; *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]) to the continued exclusion of Blacks. However, Blacks would indeed return, both with a vengeance and for revenge in so-called Blaxploitation-era horror, which indicted “whitey” for their racism discriminatory ills and exploitive abuse of Black communities.

Notes

- 1 Kennedy, Dane. *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.64–65. Print.
- 2 Kennedy (63).
- 3 Fanon would most famously espouse his stance defending the rights of the colonized to use violence in order to gain freedom in his influential book *The Wretched of the Earth*, published shortly before his death from cancer in 1961.
- 4 According to Gordon, “Over a period of time [Curse of the Voodoo] was financially successful because of television and video but not really on its initial release.” Senn, Bryan. *Drums of Terror: Voodoo in the Cinema*. Baltimore: Luminary Press, 1998.143. Print.
- 5 Bibly, Kenneth and Jerome Handler. 2004, p. 156. Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Life. *The Journal of Caribbean History*, 32.2, 153–183.
- 6 “An Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, Jamaica 1760.” *Obeah Histories*, January 24, 2013. <https://obeahhistories.org/1760-jamaica-law/>.
- 7 Paton, Diana. The Racist History of Jamaica’s Obeah Laws. 2019, July 4. www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-racist-history-of-jamaicas-obeah-laws/#:~:text=The%20Jamaican%20government%2C%20like%20other,punishable%20by%20flogging%20and%20imprisonment. [Accessed March 23, 2022].
- 8 Paton, Diana. *The Cultural Politics of Obeah*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.40–41. Print.
- 9 Paton (119).
- 10 Paton, Diana. The Racist History of Jamaica’s Obeah Laws. 2019, July 4. www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-racist-history-of-jamaicas-obeah-laws/#:~:text=The%20Jamaican%20government%2C%20like%20other,punishable%20by%20flogging%20and%20imprisonment. [Accessed March 23, 2022].
- 11 The U.S. formed neocolonial relationships with nations like the Philippines. Although the U.S. granted the Philippines independence in 1946, it did so only after it “obtained the right to establish twenty-two military bases across the archipelago, sites where its forces were free from Filipino legal jurisdiction. In addition, the Filipino economy was closely bound by tariff and currency agreements to the American economy.” Kennedy (44–45).
- 12 Senn (184–5).
- 13 Aikens was a dancer and choreographer who performed with the groundbreaking Black dance troupe the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, renowned for the “Dunham Technique” that incorporated African and Caribbean dance movements. This lent an air of authenticity to the Voodoo dance scenes in the film. Schott-Bresler, K. “Vanoye Aikens (1917–2013).” *BlackPast.org*. March 7, 2014. Web. www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/vanoye-aikens-1917-2013.
- 14 Richards, Jeffrey. New Waves and Old Myths: British Cinema in the 1960s. *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s*, Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed (Eds.). 1992. Print. 176. London; Routledge.

- 15 The movie never explains what specifically scarred Gwen beyond the image of Black men approaching her aggressively. She can't bring herself to explain the ordeal, which seems to imply something happened beyond what is shown on screen. It's left to the audience's imagination, which can often be much worse than what the script intended, especially when Black-on-white violence is implied.
- 16 Coincidentally, actor Danny Daniels portrays the cursing witch doctor in both *The Oblong Box* and *Curse of the Voodoo*.
- 17 Largey, Michael. *Voodoo Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.5. Print.
- 18 Goodall, Mark. "Introduction." *Sweet & Savage: The World Through the Shockumentary Film Lens*. London: Headpress, 2006. Print.
- 19 The Godfathers of Mondo. DVD. Directed by David Gregory (Blue Underground, 2003).
- 20 Shipka, Danny. *Perverse Titillation: The Exploitation Cinema of Italy, Spain and France, 1960–1980*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011.59. Print.
- 21 The Godfathers of Mondo.
- 22 Shipka, Danny (68).
- 23 The Godfathers of Mondo.
- 24 Thomas Cripps. "Film." *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*. Eds. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990.163–64. Print.
- 25 Romero directed *Night of the Living Dead* and co-wrote the screenplay with John Russo. The film was produced by Image Ten, a group of filmmakers that included Romero and Russo, who also contributed to the script, acted in the movies, and worked on lighting and make-up.
- 26 Hervey, Ben. *Night of the Living Dead*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.63. Print.
- 27 Stein, Elliott. "Night of the Living Dead." *Sight and Sound* 39 (1970): 105. Print.
- 28 Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986.114. Print.
- 29 Becker, Matt. "A Point of Little Hope: Hippie Horror Films and the Politics of Ambivalence." *The Velvet Light Trap* 57 (2006): 58. Print.
- 30 Becker (42, 51, 58).
- 31 Stein (105).
- 32 Hervey (110). According to Hervey, these scenes made Romero and his film seem even more radical and rebellious as he used the police themselves to make a statement about the Establishment.
- 33 Becker, Michael and Mike Carbone. "Tony Todd." *Reel Horror*. Episode 25. June 2, 2010. http://legacy-content.libsyn.com/vidhack/reel_horror-ep25-070306.mp3. Radio.
- 34 Hervey (112).
- 35 Hervey (113–114).
- 36 Hervey (118).
- 37 Dyer, Richard. "White." *Screen* 29 (1988): 45. Print.
- 38 Heffernan, Kevin. "Inner-City Exhibition and the Genre Film: Distributing Night of the Living Dead." *Cinema Journal* 41 (2002): 59–77.59. Print.
- 39 Humphries (The American Horror Film 115).
- 40 Because *Night*, due to an error in the copyright, is a public domain film, it is difficult to gauge its profits. However, according to IMDb.com and BoxOfficeMojo.com, those profits that have been recorded exceed \$30 million.
- 41 Heffernan (Inner-City 59); Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business 1953–1968*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.207. Print.
- 42 "Horror Films Debut Soon." *Daily Defender*, November 12, 1957: B10. Col. 5. Print.

- 43 “Triple Horror Films Electrify Fans at Regal.” *Daily Defender*, May 4, 1960: 16.5. Print.
- 44 “‘Paranoia’ Horror Film Debuts at the Oriental.” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 16–22, 1960: 1+. Print.
- 45 “Two Horror Films Bow at Drive-Ins.” *Chicago Defender*, April 18, 1970: 28.6. Print.
- 46 Heffernan (Inner-City 60).
- 47 Heffernan (Inner-City 74).
- 48 Hervey (7).
- 49 Heffernan (Inner-City 9).
- 50 Ernest Dickerson was the second unit camera operator on this film, according to Mark Reid in *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.76. Print. Dickerson, an African American, would go on to cinematographer and/or directing acclaim with *The Brother from Another Planet*, *Tales from the Darkside*, *Tales from the Crypt*, *Def by Temptation*, *Demon Knight*, *Bones*, and *Masters of Horror*, to name a few spooky offerings.
- 51 Horror Hound Weekend. March 26–28, 2010.7202 East 21st Street, Indianapolis, IN, 46219.
- 52 Dyer (62–63).
- 53 I have found no claims that Eugene Clark’s casting was color-blind casting.
- 54 Dyer (59, 62–63). In *Land of the Dead*, the cast is particularly diverse. Though there are Blacks seen living in the restricted, gated high-rise community, a community in which “spics” like one of the forgers are not allowed, the investment in classism and in a sort of effete, enlightened whiteness is clear.
- 55 Winokur, Mark. “Technologies of Race: Special Effects, Fetish, Film and the Fifteenth Century.” *Genders OnLine Journal* 40 (2004): 6. Web. January 20, 2006. www.genders.org/g40/g40_winokur.html.
- 56 Mailer, Norman. “The White Negro.” Fall 1957. *LearnToQuestion.com: Resource Base* 2008. N.p. Web. June 20, 2010. www.learntoquestion.com/resources/database/archives/0.
- 57 Goldsby (247).
- 58 Heffernan (Inner-City 75).

6

SCREAM, WHITEY, SCREAM—RETRIBUTION, ENDURING WOMEN, AND CARNALITY

1970s

In the 1970s, filmmakers took full advantage of the doors George Romero's brand of horror opened, as well as the disappearance of the Hays Code and the seemingly ever-in-flux, watered-down Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system.¹ In just a few short years, edgy, explicit R-rated fright-fests such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Halloween* (1978) took hold of the genre, rendering the likes of *Dracula* (1931), *King of the Zombies* (1941), and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) bloodlessly attenuated. Though the genre saw rapid and dramatic changes in style and form, this is not to say that the classic, Gothic horror films such as 1931's *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* did not continue to profoundly influence the genre. The old masterworks were updated with contemporary themes (and a good bit of carnage). This sort of refreshing innovation, particularly on the heels of Romero's successful film *Night of the Living Dead*, starring a Black actor, opened up narrative space for many more Black characters. Reinventing the genre from the vantage point of Blackness often meant reimagining the standards. For example, *Dracula* became *Blacula* (1972), featuring the first Black vampire in American film.² *Frankenstein* became *Blackenstein* (1973),³ with the monster being a gravely wounded Black Vietnam War veteran reconstructed by a white doctor. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* became *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976), with the monster taking the form of a murderous white creature, laying waste to health care inroads of his Black better half. A lawsuit filed by Warner Bros. film studio charged that *The Exorcist* (1973), a story about a demon, Pazuzu, unearthed in Iraq and possessing a white girl in the U.S., was stolen by the makers of the film *Abby* (1974), in which a Black American woman becomes possessed by a Yoruba sex demon uncovered in Nigeria. Indeed, this was a "revisionist decade"⁴ for the film industry in which, for the first time, "the studios produced Black-oriented film pitched directly at pleasing Blacks."⁵

Over the decade, “Black horror” would thrive, with Black characters appearing in the genre as villainous monsters, anti-heroes, and monster slayers. Black women figured prominently as strong, resilient protagonists. Whites were represented as well, but in this decade, they were evil bigots who would pay dearly for their anti-Blackness.

To be sure, “Black horror” films were not the first to present well-trodden movie themes. Early silent (horror) films scavenged to the point of plagiarism “preexisting formats for lucrative plots and styles of presentation that could be feasibly adopted for the moving camera” while often only minimally altering the pilfered stories with new details.⁶ While Black horror filmmakers did some poaching, the genre should be credited not only with dramatically reshaping the narratives but also with reappropriating “generic forms for more overtly political goals [such as] to critique the white power structure.”⁷

The films were emboldened by Black Power ideologies—a range of belief systems espousing an awakening of Black pride, self-sufficiency, and empowerment which were prominent during the decade. The imagistic result was “screen images of Black life reflect[ing] the new confidence of Black people”⁸ and a “veritable avalanche” of Black superheroes and anti/tragic-heroes who found their way to the big screen.⁹ However, the influx was followed by a fresh assortment of problems that called into question the exploitation of Black trendiness for profit. As Gary Null, in *Black Hollywood*, explains:

What emerges, in fact is an altogether new set of black stereotypes. Perhaps derived from the movement toward black power, the cool, efficient black hero seems to have more in common with James Bond than with the political ideals of any black movement. Some of these movies pay lip service to black separatism, Afro-American culture, and local control.¹⁰

The Horrors of Blaxploitation

Lamenting subpar representations and the low quality of 1970s films featuring Blacks, Ellen Holly of the *New York Times* wrote in 1974, “one of the penalties of being Black and having limited money is that we seldom control our own image. We seldom appear in media as *who we* say we are, but rather, as *who whites* say we are.”¹¹ The economic conditions under which Black films were made gave rise to the moniker “Blaxploitation”—a portmanteau uniting the concepts of “Black” and “exploitation”¹²—to define the decade’s Black films, horror and non-horror alike. Blaxploitation describes an era of Black film offerings that often drew their inspiration from Black Power ideologies while presenting themes of empowerment, self-sufficiency (though not always through legal means), and consciousness raising. In “Black horror” specifically, “white,” monsters, such as Dracula or Frankenstein’s Monster, were purposefully transformed into “agents”

of Black Power.¹³ Blaxploitation films also often had an anti-establishment message, challenging “the Man’s” or “whitey’s” exploitation of Black communities (e.g., importing drugs, running prostitution rings, and rogue cops).

Blaxploitation’s attempt at political engagement was not without its critics. Rhines explains:

[T]hese films were released during the height of the Civil Rights/Black liberation movement, yet their subject matter of sex, violence, and “super cool” individualism was the antithesis of what contemporaneous Black political organizations like SNCC, the NAACP, or SCLC supported for Black people.¹⁴

The films were “condemned by Black opinion leaders across the political spectrum for [their] criminal stereotypes and rightly identified as mainly the product of white studios, writers, and directors,” even as the movies proved to be popular, particularly among Blacks who enjoyed seeing Black characters and communities on the big screen.¹⁵ Moreover, the films were notoriously exploitative of women, as a hallmark of Blaxploitation films was the subjection of (cisgender and gender non-conforming) women characters to misogynistic treatment, abuse, and rape. Blaxploitation later came to be thought of as a film genre in and of itself, boasting drama/action classics such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), *The Mack* (1973), and *Dolemite* (1975), as well as “Black horror” films such as *Blacula* (1972).

Blacula, produced in 1972, was the decade’s gold standard for recreating a (white) horror classic in the image of Blackness, while also tackling issues of Black pride and empowerment. Directed by the visionary Black filmmaker William Crain and starring erudite William Marshall, this “Black horror” film presents a compelling take on the vampire story while exploring the effects of racism alongside the loss of Black history and identity.

Blacula begins its story in the year 1780 with Mamuwalde (Marshall), a refined, learned African prince, traveling with his poised wife, Luva (Vonetta McGee), to Transylvania for a dinner meeting with the white Count Dracula (Charles Macaulay). In the meeting, Mamuwalde presses Dracula to renounce the slave trade, from which the enormously wealthy Dracula has been profiting greatly. Dracula is not only a vampiric monster but also a virulent racist (“It is you who comes from the jungle”). *Blacula* rather self-consciously included hateful rhetoric to expose its detestable impact and to actively rebuke such offenses. In this film, and in a great many Black horror films of this decade, “lingering racist tropes . . . were now readily identified and exposed.”¹⁶

Dracula refuses Mamuwalde’s demands and bites him, thereby infecting the prince with vampirism. Mamuwalde is renamed “Blacula”—a variation of his white vampire “master’s” name. Given a slave name, he is robbed of his (African) identity. Dracula then entombs Mamuwalde, leaving him to suffer forever, as the

undead, from blood thirst. Luva is not tainted with vampirism, though she is presumably killed almost immediately.¹⁷

Mamuwalde-turned-Blacula remains buried for nearly two centuries, until 1972 when Dracula's abandoned Transylvanian castle has its property put up for public sale.¹⁸ American buyers purchase some of the castle's contents, including the coffin that, unbeknownst to them, contains Blacula. Thus, Mamuwalde, who died fighting against slavery, ironically himself makes a much-belated trip through the Middle Passage to the New World—enslaved by vampirism and auctioned off.

The buyers are two Los Angeles collectors, one Black and the other white, both gay men. Not only business partners but also romantic partners in a loving relationship, the men are depicted as stereotypically sissified and effete in manner and dress. Their portrayal is disappointing, and far from enlightened in this post-Hays Code period (1930s–1960s) when the strict policing of images of gender queerness (or other gender non-conformity) was enforced. When Mamuwalde emerges from his coffin, ravenous for blood, he transforms from a stately man to a hairy man-monster and quickly feeds on the two men, permitting glimpses of sensuality through implications of an interracial/homosexual encounter (an association that Eddie Murphy's 1995 *A Vampire in Brooklyn* would assiduously avoid). When Mamuwalde feeds on Billy (Rick Metzler), the white collector, he feeds on Billy's cut arm while pushing Billy's face (neck and lips) far from him. When Mamuwalde feeds on Bobby (Ted Harris), the Black collector, he first chokes him into unconsciousness and then violently bites, feeding on the lifeless body in anger. Mamuwalde's taking of the men, then, allows only a glimpse of homoeroticism before quickly shifting to a homophobic, heterosexist stance signaled by rage and violence.

Satiated, Mamuwalde does not turn his attention to avenging his own "death" or that of his beloved Luva at the hands of whites. Instead, in spite of its politically inspired narrative beginnings, *Blacula* becomes a horror love story in which Mamuwalde begins an unrelenting pursuit of a woman, Tina (also played by McGee), who reminds him of Luva. Mamuwalde's actions, then, align with that which has "always [been] explicit in Dracula's reign of terror in England . . . the search for romantic love and the desired recuperation of normality."¹⁹

Romantic love in *Blacula* is narrowly defined as heterosexual. In the film, the brave, savvy Dr. Gordon Thomas (Thalmus Rasulala), with the help of his medical assistant/girlfriend Michelle (Denise Nicholas), uncovers Mamuwalde's secret. Together they are a good team and also in a loving relationship. Yet, Bobby and Billy, who are similarly doting on one another, and even equal partners in a thriving business, are reduced to "two faggot interior decorators" in the movie. Later, when Bobby's body disappears from a funeral home because he has turned into a vampire, police raise the question, "Who the hell would want a dead faggot?" And, in yet another scene, a racist stereotype, "they all look alike," is shifted to gay men, furthering the film's dismissive, heteronormative rhetorical violence. As such, the film's dialogue around racism (disparaging Mamuwalde with a jungle



FIGURE 6.1 Blacula in full rage in *Blacula*

AIP/Photofest

reference) and homophobia may function to disrupt and expose hate. However, the references to the men's sexual identity do not upend prejudice in favor of simply being denigratory.

Sharrett describes such *Dracula* films as a parody of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913), a collection of essays attending to themes such as the importance of the father figure, obsessions with the magical realm, and illicit carnality.²⁰ Sharrett writes, "Dracula [is] the tyrannical father incidentally violating all sexual taboos, including those against homosexuality."²¹ Though 1970s Black films (both horror and non-horror) presented characters (such as Bobby and Billy) outside the boundaries of heteronormative sexuality, their depiction was rarely with positive, innovative effect. Though queer and gender non-conforming characters, at times, were integrated into the plotlines of Blaxploitation era films, they could not avoid slurs such as "dyke" and "faggot" in films, to include *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), *Black Mama White Mama* (1973), *Bucktown* (1975), *Friday Foster* (1975), *Sheba, Baby* (1975), and *Car Wash* (1976).²² Wlodarz, in "Beyond the Black Macho: Queer Blaxploitation," finds that heterosexuality, then, is used to anchor representations of "authentic" Blackness (and heroism), while queerness gains a certain threatening representational power. This means diverse sexualities are not absented from Black films because they serve

a purpose even as “the films themselves admittedly remain anxious and often phobic in their handling of these characters.”²³ These anxieties are played out violently. For example, a gay Black man is sodomized with a hot curling iron in the non-horror Blaxploitation film *Black Shampoo* (1976).

Presenting an “authentic” Black, masculine ideal, Mamuwalde’s amorous feelings for Tina, which she quickly reciprocates, can be viewed as motivating a nostalgia for an empowered Blackness outside of the shadow of whiteness. “Tina’s willingness to be his partner, to become a vampire,” argues Gateward in “Day-walkin’ Night Stalkin’ Bloodsuckas: Black Vampires in Contemporary Film,” is her attempt to recuperate the nobility of African culture, during a period in American culture when the idea of Africa as a mythic homeland was prevalent in both the political and expressive cultures of Black Americans and the Diaspora as a whole.²⁴ Likewise, Mamuwalde’s name and nobility “link him to the Afrocentric cultural politics adopted by some branches of the Black power movement.”²⁵ Tina is persuaded to believe, by Mamuwalde, that she is the key to recuperation through a play on Africa-as-motherland rhetoric: “We are of the Abani tribe, you and I. Northeast of the Niger Delta. Our people are renowned as hunters . . . You are my Luva re-created.” Even when Mamuwalde must say goodbye to Tina, he does so in Kiswahili.

However, in the film, the connection between noble Africans and African Americans is (perhaps unintentionally) illusory. Mamuwalde lands in a predominately Black section of L.A., but it is clear that these are not his people. Mamuwalde is of a different time and caste. It is as if, as James Baldwin so eloquently wrote in *Notes of a Native Son* of African/American relationships, “they face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years—an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening’s goodwill.”²⁶ Certainly, it does not help that Mamuwalde preys upon the Black Americans he encounters.

Still, *Blacula* has been credited with being revolutionary. Elizabeth Young, in *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*, credits the film for capitalizing on the “freedom for political fantasy that horror films could afford.”²⁷ Leerom Medovoi, in his article “Theorizing Historicity, or the Many Meanings of *Blacula*,” observes, “the figure of Mamuwalde recalls, for instance, the eulogizing of Malcolm X throughout the late 1960s as the ‘shining black prince’ of African-America.”²⁸ While Harry Benshoff, in his article “Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?,” draws upon *Blacula* to argue that films of this period critically comment upon white racism (both institutionalized and personal) and are “steeped in African American culture of the early 1970s; references to the Black Panthers, Afrocentric style, [and] soul food.”²⁹

American International Pictures

Blacula met with enough box office success—grossing over \$1 million by the end of its theatrical run³⁰—that its production company, American International Pictures (AIP, 1954 to 1980, pre-acquisition), sought to continue to court the

Black horror film. AIP was known for its low-budget, exploitation fare targeting the teen/young adult audience, be they monster movies or “beach” films such as *Beach Party* (1963) and *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965). AIP was far from being a film trailblazer; rather as one of its founders, James H. Nicholson, dictated, the company’s first step in movie making was to “observe trends in emerging taste.”³¹ I (Means Coleman) describe their approach to filmmaking in the documentary film *Horror Noire* (2019): AIP’s business model was, “we’re not going to lead. We’re going to look, see what’s happening out there; what might be popular. And then we’re going to get on kind of the back side of this and produce more of it.” Theirs was a strictly for-profit budget model, investing as little as they could and hoping something stuck. Their films would go on just a few screens in some cases, often in Black neighborhoods. Very low investment. Very low quality.³²

As they “waited for someone else to test the water first”³³ while “observ[ing] trends in emerging tastes,”³⁴ AIP’s finances suffered. They watched as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), offered through the production company Cinematation, earned impressive box office returns grossing over \$11 million³⁵ while the film *Shaft* (1971, MGM) saw a \$17 million domestic gross.³⁶ The success and acclaim of these films moved AIP in 1972 to release *Blacula* as well as the non-horror 1973 gangster film *Black Caesar*.³⁷ Only then did AIP see some relief through William Crain’s *Blacula*, as Crain explains, “At the time, I was not astute enough to look at AIP’s budget. But they weren’t making any money at all. The rumor was that they were in deep water. And *Blacula* brought in a lot of money for them.”³⁸

Emboldened, AIP stayed the course, offering Black horror films such as *The Thing with Two Heads* (1972), *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973), *(The Zombies of) Sugar Hill* (1974), *Abby* (1974), and *J.D.’s Revenge* (1976). In spite of imaginative stories, they were limited by their low budgets as it was also AIP’s policy to “produce with prudence, avoiding expense for what won’t show on-screen.”³⁹ Following AIP’s lead, Exclusive International released *Blackenstein*, and Dimension films offered *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde*.

Fight the Power

Exclusive International’s *Blackenstein* (1973) was “a product of white Hollywood, made by a white director, William Levey, and a white writer, Frank Saletri [;the film was] crude and sloppy, a failure even by low-budget standards.”⁴⁰ *Blackenstein* evidenced a coalescence of sociopolitical concerns as it adopted an anti-(Vietnam) war stance, questioned the contribution of Blacks to what may be perceived as a colonialist war effort, and explored the continuing tensions around Black/white race relations.

The film’s focus is Eddie Turner (Joe De Sue), a Black man, whose body is severely damaged by a land mine during the Vietnam War. Limbless, Eddie is

shipped back to the U.S., where he is sent to a Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital. While there, the helpless Eddie is bullied by a white orderly in an exchange that works to highlight struggles around bigotry and white supremacy. First, the orderly (Bob Brophy) taunts the armless man: “Why don’t you reach over there and have a nice, cool drink of water.” The scene dramatizes a racial hierarchy that is “inseparable from the setting of a VA hospital during the Vietnam War—Black Power and other activists frequently criticized the Vietnam War as a conflict run by white men but disproportionately fought by Black men.”⁴¹ Next, the orderly reveals that he tried to enlist but, to his great embarrassment, was deemed unfit for service. The orderly then transfers his lack onto Eddie: “Big deal you laying there, you know it’s my taxes, my friends’ taxes that’s gonna keep you there. We gotta take care of you.” Eddie is not regarded as a war hero; rather, he is derided by the inadequate orderly for both being a welfare case and for being a fool for falling for the “scam” of patriotism.

Eddie’s fiancée, Dr. Winifred Walker (Ivory Stone), gets Eddie transferred out of the hospital and into the care of the kindly, white Dr. Stein (John Hart). Dr. Stein, as in the classic *Frankenstein* (1931), works out of his castle-like home, which is complete with a basement laboratory. However, Eddie is not turned monstrous by Dr. Stein; rather, his fate is sealed by Malcomb (Roosevelt Jackson), a jealous Black assistant to Dr. Stein, who wants to sabotage Eddie and Winifred’s relationship. Malcomb tampers with Eddie’s drugs, turning Eddie into a fully restored and mobile, but psychopathic hulking monster. Here, much like *Blaçula*’s failure to directly engage white oppressions, in this case, a country that first forced him to fight in a war, *Blackenstein* “vitiates one of the main political contributions of the Frankenstein story: its focus on the origins of violence [thereby diffusing] the targets of its monster’s anger.”⁴² The white orderly meets his expected gruesome demise. However, like Mamuwalde, Eddie is also happy to kill off innocent, unsuspecting Black people. When Eddie opts to disembowel a Black woman, he does so only after the audience is provided with a lengthy “money-shot” of her jiggling, exposed breasts.

The scenes of slaughter are tempered, however, by the film’s low budget. Eddie as a monster is shot in low, poor lighting, and his actions are played out in almost total darkness. As a result, the film takes on an unanticipated mournful tone. The effect is a unique one as the on-screen violence that is the hallmark of horror films takes a back seat to that which cannot be seen but only heard—the anguished moans of a monster moved to kill when he does not really want to, perhaps just as he (as a man) did during the war. Eddie’s fate is not at all dissimilar to that of some disabled American war veterans. He returns to his country physically and mentally impaired, with drugs exacerbating his difficulties. He turns to a life of crime and is killed by law enforcement (police dogs maul Eddie to death). Though he is able to survive a war in a foreign land, it is his return home that finally defeats him.

The Thing with Two Heads (1972) and *Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde* (1976) drilled down more explicitly on the themes of race relations and medical experimentation. *Heads*, named one of the 50 worst movies ever made, is a story of Black

one-upmanship in the face of white bigotry.⁴³ The film, more farcical than horror, tells the story of Dr. Maxwell Kirshner (Ray Milland), a famed surgeon and infamous racist who is dying but wants to live on by transplanting his head onto a healthy (white) body. NFL football player Rosey Grier portrays “Big Jack” Moss, a Black death row inmate who, though innocent of his crimes, offers to donate his body to science rather than die in an electric chair. Unbeknownst to an unconscious Kirshner, his surgical team transplants Kirshner’s head onto Jack’s body. Both awaken surprised to see their heads on Jack’s body—hence, the obviously named thing with two heads. The movie’s premise had (ridiculous) comic consequences. “They transplanted a white Bigot’s Head onto a Soul Brother’s Body!” screamed the movie’s ads and poster art, which perhaps served as a not-so-subtle metaphor for the treatment of Black people by white image-makers.⁴⁴

Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde, with Black director William Crain again at the image-making helm, took race and medical experimentation far more seriously, with former NFL football player Bernie Casey playing Dr. Pryde as a caring Black doctor treating the Black poor of Watts. Dr. Pryde’s name is an obvious double-entendre about Black pride (he is never called Dr. Black).



FIGURE 6.2 The Thing with Two Heads

American International/Photofest

In the film, Dr. Pryde is experimenting with a cure for hepatitis and cirrhosis. Dr. Pryde develops what he believes is a promising treatment for the two deadly diseases that are afflicting members of the Watts community, particularly its female prostitutes. Over the course of the film, we learn that Dr. Pryde's search for a cure is personal—his mother, though not a prostitute, died from liver damage. The storyline is, in part, a tale of achievement and commitment as the talented Dr. Pryde has reached a higher education and professional pinnacle and, admirably, returned home to do good work. However, the film presents two “homes” for Dr. Pryde. The first is where he works, his hometown of Watts where he had a complicated upbringing. It is revealed that Dr. Pryde joined his mother in a brothel for “ladies of the evening,” in a (presumably) predominately white community.⁴⁵ There his mother was a live-in maid where it was her responsibility to “clean up the filth.” The job took its physical and emotional toll, moving Dr. Pryde's mother to drink and ultimately develop “this liver condition,” which proved deadly. But, he does not live in Watts. Rather, he lives in an upscale, suburban community in a sprawling mansion home. Hence, his residing outside of Watts is not about escape but is a symbolic act of reclamation.

Dr. Pryde develops an experimental drug that he tests on himself, with the expected disastrous results. The drug turns Dr. Pryde into a “white dude”—a white, ashen-faced, blue-eyed killer monster (presumably Mr. Hyde, though he is never called this in the movie). Dr. Pryde makes his way (in his Rolls Royce) to Watts turning it into his killing ground. There he violently unleashes his repressed hatred of prostitutes and pimps.

On the doppelgänger's hit list is Linda (Marie O'Henry), a prostitute that Dr. Pryde has fallen for. As law enforcement hunts for the killer, Linda is initially mistrustful of the police and is openly conflicted about leading them to Dr. Pryde. Here, the film is exposing a well-known tenuous relationship between law enforcement and Black communities; the film overtly addresses the issue of Blacks steering clear of police: “In the Black community, nobody knows nothing, nobody sees nothing, and nobody hears nothing.” The film also speaks to the real-life quandaries Black women face when imperiled by a violent relationship—involving the police is not always an easy choice. The National Association of Black Social Workers summarizes the fears:

Women of African ancestry often do not call the police for fear of police brutality against their mates or against themselves. . . . Women of African ancestry often do not report domestic violence for fear that such reporting would be a betrayal of the race or would contribute to negative stereotypes.⁴⁶

In his monstrous state, Dr. Pryde attacks Linda but does not kill her, eventually releasing her (perhaps there is some of Dr. Pryde left in him). The police arrive and, as in *Blackenstein* or in an earlier film, *Night of the Living Dead*, release attacking German shepherd police dogs on him. Fleeing, he climbs to the top of the

Watts Tower with helicopters circling overhead, recalling the climactic scene of *King Kong*. Police shoot the Dr. Pryde monster—in a hail of bullets, he plunges to his death (also like King Kong). The allusion to Blacks and apes in the film's ending is a curious one, as it does not appear in the original 1886 novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, or in many of the film adaptations since the novella. However, the Black monster ape emerges more explicitly in the 2006 film *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, starring Black actor Tony Todd of *Candyman* (1992) fame. In the film, Dr. Jekyll first morphs into the evil Eddie Hyde. As Hyde becomes more crazed and lethal, he (oddly) transforms into a primate, attempts a rooftop escape, and is shot down like Kong, plunging to his death.

The film *Fight for Your Life* (1977) presented the “worst” of both Black and exploitation film worlds. A low-budget rip-off of *The Last House on the Left*, the film follows three sadistic escaped male convicts: an Asian, a Mexican, and a white self-appointed “boss” of the trio. Hiding from police, the men take refuge in a predominately white, small town. The home they choose to hide out in belongs to a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.-like Black minister, Ted Turner (Robert Judd), who preaches on themes of Black passivism, peace, patience, and the meek inheriting the Earth.

The Turners are the embodiment of an integrationist family. In addition to living in a largely white community, their recently deceased son (as a result of an earlier car accident) had a white fiancée, Karen (Bonnie Martin), who still visits the family and is a devoted friend to the family's young adult daughter Corrie (Yvonne Ross). The remaining son, a pre-teen named Floyd (Reggie Rock Bythewood), has a white best friend, Joey (David Dewlow), the son of a local police officer.

A central plot line in the film is whether peace or (armed) resistance is more tenable in the face of cruel racism. Ted's ideology is embraced by his wife, Louise (Catherine Peppers) but rejected by “Granny” (LeLa Small), a feisty, wheelchair-bound woman who spouts Black nationalist rhetoric: “Black power is where it's at!”

In the film, Jesse (William Sanderson), the white convict who refers to his partners in crime as “chink” and “spic,” terrorizes the Turner family. He forces them to engage in acts of degradation—“Say, ‘All us Black ass coons is hungry’”—and showers them with racial epithets. Eventually, the horrors escalate as Karen and Joey are murdered. Ted is beaten into unconsciousness with his own Bible. Corrie is gang-raped. Finally, the family rises up by arming themselves and killing their tormentors. However, it is Ted who is at the center of the climactic finale in which during a showdown with Jesse, he dramatically renounces his ideology of peace and nonviolence, opting instead for violent revenge. Ted cruelly taunts Jesse, calling him a “faggot” and asserting that he is less than a real man for suffering rape while in jail. He then guns down Jesse, the last of the convicts. *Fight for Your Life* staked a clear political claim—ideologies of turn-the-other-cheek were

no longer sustainable. However, it was also a lowly exploitation movie in which such ideologies, as well as racism, sexism, and even recidivism, were cheapened, reduced to a moment in a family's life that is resolved through vigilantism.

The problem with this decade of industry exploitation of the Black film market was that occasionally a low-budget, but compelling horror film would be offered but was unable to stand apart from the lowest dross. *Soul Vengeance* (a.k.a., *Welcome Home Brother Charles*) (1975)—directed by Black director Jamaa Fanaka—presented one of the more shocking storylines seen in horror: a Black man wills his penis to grow to abnormal lengths and to gather impossible strength so that he can use it as a weapon to kill white police bigots. While *Soul Vengeance's* horror twist may provoke incredulity, the film is possibly the most thought-provoking response to: (1) the fear of the Black male phallus; (2) expectations of masculinity; and (3) carcerality, police brutality, and recidivism.

Soul Vengeance begins by focusing the audience on a lasting, divisive issue in race relations—white police brutality meted out upon Black people. Charles Murray (Marlo Monte), suspected of selling illegal drugs, is picked up by “the Man”—two white Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers. Instead of taking Charles to their precinct, they drive Charles to an alley to beat him. One of the officers, Jim (Stan Kamber), attempts to stop his partner Harry “Free” Freeman (Ben Bigelow) from going too far in his abuse of the handcuffed Charles, but his efforts fail. Though terrorized and badly beaten by Harry, Charles is unbowed but sees his strong will severely punished—Harry castrates Charles with a straight razor. However, the particular punishment of desexing is motivated by something more: Harry's wife is having an affair with a Black man because Harry is “not enough of a man” with his “shriveled up thing.” The castration, then, is a complex narrative around bigotry, masculinity, and the protection of white womanhood.

Charles is then incarcerated, with little reference made to the damage that has been done to his body. While in prison, Charles is consumed by thoughts of revenge that are played out in disturbing dreams and other visions. The depiction of Charles' mental state echoes the (in)famous writings of Black nationalist Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*. Cleaver reported he sexually assaulted Black women as practice before engaging in the politically motivated, “insurrection[ist]” serial sexual assault of white women—a twisted belief in disobedience that he would later renounce and hope to atone for. Cleaver describes his own state of mind while in prison: “I, the Black Eunuch, divested of my Balls, walked the earth with my mind locked in Cold Storage.”⁴⁷ In *Soul Vengeance*, after three years in prison with his own mind locked in “cold storage,” Charles returns to his Watts home only to discover recidivism looms as employers want nothing to do with him—“I can't even wash a car.”

Here, the film sets aside its horror leanings to embark on an extended, dramatic exploration of the bleak life of 1970s Watts for men like Charles. He enters into a loving relationship with a woman, Carmen (Reatha Grey), but theirs is a rocky union largely because Charles laments his inability to financially support her.

Charles catches a television news report about Harry being recognized for his highly effective police work by the LAPD. Charles' personal frustrations coupled with his anger over the celebration of a rogue cop are manifested in the film's return to horror tropes and through a focus on Charles' mutilated penis. His penis, it turns out, has healed with aberrant musculature.

Charles talks his way into the home of the police officer who brutalized him, as well as that of the lawyer who prosecuted him. Once in their homes, Charles drops his pants, quite literally mesmerizing each man's white wife with his bewitching penis; hence, not unlike Cleaver, he engages in his own insurrectionist sexual interference. In the first act of Charles' revenge, he has sex with the entranced women. While they are under Charles' spell, he insinuates a command into their psyche: they must open the doors to their homes for him later in the evening when their husbands return home from work. The women comply, and Charles catches the men off guard, killing them.

The viewer is not initially sure how the murders have been carried out, as "what lurks outside the frame or unclearly within it, generates uncertainty about what one is seeing."⁴⁸ Finally, in the murder of the crooked lawyer, Charles' power is fully revealed. He is able to will his penis to grow to lengths of several feet, which he then loops around the neck of his victims, strangling them. This scene is a fascinating one as Charles' desire to have the white men who harmed him choke on "it" cannot be fully realized in the literal sense, as that would require a far more homoerotic encounter than is already presented. Still, in wrapping a large, snaking Black penis around white men's throats, a highly erotic, but clear visual reference to lynching by hanging is established.

Charles' murderous deeds are finally uncovered. He is pursued by police and, like so many Black monsters discussed earlier, he is cornered on a rooftop. The police bring Carmen to the scene, asking her to talk him down so that he may be arrested and reincarcerated or worse (since a minor infraction got him castrated). Now that Charles has been molested and murdered, it is expected that his life is on a very short clock. During this era, "no one wanted to see a black hero defeated";⁴⁹ hence, a death in which a Black man has control of his destiny is better than handing himself—his life—over to whites. In the film's final, dramatic scene, before cutting to black, Carmen defiantly yells to Charles, "JUMP!"⁵⁰

Night of the Strangler (1972) is likewise an overlooked genre-bending film that reached deeper than its surface appearance to indict racism via a Black vigilante. Unlike *Soul Vengeance's* Los Angeles setting, *Strangler* takes place in the more traditionally portrayed hotbed of American racism: the Deep South. It begins with white college student Denise (Susan McCullough) returning home to New Orleans on a break from her studies at Vassar. Vassar is notoriously liberal, Northern, and, in 1972, only just recently converted to coeducational from all-female, thereby flying in the face of traditional women's roles as homemakers without higher educational aspirations. It is this school of choice that marks Denise as the "black sheep" of her conservative Southern family.⁵¹ To further

her “prodigal daughter” status, she breaks the news to her older brothers Vance (Micky Dolenz, of Monkees fame) and Dan (James Ralston) not only that she is dropping out of school to get married but also that she is pregnant—and the father is Black. Dan, the more virulent racist of the brothers and the one who has assumed the mantle of head of the family since their parents’ passing, demands that Denise get an abortion even before she reveals the race of the baby’s father. After finding out that she “let a stinking, degenerate nigger into your body,” Dan vows to murder the Black man who defiled her pristine white womanhood. Not surprisingly, shortly after Denise returns to New York, her fiancé is shot dead by an anonymous sniper. Sometime thereafter, Denise is drowned in her bathtub by an unknown intruder who frames the scene to resemble a suicide, leading one to wonder if Dan is heinous enough to kill his own sister.

Fast-forwarding a year or so, the story returns to New Orleans where the mystery killer targets Dan and Vance’s significant others, killing them with booby traps that bear no resemblance to strangulation, despite the film’s title. The deaths cause the two brothers to suspect one another, and their new parish priest, a Black man named Father Jessie (Chuck Patterson), is called in to help mend the rift, which was previously exacerbated by Denise’s “suicide.” The siblings’ suspicions get the better of them, however, and Dan and Vance end up mortally wounding each other in a climactic showdown. The whodunit truly comes to a head, though, when Father Jessie shows up to reveal to the dying Dan that he is in fact the killer. “Jessie,” it turns out, is not the real Jessie but rather his twin brother. The real Jessie was Denise’s murdered fiancé, whom Dan’s hired hitman killed. The real Jessie was a priest who was going to leave the church behind to marry Denise, but when he died, his unnamed brother took his place and vowed to kill Denise and her entire family, formulating an overly elaborate “long con” that involves him even going through a year’s worth of training in a monastery just to “get the moves down.”

Unlike *Soul Vengeance*, *Fight for Your Life*, and other tales of Black vengeance against white racism that revel in comeuppance throughout the film, *Night of the Strangler* is more surreptitious in its agenda. Just as the killer is unveiled only during the climax, so is the true nature of the movie. It’s a mystery in every sense; even the poster—featuring a white woman being strangled by a disembodied arm stretching through a doorway—gives no indication that it has anything to do with race. Interestingly, when the film failed to generate the desired profits upon its initial release in 1972, it was repackaged to take advantage of the Blaxploitation angle with the only slightly less misnomered title “Is the Father Black Enough?” and the inflammatory tagline “A racist wind blows the dust from a Black man’s grave to choke the honkies to death!!!”

Since *Strangler* is a “Blacks in horror” film, its Black vigilante stops short of hero status, unlike vigilante Charles in the “Black horror” *Soul Vengeance*. Charles’ capture and/or death is portrayed as tragic, but the killer in *Strangler*, who does not even get a name, is eventually caught by police in what is shown to be a just capture. It

is even treated with a sense of ironic humor, as he has the tables turned on him by the cops, who catch him in the sort of booby trap he used to murder his victims. Whereas Charles targets those responsible for his torture and wrongful jail sentence, the culprit in *Strangler* kills mostly innocents—three white women, no less, one of whom is pregnant—fully crossing the line from antihero to villain.

Until the revelation that he's the killer during the finale, "Jessie" plays the Sidney Poitier type that defined the major pre-Blaxploitation Black male roles in Hollywood: articulate, educated, professional, non-threatening, non-sexualized (being a priest), one-dimensional, and pristine to the point of blandness. In the 1967 New York Times opinion piece "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?," Black writer-actor Clifford Mason called this type of role "a show-case nigger, who is given a clean suit and a complete purity of motivation so that, like a mistreated puppy, he has all the sympathy on his side and all those mean whites are just so many Simon Legrees."⁵²

When unmasking himself as the murderer, however, "Jessie" code switches to Blaxploitation "bad nigger" mode, removing his glasses and clerical collar, using then-hip slang like "cat," "chick," "heavy," and "you dig." He taunts the dying Dan by calling Denise a "pregnant honky whore" and proclaiming proudly that "This jive-ass nigga got you all." He embodies the Blaxploitation era's transition from the old-fashioned, "turn the other cheek" type of cinematic Negro and new, swaggering, take-no-mess Negro who has no cheeks left to turn and thus resorts to violent vengeance.

Enduring Women

Over the decades, women's roles (though almost universally cisgender women) have become increasingly central and innovative in horror. In non-Black horror films, women have triumphantly battled against monsters (e.g., Laurie Strode in *Halloween* [1978]) and have been frighteningly evil (e.g., Pamela Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* [1980]). While audiences had seen wicked women before in the form of the vamp, temptress, succubus, and Voodoo queen, the *heroic* woman in horror was just beginning to make revolutionary inroads during the 1970s.

Carol Clover, in *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, theorizes on the form and function of the heroine in horror, describing her as the "Final Girl." The moniker captures the meaning—she is the one who, in the end, does not die. Indeed, the Final Girl is *the* survivor—surviving the monster's attack and often the only one to do so (e.g., Ripley in *Alien* [1979]). As Clover explains, "she alone looks death in the face, [and] she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)."⁵³ The Final Girl is also *a* survivor—smart, resourceful, and a fighter in the face of evil. Again, as Clover elaborates, the films of the 1970s began to present "Final Girls who not only fight back but do so with ferocity and even kill the killer on their own, without help from outside."⁵⁴

What is important here, in part, is the absence of a male savior. In the absence of a male savior, it is the woman—distinctly and inevitably white in this definition given the film’s representational history—who takes on and brings down the monster. As Clover asserts, what is key is the qualities of the Final Girl, “the quality of the fight and qualities that enable her to survive.”⁵⁵ For example, in *Halloween*, when Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) is pinned down in a closet by the deadly Michael, she does not whimper and collapse, awaiting death. Instead, she moves into fight mode, quickly fashioning a weapon out of a clothes hanger (the only thing on hand) to take on the evil. Likewise, (Ellen) Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* displays her tough leadership qualities when her spacecraft crewmates encounter a hostile alien monster with acid for blood. While the Black man, Parker (Yaphet Kotto), wants to brutishly attack the being headlong—“You’re gonna let me kill it, right?”—it is a reasoning Ripley who discerns that such an approach is unworkable, and takes control of the problem-solving by barking: “Shut up and let me think!” Final Girls tend to be white. When their fight with the monster is over, (franchises notwithstanding) their lives return to stasis. Ripley sleeps peacefully after she ejects the alien into space. Laurie Strode’s quiet, suburban life can return to normal.⁵⁶

However, 1970s horror films featuring Black women handled the Final Girl with a noteworthy variation. White Final Girls are generally unavailable sexually and are masculinized through their names (e.g., Ripley) and through the use of (phallic) weaponry (e.g., butcher knives or chainsaws versus, say, psychic powers). By contrast, Black women were often highly sexualized, with seduction and sexual obtainability serving as a principal part of their cache of armaments. Much like the white Final Girl, Black women stare down death; however, the threat is not some indestructible boogeyman; rather, often their battle is often more systemic with racism, community exploitation, and socio-political corruption as the enemy. In this regard, there is no going to sleep once the “monster” is defeated, as the monster is often amorphously coded as “whitey,” and whitey and the oppressions that they circulate and institutionalize are here to stay.

With no real way to dish out a final defeat against the evil—systems of inequality—that surrounds them, Black women in horror films become resilient “Enduring Women.” They are soldiers in ceaseless battles of discrimination in a quest for social justice. The Black woman’s triumphant walk into the sunset promises to take her not toward a life of peace, but back into the midst of criminal police, crooked politicians, gangsters, and “the Man” who is denying her and her neighbors a more positive life outcome.

The Enduring Woman, though committed to improving the broader social opportunities of Black people, remains bound not only by intersecting oppressions but also by the true motivating force for her action—her man. For example, in the non-horror Blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown* (1974), the character Foxy (Pam Grier) takes on “the Man” to avenge her boyfriend’s murder. She seduces her enemies before killing them, in the process also exposing herself to

beatings and rape. The 1974 “Black horror” zombie film *Sugar Hill* presents a similar driving force for its Enduring Woman. The provocatively named “Sugar” (Marki Bey) seeks to avenge the death of her boyfriend Langston at the hands of a “whitey” crime boss. Sugar uses her good looks and sensuality to get close to her foes; as such, she has lips and hips, but no shotgun like white Final Girls. Likewise, *Scream, Blacula, Scream’s* (1973) Enduring Woman, Lisa (Pam Grier), is called into battle to save not one, but two men—one from the vampirism that is coursing through his veins, and the other, a former love, from an attacking vampire. Enduring Women, then, inherit the burden of revenge and eventually become committed to ending oppression. Neither the Enduring Woman nor the Final Girl as “survivors of trauma” get to “evaluate their traumatic experiences” or attempt to heal from them.⁵⁷ Sadly, in these films, their mission is not about an inclusive feminist future in which (sexual) exploitation, marginalization, and persistent wounding are brought to a halt. Rather, they fight The Man for their man.

The acclaimed art-house movie *Ganja & Hess* (1973) (winner of the Critics’ Choice prize at the Cannes Festival),⁵⁸ directed by Black director Bill Gunn, presents the story of a tormented man and a wicked Enduring Woman. The “Black horror” film centers on Dr. Hess Green (Duane Jones of *Night of the Living Dead* fame), an attractive, highly successful archeologist. The monied Hess is “an elegant and sophisticated man by his clothes, Rolls Royce, and magnificent mansion, where a servant meets his every need.”⁵⁹ Hess’ socioeconomic status is purposeful, as the director’s strategy was “anti-stereotype” filmmaking, thereby reflecting an “earnest desire to transcend debilitating blaxploitation clichés.”⁶⁰ Hence, Hess was offered as the antithesis of depictions of the urban underclass or of those securing illicit profits through underground economies as seen in a host of Blaxploitation films.

In the film, Hess is employed by the Institute of Archaeology and is provided with an assistant, an older Black man, George Meda (Gunn). In a moment of solitude, while Meda is in a reception area waiting to introduce himself to Hess, he passes the time by pointing a small pistol at his reflection in a wall mirror. This is the audience’s first glimpse at Meda’s insanity.

Hess invites Meda back to his estate, and while there Meda reveals a crude side, offending the cultured Hess with vulgar jokes. Meda then sneaks away from Hess, fashions a noose, and climbs a tree on Hess’ property, threatening to hang himself. Hess comes to understand that Meda is drunk and “neurotic,” a volatile combination of instability. Hess asks Meda not to kill himself on his property because, as Hess reasons, “that will give the authorities the right to invade my privacy with all sorts of embarrassing questions. . . . I am the only colored on the block . . . and you can believe the authorities will drag me out for questioning.”

Meda then attacks Hess, viciously knifing him “for the father, son, and Holy Ghost.” The weapon Meda happens to use is a dagger of the Myrthia people, an ancient blood-drinking caste of Nigeria, which is part of Hess’ extensive private collection of prized artifacts. Having “killed” Hess, Meda commits suicide.

However, the infection from the blade means that Hess awakens undead and bloodthirsty. Hess stores Meda's body in a cellar freezer rather than calling the police, thereby evidencing that even the Black elite, not just prostitutes such as *Dr. Black* and *Mr. Hyde's* Linda, continue to fear (white) police.

Hess then goes blood hunting, traveling far from his sprawling estate to a ghetto to prey upon the poor. The addiction-driven Hess turns immoral and cruel, stealing the vital fluid from a clinic's blood bank. He then kills a prostitute and her pimp for their blood. Another prostitute, who is caring for her newborn, meets a similar fate, though he leaves her baby untouched but abandoned and crying in its crib near its mother's body. In this regard, *Ganja & Hess* became emblematic of films of the 1970s that were "constantly challenging the legitimacy of capitalist, patriarchal rule . . . , the monster became an emblem of the upheaval in bourgeois civilization."⁶¹ Thus, while Hess' wealth and social status represent an Oscar Micheaux-like attempt to uplift the Black image, Hess' literal feeding on the Black lower class shows that he buys too completely into his status and has lived in the company of elitist whites for too long, adopting a role of the imperialistic exploiter.

Soon Meda's wife, Ganja (Marlene Clark), arrives in search of her husband, who has "disappeared before" during bouts of psychosis. Just as Ganja's name promises (the psychosomatic drug cannabis), Hess becomes completely addicted to the beautiful but uncouth woman. Christopher Sieving in his meticulously researched, authoritative book on the film, *Pleading the Blood: Bill Gunn's Ganja & Hess*, recounts Clark's casting and role in the film:

A few months before joining the *Ganja & Hess* shoot in Croton-on-the-Hudson [NY], Marlene Clark was approached by a *Playboy* writer for comment on opportunities for African American actors in the New Hollywood. 'Blacks still get screwed in movies made by white men' was her curt response. . . . Gunn developed the part of Ganja especially for her. . . . Ganja's character is written as astoundingly gorgeous, and, in the screenplay, Hess is so shaken by his first sight of her that he falls into a sort of trance. . . . Ganja is no empty vessel waiting to be filled through a man's attention. She is a brazen, independent woman with "a tongue like a viper's," who is unafraid to dictate her desires without equivocation.⁶²

Ganja eventually discovers her husband's body in a freezer and soon after she marries Hess. Her rationale is simple: She would rather be married to an extremely wealthy crazed man than be the widow of a poor one, though her frequent affectionate gazing upon Hess and their emotional lovemaking belies any claims by Ganja of being singularly motivated by gold digging.

Eventually, Hess reveals his secret to Ganja, and then transforms her by stabbing her with the knife so that they may live together "forever." Together, they represent addictive personalities—both to blood lust and to their own carnal



FIGURE 6.3 Hess and Ganja in *Ganja & Hess*

Kelly/Jordan Ent./Photofest

indulgences. They work to satiate their insatiable lusts frequently—killing and having sex, sometimes simultaneously—until Hess concludes that such an existence is untenable.

Hess searches for, and discovers, a cure to his blood addiction (indeed, Gunn eschewed a traditional vampire horror flick for this more reflective treatise on dependency and lust). To be cured, he must accept Jesus as his personal savior and then stand before a cross with the cross' shadow over his heart. Here, the cleansing of sin in the shadow of a cross is suggestive of Spencer Williams' *The Blood of Jesus* in which Martha is restored by Jesus while she lays prone beneath a cross. While Martha is freed to live on, Hess is now free to die and, perhaps, enter into Heaven. The film concludes with Hess going back into the Black community, this time, not to feed on its residents, but to seek out a Black church where he can repent for his actions. Having reconnected with his Blackness and saved his soul, Hess returns home to Ganja to die. He begs her to join him in a penitent, peaceful death. However, Hess goes to his death alone.

Ganja opts to live on, enduring as a blood (and sex) addicted succubus. She stays on at Hess' estate, among his wealth, while having her share of male lovers and victims. Ganja not only survives her encounter with the monster but also chooses to become one.

Ganja & Hess was initially “suppressed” by its producers because it was far from the typical Blaxploitation fare that had become so familiar during this decade. “The producers,” write Diawara and Klotman, “wanted a film that would exploit black audiences—a black version of white vampire films.”⁶³ Gunn, however, wanted something more and different. As a result, *Ganja & Hess* saw improbable twists and turns: there was the rejection of Gunn’s vision by the film’s producers; on the sly, Gunn films it anyway in and around his own sprawling upstate New York property; it opens in a single theatre and dies; the film is shelved, sold, then re-edited (in the process destroying the master), and released as a jumbled vampire film called *Blood Couple* and *Double Possession*; the original cut of *Ganja & Hess* is screened to appreciative audiences at the Cannes Film Festival and at the MoMA using Gunn’s only copy of his original edit; today, the film is regarded as a cinematic masterpiece—a beautiful art film: “Black independent filmmakers have long considered *Ganja & Hess*’s very *making*, the improbability of its very *existence*, as a source of pride and encouragement.”⁶⁴

Pam Grier: Exploiting the Enduring Woman

Pam Grier became a Blaxploitation-era icon, starring in seven films for AIP alone.⁶⁵ She became, as Dunn describes in “*Bad Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas*, an AIP and Black cinema muse, “helping to establish Grier’s sex goddess screen imagery.”⁶⁶ However, Grier was not a so-called sex goddess in the tradition of white actresses Ava Gardner, Elizabeth Taylor, Hedy Lamarr, or Lauren Bacall. Rather, she was confined to the role of a hot mamma—a “controlling image,” as Hill Collins describes it, in which Black women become a symbol of deviant female sexuality, while white women become the “cult of true” womanhood.⁶⁷ Such imagery relegated Black women to the “category of sexually aggressive women,” thereby providing justification and yawning narrative space for sexual abuses.⁶⁸ For example, in *Foxy Brown* (1974), Grier’s character Foxy is drugged and gang-raped (by white racists). The horrific encounter is presented as an obligatory hurdle in that it allows Foxy to become an enduring woman working to exact revenge upon those who wronged her boyfriend. In *Coffy* (1973), Grier as Coffy offers herself as an undercover prostitute—which requires her pimp to “test her out.”

The hallmark of a Grier film was her partial nudity. The film camera lingered on her exposed, buxom bosom and long legs while she endured all manner of sexual exploitation. Writes Dunn:

The exhibition of women’s sexual bodies [was] enabled by the general relaxation of traditional Hollywood restrictions regarding violence, sexual content, and profane language. However, in the case of Grier, this exhibition is deeply tied to . . . AIP’s insistence on depicting Black female resistance and empowerment primarily through the pornographic treatment of their star.⁶⁹

Though sexual readiness does not immediately exclude a “feminist edge,” the treatment of Grier and other Blaxploitation starlets was distinctly harmfully hypersexual—ever available for sex, no matter how horrifically violent.⁷⁰

Notably, Grier is removed from these misogynistic images in the “Black horror” film *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973). *Scream* is the sequel to *Blacula*, which was directed by Black director William Crain and starred the acclaimed (Broadway) theater stage and screen actor, director, and jazz and opera singer William Marshall. Perhaps Grier’s far-from-pornographic treatment could be attributed to Marshall’s influence and earlier insistence that *Blacula* avoids stereotypes. Novotny Lawrence, in *Fear of a Blaxploitation Monster: Blacks as Generic Revision in AIP’s Blacula*, details Marshall’s influence:

While *Blacula* was in development, William Marshall collaborated with the producers to ensure that the image of the first black horror monster contained a level of dignity. In the original script *Blacula*’s straight name was Andrew Brown, which is the same as Andy’s in the blackface white comedy team of Amos and Andy. Marshall criticized the name commenting: “I wanted the picture to have a new framing story. A frame that would remove it completely from the stereotype of ignorant, conniving stupidity that evolved in the United States to justify slavery” . . . Marshall eventually persuaded the producers to incorporate his suggestions, and the first black vampire emerged as a regal character.⁷¹

Marshall’s demeanor, stature, and oeuvre tended to present Blacks outside of exploitative tropes (e.g., on stage he portrayed Othello, Paul Robeson, Frederick Douglass, an opera singer, and a doctor). It would seem that he would not participate in a role where he would play as a (sexual) abuser. Hence, given her treatment in other films, it is perhaps worth noting that Grier’s *Scream* character Lisa remains clothed, conservatively dressed even. Largely absent is the heavy makeup, revealing clothing, and large, silky wigs that were Grier’s typical costume. Rather, her natural hair—a short afro—is on display in *Scream*. And, she is often seen in pantsuits with high collared tops, thereby denying the viewer the objectifying examination of her breasts and high up her legs.

Lisa strikes a serious, even professional pose in the film, bringing a rare air of dignity to the often-maligned Voodoo religion of which she is a believer and sees as a curative for vampirism. Confronted by naysayers, Lisa and others define Voodoo as an “exceedingly complex science” and as a “religion based on faith.” In one scene, Lisa goes to a funeral home to pray over a deceased friend. She lights candles, assembles a small altar, and settles in to pray quietly—there is no stereotypical, frenzied dancing, drumming, or screaming and chanting. Her prayers are more akin to thoughtful meditation.

The shift toward more pronounced Afrocentrism and positive Black portrayals and messaging in *Scream, Blacula, Scream* was not surprising. In September 1972,

between the release of *Blacula* and *Scream, Blacula, Scream*, the NAACP and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) released joint statements against the Blaxploitation trend, specifically called out *Blacula* and *Blackenstein* as two of the offending “Black exploitation” movies that “invariably cast [Blacks] in a very demeaning, demoralizing, demented or degenerative state.”⁷² Just a month later, Marshall appeared alongside CORE National Chairman Roy Innis as Innis railed against “these bad films being made, destroying the Black image and producing the wrong kind of symbol for Black youths” and proposed the creation of a review board that would approve any “scripts involving Blacks.”⁷³ Marshall was clearly on board with the push to “clean up” Black on-screen images, and although he claimed to have little creative input on *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (stating that, after his insistent feedback on *Blacula*, AIP was “wary of me by then and didn’t want to hear anything I had to say”), it appears that the sequel’s filmmakers were well aware of expectations for an elevated sense of representation, so the film can still be seen as the indirect fruit of Marshall’s labor.⁷⁴

Where *Scream, Blacula, Scream* is particularly innovative is its inclusion of Lisa as a smart, heroic, Enduring Woman. In the film, the vampire Blacula is resurrected through a Voodoo ritual by Willis (Richard Lawson), the selfish, angry brother of Lisa, his adopted sister. Willis wants to use Blacula to exact revenge on Lisa, whom he refers to as a “jive ass bitch,” and other members of their Voodoo cult, for failing to elect him their leader or “Papa Loa.” However, Blacula is unhappy about his forced return from the dead. When he is called by his real, princely name “Mamuwalde,” the anguished vampire screams, “The name is Blacula!” Tormented by his persistent undead fate, Blacula turns to Lisa asking her to use her Voodoo skills to rid him of the vampire curse and send him to a permanent death where he can finally rest in peace. Here, Lisa is cast as hero and savior, but with a caveat, as Clover explains: “On the face of it, the occult film is the most ‘female’ of horror genres, telling as it regularly does tales of women or girls in the grip of the supernatural. But behind the female ‘cover’ is always the story of a man in crisis.”⁷⁵

Indeed, the pressure on Lisa to expeditiously assist Blacula is heightened when he threatens to kill her ex-boyfriend Justin (Don Mitchell), with whom she is still friendly. Lisa now must save both men. Unlike her male hero counterparts who “get the girl,” Lisa does not get either man even as she bravely saves them both. “If anything,” writes Bogle, “these action heroines pointed up the sad state of affairs for Black women in the movies. Very few films attempted to explore a Black woman’s tensions or aspirations or to examine the dynamics of sexual politics within the Black community.”⁷⁶ In surviving her encounter with a vampire, when others have not, protecting her ex from death, and in saving Mamuwalde’s soul, Lisa possesses the foremost traits of the Final Girl: “she is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror[; she will show] more courage and levelheadedness than [her] cringing male counterparts.”⁷⁷

Abby (1974), too, was one of the more intriguing (copyright infringement suit with makers of *The Exorcist* notwithstanding) of the “Black horror” films due to its unique focus on sexual diversity.⁷⁸ It begins with archaeology professor and theologian Garnet Williams (William Marshall) accidentally releasing an evil spirit during an archaeological dig in Nigeria. The sex demon makes its way to the U.S. and into the staunchly Christian home of Garnet’s daughter-in-law, Abby Williams (Carol Speed). Abby is married to Rev. Emmett Williams (Terry Carter) and is employed at her husband’s church as a marriage counselor. Where *Abby* takes a bit of a novel turn is that possessing Abby is the *male* demon Eshu (voiced by Bob Holt), a Yoruba god “steeped in a Western, sex-negative Christian ideology.”⁷⁹ With the theater poster art boasting, “Abby doesn’t need a man anymore,” the film presents a compelling multi-sexuality narrative: a male spirit seeks sexual conquests while in a female’s body. For example, through Abby, the male demon asks a man, “You wanna fuck Abby, don’t you?” The demon has sex with his (male) victims, and at the height of the act, he kills. The film lays bare and complicates heteronormativity as men are attracted to the outward appearance of the female Abby, who oozes sexuality and has little problem seducing her prey.

As boundary pressing as (Black) horror films are, they have not been as innovative in disrupting traditional narratives about sex and sexualities. For example, with few exceptions, films focusing on monster-apes or vampires have as their backdrop heteronormative love stories. It is not surprising, then, that Abby-as-sexual-predator must be defeated, not just because of her possession and because she kills her prey but also because “transgressive sexuality is defined as monstrous.”⁸⁰ Still, Abby’s performance is (perhaps unintentionally) independent, sexually liberated, and confident. While possessed, Abby is gregarious and strong in personality as well as physical strength. Were she not a killer, she could be interesting fodder for readings of a person free of gender and sex-role encumbrances.

Along the way, the film capitalizes on the characterization of Garnet as a professor/theologian/minister (and the authoritative demeanor William Marshall brings to his roles) by inserting pedagogic commentary on Eshu: (1) he claims credit for natural disasters; (2) he is one of the most powerful of all earthly deities, more than the powerful Orisha gods; and (3) he is a god of sexuality, a trickster, and a creator of whirlwinds and chaos. Finally, through a Yoruba-informed exorcism, Abby is freed of her possession. The effect is presenting a Black religion in a markedly different manner than, say, many Voodoo-themed horror films which cast the religion as singularly odd, ahistorical, and evil.

Apart from these intriguing plot points, *Abby* was rather standard low-budget horror fare, with the *New York Times* calling it “silly.”⁸¹ Abby is no Final Girl or Enduring Woman as she is saved from a fanciful life of sex and partying and killing by her father-in-law, husband, and police officer brother while being rehabilitated from her sins-through-possession to reconnect with her male (Western) God.



FIGURE 6.4 The monster Abby in *Abby*
American International Pictures/Photofest

Sexpot Sistas: Same as It Ever Was

The Black lifestyle, news, and entertainment magazine *Jet* attempted a progressive question, asking why Black horror films should be based on the Christian Dracula legend “when there was Voodoo in the Black experience.”⁸² The “Black horror” film *Sugar Hill* (1974) attempted some reclamation of the Voodoo. If



FIGURE 6.5 Sugar's cleavage invites more stares than her zombies in *Sugar Hill*
American International Pictures/Photofest

most Blaxploitation celebrated a “‘bad Nigger’ who challenges the oppressive white system and wins,”⁸³ then *Sugar Hill* celebrated the “Baad Bitch”⁸⁴ who did the same, albeit through Voodoo. In *Sugar Hill*, the zombies undead are the still-in-shackles enslaved from Guinea who were transported to New Orleans. The zombies are summoned by Mama Maltresse, a Voodoo queen (Zara Cully), on behalf of Sugar (Marki Bey), to exact bloody revenge on a “whitey” crime boss, Morgan (Robert Quarry), and his thugs who have killed Sugar’s boyfriend.

The silent, lethal army of zombies has among its members a loquacious, discerning leader—Baron Semedi (Don Pedro Colley).⁸⁵ Semedi acts much like a union leader, negotiating the terms under which he and his zombie peers will work. Semedi quickly spies that his work is much greater than avenging the death of Sugar’s boyfriend. Rather, his targets are irredeemably evil—murderers, terrorizing racists, and violent gangsters. In response, he and his horde happily kill off Morgan and his crew one by one. The zombies enact a particularly gruesome killing of a “sell-out” Black man, Fabulous (Charles Robinson), who shines Morgan’s shoes and permits the crime boss to call him nigger.

In this movie, the zombies are revolutionary heroes. Identifying with the monsters in *Sugar Hill* makes for “a pleasurable and a potentially empowering act”⁸⁶ as the zombies come to represent a pro-Black cadre doing away with criminal white

bigots—indeed, “Black heroes were winning and community identification was intense.”⁸⁷

Sugar is there nearly every step of the way as her zombie army takes on her (and the Black community’s) enemies proclaiming, “Hey whitey, you and your punk friends killed my man . . . I’m not accusing you, honk, I’m passing sentence and the sentence is death.” However, Sugar is still very much presented as the “Voodoo sexpot”⁸⁸ who tempts and teases her prey while clad in form-fitting, revealing outfits—as the movie’s trailer labeled her, “the foxiest, sexist, deadliest chick in town.” Sugar’s depiction presents the film’s adherence to predictable, traditional gender roles around the behaviors of young, attractive women. Soon after the death of her boyfriend, Sugar turns to her ex-boyfriend, a policeman named Valentine (Richard Lawson), seductively flirting with him to gain his help and support (though, it is likely that all she had to do was ask for his assistance). Unlike the Final Girl, Sugar must always be saddled up next to a male savior, be it Baron Semedi or Valentine. Her primary weaponry for survival is her beauty, not her brains. In fact, the sexy Sugar suggests her sexual availability to friends and foes alike. She even engages in the requisite tantalizing catfight, for the male gaze, with another (white) sexpot, Morgan’s girlfriend Celeste (Betty Ann Rees). Sugar’s portrayal “equivocates any change in the narrative representation of the Black woman”; she has not really usurped power from men.⁸⁹

This equivocation is best revealed when, with the crew of gangsters all dead, Sugar offers her soul to Semedi in return for his services, which he rejects, lustfully proclaiming, “It ain’t souls I’m interested in.” It is understood that she is to join his harem of “wives.” When it’s time for Sugar to pay up with her own body she offers a trade. Semedi, who has been described as sexually ravenous, is offered Celeste. The acceptance of the white woman by Semedi—though he “prefers” Sugar, but Celeste “will have to do”—is likely to be read as political, the apropos punishment for a “protected” white woman. On the other hand, the trading of women for sexual exploitation is unsettling, even as Celeste’s “white slavery” is a play on a taboo.

Like *Sugar Hill* and *Scream, Blacula, Scream, Nurse Sherri* (1978) offers up Voodoo as a means to right wrongs, with a Black woman in a central role. As with *Night of the Strangler*, *Nurse Sherri* is a Trojan horse “Blacks in horror” film whose Blackness is not immediately apparent upon viewing—nor is it apparent from the movie poster, which features a drawing of a scantily clad white female nurse situated prominently in the center of the frame while the true heroine, a Black woman, lingers in the background (granted, neither figure looks like the actual actresses). Interestingly, *Sherri*, like *Strangler*, would later be repackaged (on home video) with a Black angle, including a new title, *Black Voodoo*, and altered poster art that takes the original drawing and darkens the centrally located white nurse’s skin while adding an afro on top of her head.

In the story, the titular Sherri is not the Black heroine; she’s the white damsel in distress. Played by Jill Jacobson, Sherri is a nurse who becomes possessed by

the spirit of maniacal cult leader Thomas Reanhaur (Bill Roy) after he dies in the hospital where she works. He takes over her body and uses it as a vessel to murder the medical staff who failed to save his life. In the end, Sherri's savior turns out to be not her white doctor boyfriend, Peter (Geoffrey Land), but rather Black fellow nurse Tara, played by Marilyn Joi. Joi was a buxom "cheesecake" specialist in exploitation cinema throughout the 1970s, appearing in not only Blaxploitation fare like *Coffy* and *Hammer* (1972) but also sexploitation romps like *The Naughty Stewardesses* (1974), *Ilsa, Harem Keeper of the Oil Sheiks* (1976), *The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington* (1977), and *Cheerleaders Wild Weekend* (1979).⁹⁰ As such, it is predictable that Joi would be heavily sexualized in Nurse Sherri, appearing in a gratuitous scene in which she changes out of her uniform, pausing to ogle her breasts in the mirror. Every major female character in the movie, in fact, appears naked at some point, which was par for the course for B-movie director Al Adamson. *Nurse Sherri* was originally a "skin flick" looking to capitalize on the trend of softcore films built around the sexual fantasy lives of women in traditionally female occupations: nurses, stewardesses, cheerleaders, nuns, and the like. Only after producer Sam Sherman viewed the first cut did he decide to edit out several sex scenes—including one with Tara and a Black patient, Marcus (Prentiss Moulden)—in order to focus on the horror element, in an effort to capitalize on the popularity of female-centric supernatural horror like *The Exorcist* and *Carrie* (1976).⁹¹

In the film, when Sherri begins to act erratically at work, Tara steps in to help but only after Marcus diagnoses the problem. Although the inclusion of Black characters in *Nurse Sherri* came out of Sherman's acknowledgment that "African-American audiences wanted to see a reflection of their own types on screen," Marcus ends up as an amalgam (albeit well-intentioned) of shallow Black tropes meant to lend a sense of dignity and utility to the character.⁹² He's a professional football player, and a famous one at that, causing Tara to fawn over him upon learning that he is a patient in the hospital. Her reaction is an immediate signifier to the viewing audience that his athletic ability and notoriety color him as more than an "ordinary Negro." Athletics were (and still are) an avenue to Black acceptance into the mainstream, and rough-and-tumble footballers in particular—from Jim Brown to Fred Williams to Bernie Casey—bled into the movie industry and became faces of the hyper-masculine Blaxploitation era. The burly Marcus thus fits that mold, which, according to Bogle, was "nothing more than the black buck of old."⁹³ More pertinent to the story is the fact that Marcus is also the grandson of a Haitian Voodoo priestess, a convenient detail that continues the tradition of tying primitive mysticism to Blackness. Marcus's knowledge of this mysticism validates his existence in the plot; he is the first character to sense something that is wrong, as he senses "a presence" when Sherri is around and even gives Tara his grandmother's bracelet, which wards off evil spirits.

Unlike the Jim Browns and Fred Williamsons of the world, Marcus cannot use his physicality to defeat the villain, because he is bedridden in the hospital

after being blinded in a car accident. The Blaxploitation Black buck/bad nigger/superspade thus becomes neutered by his handicap and lies prone for the entirety of the film, while Enduring Woman Tara steps in to take his place. Tara becomes Marcus's eyes and legs. She also becomes his protector, restraining the possessed Sherri when she tries to stab him to death. When he informs Tara that to exorcise the spirit from Sherri, the cult leader's remains must be burned, Tara takes it upon herself to head to the cemetery with another co-worker, white nurse Beth (Katherine Pass). While Beth plays the scaredy-cat role, eager to abandon the mission, Tara—the antithesis of past scared-Negro comic roles—convinces her to help dig up the grave and set fire to the cultist's body, saving not only Sherri but also Peter, whom Sherri is preparing to kill, and presumably Marcus, since Sherri previously marked him for death.

Though Enduring Women were becoming scarce by the mid-1970s, Black women continued to figure prominently in films such as 1974s *Vampira* [a.k.a. *Old Dracula*] and *The Beast Must Die*. *Vampira* is a “Blacks in horror” comedy-horror film that presents the story of an “Old Dracula” (David Niven) who, too elderly to hunt for his young victims, gets them by luring them to his castle, which he has opened up to tourists. Dracula's wife, *Vampira*, is also out of commission, so he transfuses her with the blood of one of his victims to revitalize her. That blood happens to be from a Black woman, which, in *Vampira*, turns her young and Black—justifying (and exceeding) the mythical “one-drop rule.” *Vampira* (Teresa Graves) is now a sexpot, thereby giving unique credence to the mantra “Black is beautiful.” As Null observed at the time, “if Black movies have hardly begun to elevate women to real character roles, at least the white dominated ideas of beauty are gone.”⁹⁴ Unable to “cure” his wife of her Blackness, whose skin color inexplicably also moves her to speak jive talk, Dracula unhappily joins her, stepping to the dark side, with Niven appearing in the film's final frames in blackface.

In the film *The Beast Must Die*, also a “Blacks in horror” film, Marlene Clark plays Caroline, the gorgeous wife of Tom (Calvin Lockhart), a wealthy big game hunter.⁹⁵ This sophisticated Black couple, Tom and Caroline, along with their white assistant Pavel (Anton Diffing), host five white guests at an island estate in the hope of uncovering which among them is a werewolf. Tom is devastated when his beloved Caroline is accidentally infected with lycanthropy by one of the guests. In a heart-wrenching scene, he must kill his wife with a silver bullet so that she does not begin her own murderous animalistic rampage. Though very different films, *Vampira* and *Beast* share common themes of Black women as desirable and worthy but also stricken with a taint that threatens their relationships with their men.

J.D.'s Revenge (1976) echoes *Sugar Hill* in that it is similarly about possession and love denied. However, as imaginative as it is, *Revenge* is also an extraordinarily sexist film, raising the ante far and above *Sugar Hill* with a startling, misogynist, anti-feminist subtext that linked the independence and sexual revolution of women with being “uppity.”

J.D.'s Revenge tells the story of New Orleans resident Isaac, or "Ike" (Glynn Turman), a young, straight-laced, law school graduate studying for the bar exam. His girlfriend, Christella or "Chris" (Joan Pringle), convinces Ike to take a break from his studies for a double-date night on the town with friends. The group visits a nightclub where a hypnotist is performing, and Ike is among several who volunteer to be hypnotized. Predictably, something goes wrong for the film's star with Ike becoming possessed by the angry spirit of a 1940s gangster, J.D. Walker, who seeks revenge for himself and for his sister Betty Jo (Alice Jubert) who were murdered more than three decades earlier.

As the violent hustler J.D. becomes more powerful and dominant in Ike's body, thereby subsuming the more mild-mannered Ike, Chris falls victim. Chris is depicted as Isaac's complete equal, if not worthier. She capably quizzes Ike on legal concepts, preparing him for his bar exam. She is independent and outspoken, has a network of her own friends (hence, not solely reliant on Ike), and it is implied that she has her own money, perhaps then leading in taking care of the young couple's needs. In one scene, in a gender role reversal, Chris initiates sex while Ike opts out with, "Not tonight, I got a lot on my mind tonight." The audience learns that the kindly Ike is viewed as less of a man by his friend Tony (Carl Crudup) because he is so respectful of his girlfriend. When Ike (possessed by J.D.) slaps Chris around, Ike's buddy Tony praises him for finally being a man:

I think it's a good thing to go upside a woman's head when she starts handing you lip. I mean, believe it or not, they like that. Eh man, honest to God, you've got to go into your nigger act every once in a while. They gonna push you till you do. They want you to show'em where the lines are. You know something, man? It's pretty encouraging that you did what you did. As long as I've known you, you always seem to be, you've been sort of repressed . . . That's fantastic man.

Putting the strong-willed Chris in her place, in particular through a beating, is to be read as a necessary and effective tool to break her as, the audience comes to learn, she likes and understands football and instructs Ike to remove his smelly sneakers from their apartment and, worse, she is a divorcee and it was she who left her husband.

An intriguing plot point is that except for a change in style—wearing a fedora, "conking" his hair, donning a 1940s-style suit—Ike's new, brutal masculine performance does not seem out of place in the 1970s (the context for the second wave of the Feminist Movement); rather, they are rewarded. As J.D., Ike is rough and dangerous—traits (certain) women find alluring. Ike picks up an attractive woman in a bar and returns to her place, providing her with "the best fuckin' I've ever had." When the woman's "old man" catches them, J.D. delights in slashing the woman's partner with a straight razor, his hyper-masculine bravado fully on display.

When Ike returns home drunk, Chris is angry. J.D./Ike reveals what is wrong with her kind of women (unlike those he is currently finding in bars) by calling her a “bitch” and a “bitch ho” while screaming, “How dare you talk to me like I’m some kind of common sissified nigger wimp.” Eventually, Chris is completely silenced when J.D. badly beats and sexually assaults her, thereby putting an end to her uppity-ness. The film, Benschhoff observes,

suggests a man caught between two different constructions of African American maleness when Ike . . . treats his girlfriend as a pimp might treat his whore. The film points out that J.D.’s style and masculine brutality are still a lingering problem in 1970s Black macho culture.⁹⁶

For her part, Chris is neither a Final Girl nor an Enduring Woman; her ex-husband comes to her aid, and in the end, she happily returns to a depossessed Ike.

Similarly abhorrent is *Poor Pretty Eddie* (1975), a “Blacks in horror” film in the “rape-revenge” mold also known by the more provocative titles *Black Vengeance* and *Massacre in Redneck County*. Leslie Uggams stars as Liz Wetherly, a famous Black singer who decides to spend the time until her next concert driving alone through the rural South with no discernible destination in mind. Naturally, her car breaks down, and she walks to a ramshackle wooded resort called Bertha’s Oasis. The “oasis” consists of a saloon and a series of (empty) cabins run by drunken, chain-smoking, washed-up starlet Bertha (Shelley Winters) and her younger boytoy Eddie (Michael Christian). When Liz approaches the complex, the threat of sexual violence is immediate as handyman Keno (Ted Cassidy) comments, “A good-lookin’ woman like you shouldn’t be out here drivin’ alone.” Keno takes her to Eddie, who promises to get someone to fix her car and arranges for her to spend the night in a cabin.

A jealous Bertha takes umbrage at the attractive Liz’s presence and inserts the threat of racial violence into the already volatile situation, demanding of Eddie, “What is that there juicy pickaninny doing up in my cabin?” When the local sheriff (Slim Pickens) drops by for dinner, he adds fuel to the fire, insisting to Eddie that Liz is attracted to him: “That lil’ ol’ high yellow, she couldn’t hardly take her eyes off of you . . . It sure would be a shame to let that lil’ thing go to bed all by herself.” “High yellow” Liz, with her luxury car, designer clothes, and haughty Northern demeanor, is clearly of a higher class than the residents of this backwater town, but she is still a Black woman and thus is subject to the prevailing racial and gender hierarchy. To wit, Eddie shows up to Liz’s cabin and climbs into her bed, assuming it is within his rights to expect sex. Liz reacts angrily, kneeling him in the groin, at which point he beats and rapes her, a scene that plays out in slow motion interspersed with shots of two dogs outside having sex. When Liz goes to Bertha, threatening to call the police, Bertha offers no sympathy to her fellow woman. Race is thicker than gender, as the “sugar mama,” desperate to hold on to her man, proclaims, “I’ll stand up in any courtroom, and I’ll say how innocent poor little

Eddie is and what a vicious Black little bitch you are.” Liz becomes a literal sex slave; Eddie even whips her into submission with a belt at one point.

Thus begins a cycle of recurring indignities for Liz. There are repeated sexual assaults, even at the hands of a would-be rescuer: a white man who drives Liz not to safety but to a secluded spot where he forces her to perform oral sex. Other, repeated attempts to get help are dismissed and disturbingly played for humor, as when the sheriff questions Liz’s accusations of rape with queries like, “Did he bite ya on the titties?” and (oddly) “Would you like to suck on a tomato?” The sheriff takes Liz to the justice of the peace (Dub Taylor), and they hold an impromptu hearing in a V.F.W. hall with a conspicuous Confederate flag on the wall, next to a bar, a pool table, a country band, and drunken white locals. When Liz protests, the sheriff insists, “We just want to get a look at the evidence” as the justice of the peace rips her shirt open. In the societal balance of power, no matter how successful she is, the Black woman remains under the thumb of the white man, who remains dependent on the white man, all of whom are subject to the whims of the police and the justice system. Even more frustrating, the “revenge” portion of the rape-revenge equation delivers no payoff. Liz remains helpless throughout and must be rescued at the end by an exasperated Keno, who shoots both Eddie and the sheriff while a catatonic Liz tearfully screams. She ends the film as a broken woman.

Problematic in a much less distasteful manner is *The House on Skull Mountain* (1974), a “Black horror” movie that plays more like white horror painted Black. *Skull Mountain* was conceived and executive produced by Joe R. Hartsfield, a Black publicist for CBS who handled iconic TV series like *Green Acres*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Hogan’s Heroes*, and *Gunsmoke*, plus the groundbreaking *Leslie Uggams Show*.⁹⁷ Hartsfield secured \$300,000 in financing from Black Georgia businessmen and clergy and used his connections to recruit *Gunsmoke* crew members who shot the film in and around Atlanta in just 12 days. Despite the mostly Black cast, Hartsfield’s aim was universality:

We’re not in it for just the black market. We’re in it for the entire market. We talk about black exploitation. Well, the only way we can stop it is for us as a people to get together and finance our own pictures. We can say what we want to say.⁹⁸

Skull Mountain was a revelation as a Black-funded, Black-produced horror movie released by a major studio (20th Century-Fox), but from an artistic standpoint, the result was overly polite and old-fashioned, relying on antiquated horror tropes like an “old dark house,” skulls, snakes, thunderstorms, and Voodoo used for villainous purposes. Despite Hartsfield’s stated freedom that “We can say what we want to say,” *Skull Mountain* falls back on clichéd portrayals of Black Voodoo from previous decades of (white) horror cinema. The story involves four cousins who are summoned to an Atlanta-area mansion for the funeral of their great-grandmother and the reading of her will. They include leading lady Lorena

(Janee Michelle) and leading man Andrew (Victor French), an anthropologist who comes from a white branch of the family tree and who seems to be a product of Hartsfield's aim to appeal to the "entire market." The cousins find out that they are descended from a long line of Voodoo practitioners, including Henri Christophe, a leader of the Haitian Revolution and the first king of Haiti.

The script deserves credit for giving some historical and religious background to Voodoo and for tying it to something positive like the Haitian Revolution, but the bulk of the film devolves into Voodoo fear mongering. While waiting for the will to be read, the cousins' great-grandmother's Haitian butler, Thomas (Jean Durand), secretly uses Voodoo spells to kill the cousins one by one in order to steal the family's powers. (As an indication of how hackneyed the plot is, the butler did indeed do it.) It is unclear how exactly Thomas plans to acquire their Voodoo ability, but it is implied that it involves the forced seduction of a hypnotized Lorena. Clad in a silky, see-through nightgown, she dances suggestively with a gyrating Thomas to Voodoo drums until Andrew intervenes.

True to *Skull Mountain's* outdated feel, Lorena plays the traditional woman's role from horror movies of the 1930s and 1940s: delicate, weepy, screaming, and reliant on men. Not only does she need Andrew to rescue her when Thomas puts her in a trance, but also it is Andrew who is knowledgeable enough about Voodoo to uncover the butler's malicious plot. Thomas is impressed that the only member of the family competent enough to threaten him is white: "I didn't expect so much perception from one of your background." Andrew even uses his own rudimentary Voodoo to overcome Thomas's spells during the climax, leading to the butler's demise. Andrew is the white Savior, rescuing Lorena from Thomas and an entire Black Voodoo sect that gathers in the bowels of the mansion to commit human sacrifices. Andrew is even presented as Lorena's potential romantic interest (a "white knight," jokes a Black male cousin whose romantic advances Lorena spurns), even though they are related. Presumably, this is why their relationship is never consummated, despite obvious mutual attraction, although a film produced in the Deep South in this era might have been more concerned with depictions of miscegenation than incest. *Skull Mountain* ended up being Joe Hartsfield's only foray into movie production. His plans for a half-million-dollar film based on the life of Black outlaw folk hero "Stagger" Lee Shelton never came to fruition.⁹⁹

It Has Come to This

Made the tombstones jump and put the dead on the wonder.

—Rudy Ray Moore¹⁰⁰

The demise of 1970s "Black horror" was symbolized by a horror-comedy that left some entertained, but many more scratching their heads while speculating whether the inevitable decline of the Blaxploitation genre was coming none

too soon. The epitome of the Blaxploitation era, stand-up comedian Rudy Ray Moore offered the film *Petey Wheatstraw: The Devil's Son-in-Law* (1977). The jaw-dropping film opens with a pregnant Mother Wheatstraw (Rose Williams) laying in a bed inside a shack, in labor, surrounded by midwives dressed as mammies. She is experiencing a difficult labor, and a white male doctor is summoned to assist with the birth. The doctor first delivers a large watermelon and finally (as afterbirth) a fully formed, fighting and profanity-spewing boy about 7 years of age. The boy, Petey Wheatstraw (Clifford Roquemore II), arrives at the beating of drums as well as screams by the doctor of “It’s alive! It’s alive!,” a line borrowed from *Frankenstein*.

The plot of this lowest of low-budget films is fairly indecipherable (a “pimp cane” figures prominently); however, the main narrative thrust is that the adult Petey Wheatstraw (Rudy Ray Moore), a comedian, is killed by rivals. Petey will be given a new lease on life by the Devil, provided that Petey marries the ugliest woman on Earth—the Devil’s daughter. Along the way, Moore performs his trademark rhyming and signifying comedy raps.

Petey Wheatstraw was a reflexive look at 1970s films, as Moore appropriated and spoofed their most clichéd aspects of martial arts, exploitation, and B-movies and dumped them into his films. For example, as a boy, Petey is trained like Caine in the *Kung Fu*¹⁰¹ television series by a mysterious, elderly martial arts master. Later, as an adult, Petey would (badly) karate chop his assailants, including “demons” dressed in purple leotards and capes with red horns affixed to their heads. In between fights and other escapades, portly Wheatstraw is also presented as a sex symbol, an insatiable lover with a trove of women. Moore, in keeping with the Blaxploitation-era themes he perfected in his earlier films (e.g., *Dolemite* [1975]), even dropped in a revenge-against-whitey storyline as well. For Moore, his film contributions were far from exploitative: “When we wasn’t getting kicked in the ass and beat upside the head, then they termed it as ‘blaxploitation,’ and I think it was extremely crude to us as a people.”¹⁰² Thomas Cripps summarized Blaxploitation’s end, implicating Moore’s film: “Predictably, such ‘blaxploitation’ movies soon fell from favor and were rivaled by Oriental martial arts movies, a new generation of science fiction monsters, and other arcana.”¹⁰³ Not surprisingly, the genre could not sustain itself, as the exploitative nature of the films—content, investment, quality—fell from favor. In 1977, the same year *Petey Wheatstraw* was released, a historically Black university “opened its spring term film series, not with one of the ephemeral Black heroes like Shaft, but with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.”¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Though many 1970s horror films were exploitative in so many ways—in budget, in quality, in the treatment of women, and in the presentation of the underclass versus the urbane—they should not be readily dismissed as lacking

relevant discourse. The decades' "Black horror" films and "Blacks in horror" films left audiences with a clear indication of the role and function of race, gender, sexuality, culture, and class in popular culture, as well as how these identity positions may, rightly or wrongly, be reflected upon in the social world. In the films, struggles against those oppressions, and themes of (intra)racial uplift in the face of those oppressions, were in conversation with the rhetoric of non-violence and integration, as well as armed resistance and Black self-reliance. The films also worked hard to reveal to audiences that for Black Americans, the horror or the monster was located within whiteness—whitey, the system, the Man. Unlike mainstream horror films in which (Final Girl) heroes took on an individual evil (such as an alien with acid for blood) and fought to bring about its demise, Black horror films revealed that the evil enveloping Blackness was systemic and enduring.

While "the Black audience had always been a substantial part of the horror crowd," these 1970s films, which specifically hailed Black audiences, encouraged them to look beyond the monsters to identify with messages of Black equality through metaphorical unity (zombie armies) or through the metaphorical bullet (a magical penis).¹⁰⁵ With Black stars in these roles, even if at times exploitative, their presence and performance exploded past horror film treatments of Black people as spooked, bug-eyed, and shuffling.

This period was not always purely reactionary to the kinds of racism and classism Blacks had to endure at the time. *Ganja & Hess*, by way of example, largely excluded whiteness in an attempt to privilege a story coming out of Blackness. Here, there were no "cardboard" and "oversimplified" characters who make their reputations "by kicking white villains all over the screen."¹⁰⁶ Still, Black horror films that worked to break free of such traditional Blaxploitation tropes found a tepid response among some movie-goers, as film producer Rob Cohen explained: "They want a shark marauding off the coast of a vacation spot or 'the Sting.' If there's one thing an audience doesn't want, it's a message. If there's one thing beyond that, it's a Black message."¹⁰⁷ In short, Blaxploitation-era films were facing a multifaceted quandary of being too culturally and politically Black, not Black enough, or not purely entertaining enough.

Not particularly revelatory, *The Washington Post* worked to predict where Black film would go next by not being specific—"blacks interacting among themselves, or with whites."¹⁰⁸ Significantly, the newspaper did express an optimism around the representational treatment of Blacks in which they are "portrayed as complete human beings—good and evil, rich and poor, smart and dumb."¹⁰⁹ Any hope of more substantive cross- or intra-racial interactions, or of more complex portrayals, for the coming decade did not pan out. In the 1980s, Black people became associated with dreadful urban spaces, prompting white flight to the suburbs. Black people and their horror films were left out in the cold as the genre shifted attention more exclusively to white, middle-class fears.

Notes

- 1 Motion Picture Association of America Site. Motion Picture Association, 2005. Web. April 2, 2010. The Hays Code (1930–66), which presented organizing principles for U.S. filmmakers associated with major studios, warned against things such as: criticizing religion, showing childbirth, showing “lustful” kissing or “suggestive” dancing. These principles were replaced by a voluntary ratings system in 1968 which changed three times between 1968 and 1983: G, M, R, X; G, GP, R, X; and G, PG, R, X. There have been further revisions since the early 1980s.
- 2 Outside of the film industry, Black vampires were actually not a new concept. The first recorded American vampire tale, in fact, was “The Black Vampyre: A Legend of St. Domingo” (1819) by the enigmatic Uriah Derick D’Arcy, a pseudonym believed to be either Robert C. Sands or Richard Varick Dey. Published less than three months after English author John William Polidori’s more renowned short story “The Vampyre” (1819), “The Black Vampyre” is an abolitionist tale about a vampiric Haitian slave who survives a murder attempt by his master and gets revenge by not only killing his master but also kidnapping his master’s infant son and later marrying his master’s wife, both of whom he turns into vampires. Duncan Faherty and Ed White. “The Black Vampyre; A Legend of St. Domingo (1819).” Just Teach One no. 15, Summer 2019. Web. <http://jto.common-place.org/just-teach-one-homepage/the-black-vampyre/>.
- 3 Young, Elizabeth. *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.219. Print. In 1977, a comic book called *Black’nstein* “featured a white Kentucky slave owner, Colonel Victah Black’nstein, who builds a black monster-slave”; 1976’s *The Slave of Frankenstein* novel presents “Victor Frankenstein’s son as a white abolitionist who challenges an evil pro-slavery monster”; George Clinton/Parliament released in 1977 “The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein,” focusing on the creation of a Black doctor of funk.
- 4 Denzin, Norman K. *Reading Race*. London: Sage, 2002.27. Print.
- 5 Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1993.232. Print.
- 6 Crane, Jonathan. *Terror and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.48. Print.
- 7 Benschoff, Harry M. “Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?” *Cinema Journal* 39.2 (2000): 34. JStor. Web. January 20, 2005. www.jstor.org/pss/1225551.
- 8 Null, Gary. *Black Hollywood: The Negro in Motion Pictures*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1975.209. Print.
- 9 Leab, Daniel J. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975.254. Print.
- 10 Null (209).
- 11 Holly (127).
- 12 Exploitation films, according to Eric Schaefer in his dissertation *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959*, emerged during the “classical era,” 1919–1959, paralleling not only Hollywood cinema but also made outside of it by indie producers. The films, writes Schaefer, “were rooted in an early, exhibitionistic ‘cinema of attractions’ and relied on forbidden spectacle at the expense of the more costly system of narrative continuity and coherence favored by mainstream movies.” Schaefer, Eric. *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959*. Austin: University of Texas, 1995. Dissertation. Print.
- 13 Benschoff (37).
- 14 Rhines, Jesse Algeron. *Black Film/White Money*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.46. Print.

- 15 Worland, Rick. *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.97. Print.
- 16 Benshoff (34).
- 17 In the film, Luva is entombed with her prince. Her death isn't shown.
- 18 In the film, it is explained Dracula has been killed by his nemesis Dr. Van Helsing.
- 19 Sharrett, C. "The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21.3 (Fall 1993): 107. Print.
- 20 Sharrett ("Neoconservative" 107).
- 21 Sharrett ("Neoconservative" 100–110).
- 22 Harris, Anelique, and Mushtaq, Omar. "Creating Racial Identities Through Film: A Queer and Gendered Analysis of Blaxploitation Films." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 37.1 (2013): 28–38. https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1251&context=socs_fac [Accessed March 26, 2022].
- 23 Wlodarz, Joe. "Beyond the Black Macho: Queer Blaxploitation." *The Velvet Light Trap* 53 (2004): 11. Web. January 20, 2006. http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/the_velvet_light_trap/v053/53.1wlodarz.html.
- 24 Gateward, Frances. "Daywalkin' Night Stalkin' Bloodsuckas: Black Vampires in Contemporary Film." *Genders OnLine Journal* 40 (2004): 10. Web. June 20, 2005. www.genders.org/g40/g40_gateward.html.
- 25 Medovoi, L. "Theorizing Historicity, or the Many Meanings of Blacula." *Screen* 39 (1998): 14. Print.
- 26 Baldwin, J. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955/1984.115, 122. Print.
- 27 Young (Black Frankenstein 189).
- 28 Medovoi (14).
- 29 Benshoff (36).
- 30 Lawrence, N. "Fear of a Blaxploitation Monster: Blackness as Generic Revision in AIP's *Blacula*." *Film International* 39 (2009): 24. Print.
- 31 Lawrence, N. *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.49. Print
- 32 Burgin, Xavier (Dir.). *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*. Philadelphia, PA: Stage 3 Productions, 2019.
- 33 Stenger, Josh. "Mapping the Beach: Beach Movies, Exploitation Film and Geographies of Whiteness." *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.31. Print.
- 34 Lawrence (18).
- 35 Gent, G. "Black Films Are In, So Are Profits." *New York Times*, July 28, 1972: 22. Print.
- 36 Gent (22).
- 37 Stenger (31). AIP is also responsible for the distribution of an astonishing number of other "Blaxploitation-era" films, such as *Black Mama, White Mama* (1973), *The Mack* (1973), *Coffy* (1973), *Hell Up in Harlem* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Truck Turner* (1974), *Sheba, Baby* (1975), *Cornbread, Earl, and Me* (1975), *Cooley High* (1975), and *Friday Foster* (1975).
- 38 Burgin.
- 39 Lawrence (18).
- 40 Young (Black Frankenstein 190).
- 41 Young (Black Frankenstein 191).
- 42 Young (Black Frankenstein 196).
- 43 The 2004 documentary film *The 50 Worst Movies Ever Made* cites *The Thing with Two Heads*. The DVD documentary was produced by Dante Pugliese for the studio Passport Video. *Heads* is frequently included in various fan-developed listings of horror such as Blackhorrormovies.com.

- 44 Worland (97).
- 45 In the film, it is never explicitly made clear that the home is in a white neighborhood, or that the prostitutes his mother cleaned for are white. Rather, Dr. Pryde alludes to the prostitutes' race by calling them, with ironic emphasis, "ladies of the evening," while Black street prostitutes working in Watts are "hookers" and "hoes." They do not work in brothels. In addition, the film works to show the great socio-economic distance between Watts and where Dr. Pryde lives by presenting sequences of neighborhood changes. The homes get bigger, the cars nicer, the streets cleaner, and the Black faces disappear.
- 46 "Domestic Violence: Domestic Violence in the African American Community." Nabsw.org. National Association of Black Social Workers, 2002. Web. April 9, 2010.
- 47 Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1968.191. Print.
- 48 Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997.53. Print.
- 49 Bogle (*Toms, Coons* 240).
- 50 This scene is a precursor to the life-through-death decision made by the characters Thelma and Louise in the movie of the same name.
- 51 As of 2022, Vassar still ranks among the "Most Liberal Colleges in America," per Niche.com. www.niche.com/colleges/search/most-liberal-colleges/.
- 52 Clifford Mason. "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?." New York Times, September 10, 1967. Web. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/heat-ar.html>.
- 53 Clover, Carol. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.35. Print.
- 54 Clover (*Chainsaws* 37).
- 55 Clover (*Chainsaws* 39).
- 56 Of course, when these movies became franchises, peace could not be had.
- 57 Podraza, Morgan. "Forty Years Later: Laurie Strode and the Survival of the Final Girl," p. 143. *Horror Studies*, 12, 1, 133–147. Print.
- 58 Diawara, Manthia, and Phyllis Klotman. "Ganja and Hess: Vampires, Sex, and Addictions." *Black American Literature Forum* 25.2 (1991): 299. Jstor. N.p. Web. June 21, 2005. <http://jstor.org/>. Diawara and Klotman cited other kudos for the film. According to the authors, the film was hailed in the *Amsterdam News* as "the most important Black produced film since *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," as well as it being described as a "great underground class of Black film . . . If *Sweet Sweeback* is *Native Son*, *Ganja and Hess* is *Invisible Man*."
- 59 Diawara and Klotman (300).
- 60 Hasan, Mark. "Ganja & Hess [Review]." *Rue Morgue* (2007): 47. Print.
- 61 Sharrett ("Neoconservative Culture" 100).
- 62 Seiving, Christopher. *Pleading the Blood: Bill Gunn's Ganja & Hess*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022.99. Print.
- 63 Diawara and Klotman (299).
- 64 Seiving (227).
- 65 Black Mama, White Mama (1973); Coffy (1973); Scream, Blacula, Scream (1973); Foxy Brown (1974); Sheba, Baby (1975); Bucktown (1975); Friday Foster (1975).
- 66 Dunn, S. *'Baad Bitches' and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008.109. Print.
- 67 Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.91. Print.
- 68 Hill Collins (89).
- 69 Dunn (111).
- 70 Dunn (113).
- 71 Lawrence (18).

- 72 “Civil Rights Groups Attack Black Films.” *Jet*, September 14, 1972.50. Print.
- 73 “Roy Innis Proposes Review Committee for Black Films.” *Jet*, October 5, 1972.55. Print.
- 74 Senn, Bryan. *Drums of Terror: Voodoo in the Cinema*. Baltimore, MD: Luminary Press, 1998.208. Print.
- 75 Clover (*Chainsaws* 65).
- 76 Bogle (*Toms, Coons* 252–253).
- 77 Clover (*Chainsaws* 35, 36).
- 78 As for *The Exorcist*, Warner Bros. thought that the film served as more than a template for the Black horror film *Abby*, and a court agreed.
- 79 Benschhoff (40).
- 80 Sharrett, Christopher. *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1999.103. Print.
- 81 Weiler, A.H. (1974). “‘Abby’, About a Black Family and Exorcism.” *New York Times*, December 26, 1974: 53. Print.
- 82 “Black-oriented Films Produced since Mid-1970s.” *Jet* 42 (1972): 58–59.58. Print.
- 83 Guerrero, E. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993.86. Print.
- 84 Dunn.
- 85 Semedi is a keeper of the dead, a “great lover,” and a greedy spirit who values money, gifts, and women. In the film, his name is pronounced Baron Samdi.
- 86 Benschhoff (32).
- 87 Murray, J. “Now a Boom in Black Directors.” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1972: D11. Print.
- 88 Harris, M. “Scary Sistas: A Brief History of Black Women in Horror Films.” *Prettyscary.net*. Pretty Scary: For Women in Horror By Women in Horror. June 4, 2006. Web. March 17, 2010.
- 89 Yearwood, Gladstone L. *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000.44. Print.
- 90 Joi was perhaps most widely seen (again, topless) as “Cleopatra Schwartz” in a Blaxploitation parody skit in John Landis’ cult spoof film *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977).
- 91 Sherman, Sam. “Commentary.” *Nurse Sherri. Vinegar Syndrome*, 2017. DVD.
- 92 Sherman (“Commentary”).
- 93 Bogle (*Toms, Coons* 220).
- 94 Null (219).
- 95 Marlene Clark became a bit of a horror icon, appearing in *Ganja & Hess* and *The Beast Must Die*, as well as two other English-language, Philippines films, *Night of the Cobra Woman* (1972) and *Black Mamba* (1974).
- 96 Benschhoff (39).
- 97 “Long Running Gunsmoke Series Has Black Publicist.” *Jet*. October 28, 1971.47.
- 98 “Tight \$300,000 Budget Transforms Skull Filming into Dramatic Race.” *BoxOffice*. June 25, 1973. SE-5. Web. www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/31901493/boxoffice-june251973.
- 99 “Black Group Finances Two Films in Georgia.” *Jet*. April 26, 1973.52.
- 100 Rudy Ray Moore. “Petey Wheatstraw, the Devil’s Son-in-Law,” *The Cockpit*. Kent Comedy Series, 1973. CD.
- 101 The *Kung Fu* TV series (1972–1975) presented a young martial arts student “Grasshopper” being trained by his Shaolin Priest Master Po.
- 102 Rudy Ray Moore, in the documentary *Macked, Hammered, Slaughtered, and Shafted* (2004).
- 103 Cripps, Thomas. *Black Film as Genre*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978.129. Print.

- 104 Cripps (*Genre* 129).
- 105 George, N. *Blackface: Reflections on African Americans in the Movies*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994.87. Print.
- 106 West, Hollie I. "Black Films: Crossovers and Beyond Blaxploitation." *Washington Post*, February 8, 1976: 119. Print.
- 107 West (119).
- 108 West (119).
- 109 West (119).

7

WE ALWAYS DIE FIRST—INVISIBILITY, RACIAL RED-LINING, AND SELF-SACRIFICE

1980s

And every night, say a prayer to the patron saint of Black death, Scatman Crothers, who took an axe for that crazy-ass White boy in *The Shining* so that others might follow in his footsteps.

—Harris¹

During the 1980s, densely populated cities (also termed the inner city, the 'hood, or the ghetto in pop culture) were depicted in the film as being gritty, tough places largely inhabited (or overrun) by Black and Brown people. The urban or inner city, writes Nama in *Black Space*,

became political shorthand for discussing a myriad of social ills that disproportionately affected Blacks—such as poverty, crime, drug abuse, high unemployment, and welfare abuse—without focusing on race as the specific source of the problem. Instead, geography or spatial location defined the scope of the problem.²

The urban was portrayed as substandard: public schools were overrun with troublemakers (*Lean on Me* [1989]); school-aged children lacking parental support behave with insolence (*Stand and Deliver* [1988]); violent street gangs trample neighborhoods (*Colors* [1988]); brutal drug lords reign (*Scarface* [1983]); criminals rule over law enforcement (*Robocop* [1987]); and, in the absence of protection and safety, vigilantism becomes the solution (*Death Wish II* [1982]).

While, as Nama explains, there was rarely an explicit pointing of the finger at people of color (few of whom were understood as anything but underclass) for the decaying or “dead” cities,³ it was zealously implied. As a result, there

was an acquiescence that white people had no choice but to flee for whiter ground—the suburbs. In the real and in the imaginary, an America characterized by white flight materialized in which white people “turned their backs upon the old downtown areas and retreated to the suburbs” and exurbs.⁴ White flight became the latest variant of racial and economic segregation further induced by the government. Avila explains the shifting urban demographic in his essay “Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America”:

[A]s racialized minorities concentrated in American inner cities during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, millions of “white” Americans took to new suburban communities to preserve their whiteness [with the] collusion of federal policy, local land development strategies, and the popular desire to live in racially exclusive and homogenous neighborhoods.⁵

For many whites, opting into a so-called suburban “culture of progress”⁶ actually meant embracing racial homogeneity but without the linguistic baggage of “racism” or “segregation.”

While Black people were implicated to incite racial, spatial, and underclass fears, in 1980s horror films, their participation as characters in the drama (thankfully) was fleeting or non-existent. As such, the fear of the Black urban was propagated through myth; deviant Blackness became a sort of invisible boogeyman “out there” that whites would not ever want to encounter and must shield themselves from. As a result, Black people were nowhere to be found in popular horror films set outside of the urban, leaving white people to carry the horror, such as the following:

- *Amityville Horror* (1979), set in a small Suffolk county (NY) village;
- *Friday the 13th* (1980), set in a camp called Crystal Lake;
- *The Evil Dead* (1983), set in rural woods;
- *Halloween II* (1981), set in an Illinois suburb in Haddonfield;
- *The House on Sorority Row* (1982), set in an all-white college sorority house;
- *Poltergeist* (1982), set in suburban California;
- *Critters* (1986), set in rural Kansas.

The slasher sub-genre (e.g., *Friday the 13th*) that rose to dominate early 1980s horror was a particularly rural and suburban phenomenon. Richard Nowell, in his definition of the slasher “film-type,” explicitly excludes a city setting from the equation:

Action is confined largely to a single non-urban location which, as a result of being labyrinthine, remote, and sparsely populated, transforms the everyday sites of the American middle-class into ideal arenas for activities that otherwise would be restricted, enabling youths to pursue and realize their hedonistic urges.⁷

The location in these movies not only served the narrative function of isolating the protagonists (and victims) but also reflected the filmmakers' and distributors' target audience: white suburban teens. As Nowell's analysis of slasher filmmakers' tailoring of content in order to garner distribution deals notes, "On-screen depictions of the target audience were perhaps the most valuable hooks."⁸ Unspoken in Nowell's discussion of target audiences, which focuses on age and gender, is race—specifically that these movies were almost exclusively white—just as Clover's groundbreaking delineation of the Final Girl glossed over the fact that Final Girls of the 1970s and 1980s were, too, almost always white. This sort of racial omission in the retroactive analysis is apt, as it mirrors the omission of Blacks and other people of color from these films, as well as their omission from the idyllic suburban oases to which whites fled. In movies as in life, Black Americans were out of sight, out of mind.

By the 1980s, Hollywood had virtually ceased considering Black films as money-making endeavors. They had given Black cinema a shot during the Blaxploitation era out of desperation as much as altruism. Starting in the 1950s, the ever-growing prominence of television (the share of American homes with a TV jumping from 2% in 1949 to nearly 90% by 1960) siphoned off regular moviegoers, precipitating the box office downturn of the 1950s and 1960s that saw attendance plummet by nearly 80% from the high water mark of 1947.⁹ In the mid-1940s, 23% of Americans' recreational expenses went to movies, but by the end of the 1960s, that number had dwindled to 3%, thanks to not only television but also increased ticket prices.¹⁰ In stepped Black cinema to, as David Walker puts it, "save Hollywood." Walker succinctly sums up the situation:

For the studios, which had been suffering financially for several years after a string of box office disappointments, blaxploitation represented a form of salvation. . . . Most movie theaters were still located in the heart of the city. But after the massive migration of whites to the suburbs (known as "the great white flight"), those theaters became harder and harder to fill, because there were so few white people living in the inner city. Films like *Shaft* and *Foxy Brown* (1974) drew in Black audiences and box office revenues that helped struggling studios stay afloat.¹¹

The early days of Blaxploitation proved immensely profitable, providing much-needed stability to the box office, but the market became saturated with inferior copycats, and the popularity of mainstream blockbusters with Black audiences convinced studios that they did not need to release movies targeted at Blacks in order to attract them to the theater. In fact, Guerrero points out that the demographic makeup of the audience for a white horror movie, *The Exorcist* (1973)—reportedly up to 35% Black—played no small role in this strategic shift.¹² That said, the decline in Black movies was already well underway by the time *The Exorcist* was released in December 1973; just a month later, *Jet* magazine declared

that “the run of the ethnic film seems to be over.”¹³ More, what Black movies did exist involved so few Black creatives (only one-third of the Black releases in 1975 boasting a Black writer, director, or producer) that there was little power behind the scenes to keep the Black perspective in the limelight.¹⁴ By the late 1970s, Black films had slowed to a relative trickle, prompting showbiz journalist Rona Barrett to declare in 1978 that “there is currently an official tacit agreement among studio executives that movies focusing on Black people will be ignored.”¹⁵

This is not to say that Blacks were entirely absent from the big screen in the 1980s. Rather, Blacks played an integral role in what became known as the “buddy” subgenre—a cycle of comedy/drama films that problematically paired Black and white actors in (often clumsy) adventure. These films included: *Stir Crazy* (1980), with Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder (who appears briefly in blackface); *48 Hours* (1982), with Eddie Murphy and Nick Nolte; *Beverly Hills Cop I and II* (1984 and 1987), with Eddie Murphy, John Ashton, and Judge Reinhold; *Running Scared* (1986), with Gregory Hines and Billy Crystal; and *Lethal Weapon I and II* (1987 and 1989), with Danny Glover and Mel Gibson.¹⁶ The effect of such couplings was not exactly the racial harmony the films promised; rather, as Guerrero explains, Blacks were “completely isolated from other Blacks or any referent to the Black world. In this situation, what there is of Black culture is embodied in an individual Black star surrounded and appropriated by a White context and narrative for the pleasure of a dominant consumer audience.”¹⁷

Within the horror genre, however, Black performers would scarcely be trusted to even co-lead a picture during the decade. As the 1980s dawned, teen slashers dominated the genre, and were not only distributors concerned with reflecting the aforementioned “on-screen depictions of the target audience” but also the myriad of independent filmmakers seeking to make products appealing to those distributors fell back on mimicking previous (white) hits to catch their eye. Even as the commercial viability of slashers began to wane, Nowell points out that rather than try something new (such as a shift away from the W.A.S.P.-y demographic makeup of the lead characters), filmmakers doubled down, attempting to emulate the films that had found success in the past: “In response to the box-office failure of the teen slashers . . . ([like] *Terror Train* and *My Bloody Valentine*), distributors played down product differentiation in favor of echoing the advertising of *Friday the 13th* so as to imply similarities to the film.”¹⁸

With no desire to install Black co-stars, the “buddy” film never developed within horror. The closest approximation would be Blacks operating in clearly subordinate and expendable supporting “partner” roles like Gregory Hines as a colleague to a white police detective (Albert Finney) in *Wolfen* (1981) and Mario Van Peebles as a colleague to a white marine biologist (Lance Guest) in *Jaws: The Revenge* (1987)—the films’ respective urban New York and tropical Bahamian settings providing the rationale for the subordinate inclusion of Black characters. More commonly, the genre expanded the “buddy” twosome model into an interracial group scenario with one Black individual tokenized as

the sole representation of their race. Sometimes, they would be the lone Black teen within a group of prototypically white, youthful, partying, slasher-friendly victims—in which case, if they were allowed to convey any semblance of sexuality, they would be paired with another Black character to avoid miscegenational imagery that might alienate the target audience. Such was the case with *The Hills Have Eyes Part II* (1984) (with a Black couple played by Willard Pugh and Penny Johnson) and *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* (1985) (with a Black couple played by Miguel A. Núñez Jr. and Jere Fields), two movies whose status as sequels in successful franchises helped afford them the freedom to integrate their casts. More often, these Black loner characters would appear in workplace/professional settings—à la Ernie Hudson in *Ghostbusters* (1984)—deemed more socially appropriate and more realistic for interracial interaction than mere friendship. This was applicable in typically urban environments, like hospitals, where Black performers played nurses and orderlies (Gloria Gifford in *Halloween II* [1981], Beverly Hart in *X-Ray* [1982], Laurence Fishburne in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* [1987]), or police stations, where they played beat patrol cops (Steven Williams in *House* [1985]), homicide detectives (Stan Shaw in *The Monster Squad* [1987], and Art Evans in *Fright Night* [1985]), or what would become one of the predominant Black typecast roles of the 1980s: the angry police captain who spends most of their screen time chewing out the hero cop (Mel Stewart in *Dead Heat* [1988] and Richard Roundtree in *Party Line* [1988]). Military settings (Carl Weathers and Bill Duke in *Predator* [1987], Rico Ross and Al Matthews in *Aliens* [1986], and Jessie Lawrence Ferguson in *Prince of Darkness* [1987]) likewise presented workplace settings suitable for Blacks to infiltrate ensemble casts.

These Black—white assemblages aside, a significant number of top films in the 1980s, many with settings outside of the urban, rendered neglected references to Blackness, as these 20 popular non-horror films illustrate: *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Batman* (1989), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Tootsie* (1982), *Rain Man* (1988), *The Terminator* (1984), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), *Look Who's Talking* (1989), *Top Gun* (1986), *Amadeus* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *The Big Chill* (1983), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Working Girl* (1988), *On Golden Pond* (1981), and *Nine to Five* (1980). The result was an affirmative construction of whiteness through the exclusion of Blacks. Such omissions were most assuredly a “form of stereotyping, one that reinforces the idea that Blacks and other non-white groups are obscure, marginal, and dependent.”¹⁹

Isolation and invisibility were but two of many representational attacks Black culture endured. The infamous Willie Horton political ad campaign, produced by Republican candidate George H.W. Bush's camp during the heated 1988 Presidential race against Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis, also served as a defining backdrop to popular constructions of what happens when Black people enter white spaces. The ad's message, as offered by the National Security Political

Action Committee, was not at all dissimilar to the 1980s *Death Wish* films—without the proper (white) authority figures in power, Black men would come into white Americans' homes to rape and murder. The ad shows two photos—one of Willie Horton, a Black man, and the other of Gov. Dukakis, a white man. A voice-over asserts, “Bush supports the death penalty for first-degree murders. Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty, he allowed first-degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison.” This narrative is accompanied by the words “kidnapping,” “stabbing,” and “raping” flashing across the screen. Likewise, the Maryland Republican Party distributed a letter that read “Dukakis/Willie Horton Team” and “You, your spouse, your children and your friends can have a visit from someone like Willie Horton if Mike Dukakis becomes president.”²⁰ Horton was a cinematic boogeyman come to life who embodied the danger that mainstream (white) America was indoctrinated to fear about all things Black and urban.

The horror genre did its fair share to perpetuate the narrative of urban chaos, films like *Tenement* (1985), *Maniac* (1980), *Maniac Cop* (1988), *Vamp* (1986), and *Basket Case* (1982), along with violent revenge thrillers like *Ms .45* (1981), the *Death Wish* sequels (1982–87), and *Sudden Impact* (1983) reveling in the seedy side of city life and the inability of the police to prevent violence, with Black and Brown faces occupying a noticeably higher proportion of the supporting cast than in horror films with rural and suburban settings. In the process, “Black” and “urban” became codified as dangerous and worthy of punishment, as Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) and “Dirty Harry” Callahan (Clint Eastwood) became embodiments of the “tough on crime” agenda of the 1980s with what movie reviewer Gene Siskel called a “subtext of white man’s revenge.”²¹ Even if they were not the primary antagonist (and they rarely were deemed worthy of such prominence), Black roles in these movies tended to be criminal in nature: gang members, pimps and prostitutes, muggers, rapists, and menacing would-be muggers/rapists.

Chocolate Cities and Vanilla Suburbs

“Main Street and Elm Street U.S.A.,” writes Crane, “It is on these avenues, common to all of the public, where terror implacably strikes. The great man’s laboratory, the gothic castle, the ruined mansion, and the pharaoh’s sacred tomb have been dismissed from the screen.”²² While Main and Elm streets were now “common,” horror said that these streets were not accessible to just any old member of the public. Implicitly, this was not the place for Black Americans (or any racial minorities for that matter); their place was in the city. These “Whitopias,” as Rich Benjamin, in *Searching for Whitoopia: An Improbable Journey to the Heart of White America*, dubs them,²³ prided themselves on a seemingly ordinariness, friendliness, orderliness, safety, and comfort—traits that differentiated them from the urban chaos seen in the movies and on the 6 o’clock news. But what would happen if that sense of security started to crumble—not from outside but from within?

Horror needed its monsters, and in this decade, they infamously came, via the slasher movie, in the form of a host of suburban white males as the embodiment of evil, taking up a “masochistic aesthetic” through the use of machetes and power tools.²⁴ If white people were to survive their stay in the suburbs, they would have to figure out other ways to discern the good neighbor from the monster, as color-coding did not apply. These white monsters could then only terrorize those closest to them: white, non-urban (e.g., suburban or rural) families. Whiteness had its failings: parents left their young children in the care of babysitters or a TV set; absent their parents instilling high moral or religious standards, white children met a particularly gruesome end for engaging in out-of-wedlock sexual activities or for substance abuse. In the *Halloween* films, Michael “the Shape” Myers slashes his way through a host of partying, unsupervised teens in the tranquil, Middle American town of Haddonfield. In the *Friday the 13th* movies, the remote camp setting—a getaway experience to which many urban children do not have access—serves as Jason Vorhees’ stomping grounds, as he targets nubile camp counselors who are too occupied with sex, drugs, and alcohol to notice a hulking zombie serial killer, much less take care of the campers under their watch. These movies flipped the script on the place where whites believed they could find a sense of comfort and security. These films said “gotcha” to those who thought white flight away from the urban Black and poor and into the welcoming arms of white, middle-class suburban communities would bring them an insular peace.

The *Halloween* films, specifically, proved duplicitous as they played on ideals of racial and class homogeneity while destroying that very same sense of community by challenging suburbanites’ “ability to recognize strangers and predators.”²⁵ More pointedly, these monsters were not coming from outside the suburbs to wreak havoc on middle-class domesticity; rather, white Americans saw that “they are us, and we never know when we will act as monsters.”²⁶ Still, perhaps the most deliberate horror “gotcha” came from the non-Black horror film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Here, inattentive, alcohol-soaked parents discover that their “McMansions” simply gave a murderous pedophile named Fred Krueger (Robert Englund) more space to practice his sadism. Nevertheless, Krueger is likened to a “moral blemish” in an otherwise comfortable suburban community.²⁷

Just as white characters in 1980s films were warned away from urban spaces, Black characters received warning notices about foisting themselves into suburbia. In the “Blacks in horror” film *Lady in White* (1988), set in 1962 in the “small town” of Willowpoint Falls, “25 miles south west” of “the city,” there resides the rare Black family. The family’s patriarch is a drunkard school janitor, Harold Williams (Henry Harris), who is falsely accused of the rape and murder of a white schoolgirl. Williams is called a “Black son of a bitch” and described by the town’s sheriff as “the perfect scapegoat” because “he’s Black.” It is eventually revealed that Williams was falsely accused and left to navigate the hate coming his way by a white member of the community who is actually the culprit. Still, the film

brought home another message: white, small towns are strikingly tough on Black people. Williams is shot and killed by a vengeful vigilante who does not believe in his innocence.

Still, relative invisibility did not mean those races and ethnic groups that were marginalized or subordinated were given a wholesale reprieve from their symbolic annihilation. One implication of their representational invisibility is that white audiences were left to ponder: If all of this horror is going on in the suburbs among those we know and who look like us, what might be happening among those racially and culturally different people in the 'hood?

In a few instances, though "Other" races were not actually depicted on screen, horror films did work to cure viewers' curiosity about what non-white people have been up to. Native Americans bore a significant brunt of symbolic attacks, portrayed as an aggregation of being (too) spiritual, (too) volatile, and (too) primitive. This tripartite of virtue equivocation was tied to "a field of romantic nostalgia" in which symbols of idiosyncrasy were crafted around religious ceremonies (e.g., dancing; connecting with the spirit world), around resigned stoicism in the face of genocide and the theft of land and children, and around forced integration.²⁸ These inaccurate portrayals fixed a frozen, incomplete image of Native Americans into popular culture, narrowly depicted in particular ways of dressing (headdress), of moving (on horseback), and even of existing—simple, but dangerous. Native American culture was to be brutally tamed, and peskily it persisted—never to be adequately contained or completely destroyed, forever rising up to haunt unsuspecting white people. Suburbanites were horrified whenever they discovered that their housing developments were built upon, and thereby disrupted by, the remains of "sacred land" in the form of "ancient Indian burial grounds."

White Americans were depicted as innocents—inadvertent and unwitting interlopers into a bygone culture that simply will not cede its existence. Hapless and exasperated, white people were left to lament the unreasonableness of their situation—being unable to live a life of exclusion in their Whitopia.²⁹ For example, 1979's *The Amityville Horror* begins as a story of living out the American Dream through homeownership in a predominately white suburb. However, a white couple's (the Lutzes) new Long Island, NY house, unbeknownst to them, sits atop a long forgotten Native American cemetery. Even in death, Native American culture is portrayed as excessive and in need of control. The dead are relentless as they radiate terror from their spirit world, first targeting the previous residents who become susceptible to demon possession and who ultimately become the victims of mass murder in the house. Then there is the Lutz family who is driven from the home, just weeks after moving in, after a malevolent force haunts, attacks, sickens, blinds, and kills those trying to uncover the mysteries of the house which is a gateway to hell. The audience is asked to mourn over the Lutzes' failed attempt at securing the suburban American dream (they live in their home for only 28 days), and the great financial hardship that the whole sad affair

has cost them—rather than speculate as to what atrocities must have happened on that Native American land to spark such enduring rage.³⁰

The Shining's (1980) mountaintop Overlook Hotel, too, was built over the graves of Native Americans. Its grounds were blood-soaked as, over a two-year period between 1907 and 1909, Native Americans fought to maintain control of their land, battling theft and white encroachment, as explained in the movie: “The site is supposed to be located on an Indian burial ground. They actually had to repel a few Indian attacks as they were building it.” The incursion, though again unexamined, opens the door to a set of deadly events—exposure to evil attacks, possession, and murder. The same inattention to Native American hallowed ground is the terror trigger for the suburban housing development in *Poltergeist* (1982). Here, a real estate developer has built a sprawling housing plan atop a cemetery without even first relocating the bodies. Across these films, those seeking reprieve from the urban still find that there are “skeletons in their closets (not to mention their swimming pool).”³¹

In the film *Wolfen* (1981), the story is a gentrification tale with a twist. Shapeshifting Native Americans-cum-wolves live and lurk in the dark shadows of a desolate New York City. A white corporate developer wants to reclaim the space, thereby reversing the white flight trend but with the effect of displacing the sorcerous Native Americans—a slight deviation from the well-known colloquialism of “urban renewal—Negro Removal.”³² In the end, many must die before the project is scrapped and the white developers are convinced to stay away. Somehow Native Americans are presented as “winning” the battle against gentrification and corporatization by being left alone to live in the trash strewn, neglected dead city, thereby making no demands on various government agencies for change. The white people, it is assumed, return to their thriving “vanilla” suburbs.³³

But what of Blacks' roles in the horror films of this decade? Horror films failed to build a plausible narrative around their suburban presence. This prohibition stemmed from the fact that, mirroring the discriminatory housing practices and hostility toward integration in real life, horror films had largely confined Black horror to urban locations (e.g., New Orleans, Chicago, New York, L.A.), or outside of that, Africa or the Caribbean. For example, in the “Blacks in horror” film, *Zombie 4: After Death* (1988), white people have to travel quite a distance to meet up with Black horrors because there is no Voodoo to be found on Main or Elm Street. In the film, the Black characters are confined to a remote island (far from any suburb) where a Voodoo priest has his revenge on the uninvited white strangers by letting his zombies feed on them.

Black Saviors and Self-Sacrifice

As horror focused on the white teen-meets-pickaxe money-shot, the revolutionary themes that swirled around Black people in 1970s horror became a distant memory. Tony Williams, in his essay “Trying to Survive on the Darker Side,” describes the overall pessimism around 1980s fare:

The 1980s decade was extremely disappointing for critics impressed by the horror genre's brief 1970s renaissance. While the 1970s saw the emergence of racial works by directors such as . . . George Romero, the following decade appeared to feature reductive exploitation films such as the *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series—all highly dependent on spectacular special effects and gory bloodbaths of promiscuous (mostly female) teenagers.³⁴

The value of Black characters, outside of menacing urban inhabitants, was then confined to their ability to affect an assimilable air in cross-racial, interpersonal encounters. In the films of the 1980s, Black characters were pressed to enter into support relationships with their white peers and to display a value system of loyalty and trust that was generally unilateral. That is, there was no expectation that the kinds of displays of faithfulness emanating from Black people would be reciprocated by white people. More striking, in this decade's horror films, a Black character's constancy to whites was frequently evidenced by a willingness not only to pitch in but often to die a horrific death on whites' behalf—horror's version of the buddy film.³⁵

Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980) is especially powerful in its two-prong approach to the symbolic annihilation of Blacks. First, *The Shining* represents *the* defining (re)turn toward the trope of the sacrificial Negro—a Black character who surrenders their life in the course of saving whiteness. Second, the film invokes a second trope, that of the “magical Negro.” Here, a Black character is imbued with supernatural powers, which are used, notably, not for their own personal, familial, or community protection or advancement; rather, the powers are used wholly in service to white people and their preservation. It is as if there was a perceived need by Hollywood to go overboard to ensure the viewing audience that these were not “those” types of Blacks so negatively portrayed in the media—fiction and nonfiction alike. These were “the good ones.” They were so good, in fact, that they would put their lives on the line, like an Asimovian robot with a celestial sense of virtue, at the ready to help just white people in their time of need.

In *The Shining*, the white Torrance family—father Jack (Jack Nicholson), mother Wendy (Shelley Duvall), and young son Danny (Danny Lloyd)—temporarily relocate to the Overlook Hotel, an isolated Colorado mountain-top resort, which is the site of a Native American massacre-turned-burial ground. Jack has taken on the job of caretaker of the hotel while it is closed for the winter, and its staff is on winter break. Before heading out for his winter vacation, the hotel's Black cook, Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers), spends the day familiarizing the Torrances with their responsibilities in maintaining the hotel. Before Dick departs for his vacation, he reveals to young Danny that he has secret telepathic powers. Dick calls his mental telepathy “shining” and confides in the boy because he

correctly detects that Danny is also telepathic. In Dick, shining is an endearing, folksy, unproblematic condition he inherited from his grandmother, who long ago explained to him that it is a magical gift.

Dick is played by the then 69-year-old entertainer (singer, dancer, musician, and comedian) and former vaudeville performer Scatman Crothers. With the elderly Crothers in this role, Dick presents an amiable and safe figure. As such, the particular interest that Dick displays toward Danny is grandfatherly affection. In the *Shining*, Crothers, who had played helpful roles such as railroad porters, gardeners, waiters, and shoeshine boys in the past, recalls earlier popular culture Black male adult/white child asexual relationships such as that of Huckleberry Finn (Junior Durkin) and Jim (Clarence Muse) in *Huckleberry Finn* (1931) or Virgie (Shirley Temple) and Uncle Billy (Bill “Bojangles” Robinson) in *The Littlest Rebel* (1935). In each of these cases, it goes unquestioned why Black men would find satisfaction in the company of white children. To be sure that there is no confusion about Dick’s proclivities, objectifying iconography is deployed. In one scene, Dick is in his vacation home in Florida lounging in his bed. The audience sees that he has adorned his room with two large prints of Black women with large afros, one of a busty, naked woman sitting on her knees and the other of a partially-nude woman sitting on the floor—both gazing out at the gazer.³⁶

Though telepathy or shining is portrayed as natural to and accepted in Black families such as Dick’s, to Danny’s family, it is something aberrant. Danny’s shining is dubbed “Tony, the little boy that lives in my mouth” and is worrisome enough that Jack and Wendy have even sought medical help for Danny’s condition which for them is far from a “gift” in their son. Central to the film’s plot is the reality that Danny’s powers are growing stronger and more dangerous the longer he spends in what is revealed to be a haunted hotel. By contrast, Dick is largely unaffected by the hotel, even as he knows that the hotel is a discontented space due to a bloody axe murder carried out on the premises by the previous caretaker. Nevertheless, Dick is not troubled enough by these conspiring presences or “muted echoes”³⁷ to feel overly endangered: “I ain’t scared of nothing here.” Likewise, the hotel does not feel especially endangered by Dick.

In *The Shining*, Danny eventually faces mortal danger while trapped in the blizzard-bound hotel as his evil-possessed, axe-wielding father tries to kill him and his mother Wendy. Danny telepathically sends out a distress call to the vacationing Dick who, without hesitation, drops everything to return to Colorado to help the boy. Dick spares no effort to function as savior—he purchases a last-minute plane ticket out of Florida, rents a car after landing in Colorado and drives until he can go no farther in the snow, borrows a SnowCat, and drives through the deepening snow and turbulent blizzard, all in an attempt to get up to the remote hotel.

Dick’s efforts to come to Danny’s aid (finally) prove threatening to the hotel which had not been particularly fearsome before. But, with its sights set on

Danny and the power that he holds, the hotel now expresses its great displeasure in Dick's interference through the ghost of the Overlook's former murderous caretaker, Grady (Philip Stone). While Dick has been called the "head cook" by the hotel's manager, Grady diminishes Dick by warning Jack that "the nigger cook" is coming.

Notably and oddly, Dick's entire harrowing experience is shown to be all for naught. He never reaches Danny. Rather, immediately upon Dick's arrival at the hotel—he makes it a few steps through the main door of the hotel, but does not get the snow dusted from his coat and boots—he is quite literally cut down with an axe by Jack, his shining powers seemingly taking a break when he needs them the most. Danny and Wendy make their escape to safety in Dick's SnowCat, while Dick's body is left lying in the hotel lobby in an ever-expanding pool of blood. Certainly, Dick's startling death is the stuff that makes the horror genre what it is; however, as the only character to be slaughtered in real time in the film, Dick's primary function was to serve as magical-turned-sacrificial Negro for the Torrances. For his portrayal, Crothers earned a Saturn Award for Best Supporting Actor.

Even winning more prestigious awards than a Saturn did not preclude Black performers from having to settle for self-sacrificing roles in horror. For instance, James Earl Jones, having already won a Tony and a Golden Globe and having been nominated for an Oscar for *The Great White Hope* (1970), not to mention voicing Darth Vader, found himself slumming it in the cheap underwater monster movie *Blood Tide* in 1982. Although certainly a bigger name than Martin Kove (who had yet to appear in 1984's *The Karate Kid*) and Deborah Shelton, Jones fell prey to the cinematic racial pecking order and ends up swimming into the jaws of the sea creature, bomb in hand, blowing both himself and the monster to smithereens as the two white leads escape to safety. His final words are a familiar refrain for this type of role: "Get out!"

Poof! More Magical Negroes

The Shining functions to imply that in modern-day America all that remains of the legacy of the wild and primitive African medicine man or the frenzied Voodoo priestess is the subtler magical Negro. The magical Negro, writes Matthew Hughey in his essay "Cinematic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films,"

has become a stock character that often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken Whites (almost exclusively White men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation.³⁸

This contemporary magical Negro, be it in horror, science fiction, or drama, continues to captivate Hollywood. For example, in the film *The Green Mile* (1999), set in the 1930s, the Black character John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) is depicted as a dull-witted, magical giant of a man on death row for a crime he did not commit—the rape and murder of two white girls. Coffey cures his jailer/executioner of an infection with a touch of the hand, thereby freeing the man of chronic pain and permitting him to restore his sex life with his wife. Coffey removes late-stage cancer from the prison warden’s wife, by ingesting the nasty bits of the malignancy, thereby saving her life. Coffey even dramatically slows the aging process of a mouse. However, what Coffey does not do is use his powers to save himself and, in fact, is executed by those he has saved, even though they know he is innocent.

In the 2000 film *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, also set in the 1930s, a Black ghost (Will Smith) mysteriously appears in Savannah, Georgia to serve as a caddy to Rannulph Junuh (Matt Damon), an emotionally depressed white World War I veteran and former golf star. Vance restores Junuh, a son-of-the-South, to his former self and status: he rehabilitates his mental health and rebuilds his confidence through folksy wisdom and coaching; he helps him regain his glory as a golfer reviving his swing; and he supports him in matters of love and then Vance disappears (reappearing decades later to be available to another broken white golfer). The violence, segregation, and economic troubles (exacerbated by limited opportunities and the Great Depression) that Black Georgians endured did not merit relief through Vance’s magic.

Heather Hicks speculates on the impetus behind such magic Negro portrayals.³⁹ She writes that Black characters are given saintly, even magical qualities in a misguided attempt by filmmakers (perhaps like *Bagger Vance*’s director, famed actor Robert Redford) to counter racist stereotypes. However, such characterizations are really for white audiences, in that it takes a saintly Black character to become the moral equivalent of a “normal” white one. More, Hicks observes that there is a fantasy of equality when the downtrodden, dispirited, or those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder (e.g., John Coffey) are bestowed with magic to compensate for what they lack. However, magical Negroes have necessary limits, else they become (white) superheroes such as Superman or Captain America.⁴⁰

In the “Blacks in horror” film *Jeepers Creepers* (2001), a Black woman with psychic ability, Jezelle Gay Hartman (played by accomplished stage actress Patricia Belcher), senses danger for two young, white siblings—Patricia (Gina Philips) and Darry Jenner (Justin Long)—who are driving home, through the countryside, for their college spring break. Under her own volition, Jezelle locates two strangers to help them survive an encounter with an otherworldly human body collector who engages in the ritualistic eating of humans. Like Dick in *The Shining*, Jezelle remains by the side of the Jenners even after she is initially harshly rejected by them as being crazy. Jezelle even places herself face to face with the monster,

falling to her knees in prayer in preparation for her self-sacrificial death. However, Jezelle is spared when the monster senses something in Darry that it wants more (heightened fear) and consumes Darry instead. Unneeded by the monster and an ineffective savior, Jezelle does what she can by comforting the surviving sibling, Patricia, acting as a surrogate mother until Patricia's parents can arrive to take her home. Of course, there is no home for the Dick Halloranns, John Coffeys, Bagger Vances, and Jezelle Hartmans. Their heroism is offered without regard for self or their loved ones (who are absent in all of these films). That is, for magical Negroes, it is noble enough of a goal to labor to maintain whites' family units; they care not about a family of their own or who might mourn their sacrificial deaths.

In the "Blacks in horror" film *Angel Heart* (1987) set in New Orleans, the character Epiphany Proudfoot (Lisa Bonet) is the rare self-sacrificing Negro with a family member, a toddler, thereby making her death all the more heartbreaking. Her mother, who is Black, is a deceased Voodoo practitioner, while her white father disappeared long ago. Alone, Epiphany is shown caring for her toddler son, who appears to be no older than two years old. They seem to have only each other, as together they visit her mother's grave. With no family around, the only other support Epiphany has is a for-hire babysitter—a woman with 14 children of her own who looks after the boy while Epiphany goes about her day, which includes dancing sensuously in a bloody Voodoo ritual or bedding a white, male stranger who has come to New Orleans. Though Epiphany is reported to be a highly intuitive "mambo" priestess who controls her followers with fear and punishment, she is not enough of a seer to realize that she is having (soft-porn) sex with someone who is not only possessed but also a relative. Epiphany experiences a particularly gruesome, misogynoir annihilation after sleeping with the man, Harold Angel.⁴¹ For being a purportedly promiscuous Black woman (not "lady-like") her nude, bloody body is found with her legs spread wide to reveal that she met her death by a "gun in her snatch." Epiphany's son becomes an orphan.

Angel Heart is retrogressive in its representation of Blackness and focuses on Voodoo. The film focuses on Harold Angel (Mickey Rourke) who, in the opening scenes, is summoned to 1955 Harlem by the mysterious Louis Cyphre (read: Lucifer) for a meeting. Cyphre (Robert De Niro) meets with (the obviously named) Angel in a Black church, seemingly Pentecostal, where Cyphre is welcomed, housed, and protected by parishioners. Hence, the symbiotic and symbolic relationship between Blacks, Black religions, and evil is made clear in the film from the start. Angel's next stop is (of course) New Orleans, where he encounters more Black people and Black religion—in this case, Voodoo. He discovers that just as in Harlem, in New Orleans, Black worshipers are willing to share their most prized religious secrets with white people. As a result, much like early films such as *White Zombie*, whites have become particularly adept at wielding Voodoo's black magic which, in this film, means communicating directly with the Devil.



FIGURE 7.1 Epiphany Proudfoot in Voodoo ritual in *Angel Heart*

Tri-Star/Photofest

In the film, a white man (also obviously) named Johnny Favorite has mastered black magic with a level of expertise that is unrivaled, even by the Black people who taught it to him. He makes a deal with the Devil to surrender his soul in return for immediate fame as a singer. When it is time to fulfill his bargain and submit to the Devil, Johnny attempts to renege on the deal by hiding in another man's body.

Predictably, *Angel* is actually Johnny's Favorite and Johnny is, of course, Epiphany's long-lost father. Johnny, as Angel, suffered from amnesia and had no memory of the body possession. The punishment for Epiphany's (unknown to her) incestuous encounter with her father is ultimately far, far greater than that which Angel experiences for being on the wrong side of Lucifer. Angel's fate is to simply take a slow ride in an antique elevator down to Hell, to join the Devil. If abuses are coming, and it is unclear that they are, no hint is offered as to what they might be.

The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988) continues the passe and racist treatment of Blackness, doubling down by also featuring several sacrificial Negro in support of whiteness. In this "Blacks in horror" film, a white American anthropologist, Dennis Alan (Bill Pullman), travels to Haiti to acquire from Voodoo practitioners a powdered drug concoction that turns people into zombies. Dennis plans to acquire the drug for the U.S. pharmaceutical company Bio Corp, who will use it as an anesthetic. As such, this is a film that "repeatedly elaborates the distinction

between White Science [American pharmaceuticals] and Black Magic.”⁴² The Black characters who work to aid Dennis in his appropriation efforts meet grotesquely violent ends. For example, Dennis enlists the help of a Voodoo priest/nightclub owner, Lucien Celine (Paul Winfield). It is made clear to Lucien by rogue Haitian law enforcement officials—members of the infamous Tonton Macoute secret police—that Dennis should not be assisted in any way in the theft of the cultural practice/sacred drug. When Lucien fails to heed their warning, he is sacrificed—bitten by a venomous scorpion that magically appears in his mouth. It comes as no surprise, then, that Louis Mozart (Brent Jennings), a poor Black Haitian who knows how to make the zombie drug, is decapitated because he shares the recipe with Dennis and helps him to secret it back to the U.S. The desperate Louis helps Dennis on the promise of a small pay-out of \$1,000 and that Dennis will boast about Louis to the pharmaceutical company extolling the value of the “magic powder” and its maker. Dennis follows through on neither promise.

Although the backdrop of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* is the rising revolution against the violent, oppressive presidency of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, none of the government or police personnel who are opposed to Dennis’ efforts think of doing away with him through traditional murderous means, such as death by machete or shooting him with a pistol—fates that, in the film, befall Haiti’s innocent Black citizenry with swift regularity. Rather, Dennis is closely watched, harassed (he is magically made to dream bad dreams), and eventually tortured, before finally being cajoled to fly back to the States. However, Dennis defiantly returns to Haiti, reuniting with yet another one of his Haitian helpers, Marielle (Cathy Tyson), with whom he has had sex. Marielle wants to stop the corrupt Haitian government, although how she will do so by helping Dennis is not explained. Upon his return, Dennis is zombified and buried alive. He is unearthed by yet another Black helper, Christophe (Conrad Roberts), a zombie who cannot save himself from the suffering.

Of course, it is Dennis’ nemesis, the cruel chief of police Dargent Peytraud (Zakes Mokae), who meets the worst end. Peytraud, himself a masterful practitioner of black magic, engages in a variety of supernatural scare tactics to throw Dennis off the trail of acquiring the valuable concoction. However, Dennis gets one last bit of invaluable assistance from the souls of those Blacks Peytraud has killed. Dennis goes head-to-head with the powerful Peytraud with a success and finality that none before him ever achieved. Dennis acquires the gift of telepathy, and he is able to torture Peytraud with a dramatic genital mutilation before sending him to Hell.

The Changing Cinematic Experience

In the 1970s, socially vibrant, urban, independent theaters such as New York’s Elgin, Boston’s Orson Welles Cinema, and San Francisco’s Pagoda Palace Theater offered “midnight movies” (as did many drive-in theaters across the country).

These movies were defined as much by their independent, limited-budget production and counter/oppositional sociopolitical themes as they were by their late-night showing times. The result was a cinematic evolution in which horror films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Eraserhead* (1977), and *Night of the Demons* (1988), as well as non-horror offerings such as *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *The Harder They Come* (1972), embraced their non-mainstream status and in return rose to become cult-classic favorites among hip, young adult movie-goers. “Here was a movement,” writes Heffernan,

“of exploitation films for art theatres” in [filmmaker] John Waters’s phrase. Many art theaters remained open throughout the seventies on the strength of box-office receipts generated by eccentric hybrids like Waters’s own *Pink Flamingos* [or] *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which combined grueling visceral horror with eccentric stylistic flourishes and non sequiturs from the art film.⁴³

The more successful midnight films saw unusually long runs that lasted, not the few weeks typical of mainstream, studio films, but several months, if not years. For example, the British *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), despite its failure as a Broadway play, experienced an unprecedented revival for U.S. audiences when it was remade and released in the U.S. as a musical-horror film. Renamed *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the film “went midnight” and became a cultural phenomenon as viewing the film repeatedly, as well as performing along with it, often in full costume, became a regular ritual for legions of the movie’s fans. In movie houses such as the Oriental Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the Clinton Street Theater in Portland, Oregon, the film has been running for decades, while, notably, the Museum Lichtspiele in Munich, Germany, has shown the film since 1977 without interruption.

The 1980s movie-going experience saw the demise of independent and drive-in theaters, along with the disappearance of the raucous, often pot-smoking midnight movie revelers these businesses thrived on. The end of the cult film/art theater phenomenon in the early 1980s coincided with two trends: “first, the upscaling of the horror and science fiction genre in films such as *Alien*, and second, the success of home video, which put the final nails in the coffin of the drive-in theater, the sub-run grind house, and the art theater.”⁴⁴ In the stead of small theaters and drive-ins, large chain multiplex theaters (e.g., AMC Entertainment) assumed a dominant position. In response, in the early 1980s, “entertainment architecture” companies such as Mesbur and Smith Architects (Canada) emerged globally offering “substantial expertise in the multiplex cinema design,” including “the restoration, renovation, and refurbishment of historic theatres” to incorporate “the latest technologies, including equal sightline stadium seating.”⁴⁵ The multiplex business plan revolved around presenting mainstream, blockbuster movies on multiple screens. Interestingly, as theaters grew bigger, their offerings

became less diverse. The variety of movies once shown in smaller movie houses was sacrificed to provide a greater number of auditorium seats for simultaneous screenings of the same movie.

Working to fill the spatially large and architecturally modernist theaters, horror filmmakers sought to attract a mainstream, white young adult market. Youthful stars were cast, and youthful themes were adopted. Improved special effects technologies enabled grotesquely innovative ways in which to kill young people, while further exploiting the evil-within-white-community fears. These films included special event/date night holiday horror films such as *Prom Night* (1980), *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), and the Christmas-themed *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984).

These slasher-splatter horror films were, apart from being extraordinarily grisly, very white. Audiences were asked if they could discern whether the person behind the Halloween mask or Santa beard was a white friend or a foe⁴⁶ and whether they were going to cheer for the monster or their monstrous deeds: “either you identify with the slasher—you’d like to have a razor-sharp, foot-long machete in hand as well—or you identify with the worthless victim whose spectacular dismemberment becomes the death you too merit.”⁴⁷

Alongside hyper-violent horror films, the horror genre was also being moved into the *very* center of popular culture from a wholly unlikely source—singer Michael Jackson, the King of Pop.

Michael Jackson as Horror Impresario

Jackson’s album *Thriller* (1982) turned Jackson from a chart-topping pop music star (e.g., *Off the Wall*) into an entertainment phenomenon and global cultural icon. Jackson’s surge in popularity coincided with the emergence of music video programs (e.g., *Video Concert Hall* and *Friday Night Videos*) and cable networks (e.g., MTV). The titular single from *Thriller* (written by Rod Temperton) was released in 1983 and pays homage to the horror film genre. In the song *Thriller*, Jackson sings about evil, stalking beasts lurking in the dark, and victims with nowhere to run or to hide as they are paralyzed by their own terror. Vincent Price, a horror film icon (e.g., *The Fly* [1958], *The Pit and the Pendulum* [1961], and *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* [1971]), is also featured on the single delivering a “rap” accompanied by staple horror sound effects such as creaking and howling: “Darkness falls across the land/The midnight hour is close at hand/Creatures crawl in search of blood/ To terrorize y’awl’s neighborhood.” The lyrics of *Thriller*, Mercer observes, “evoke allusions and references to the cinematic culture of ‘terror’ and ‘horror’ movies . . . The lyrics weave a little story.”⁴⁸

In working to further align the *Thriller* song with the horror film genre, Jackson enlisted film director John Landis to direct the *Thriller* music video and special effects technician Rick Baker to create the onscreen frightening atmosphere. Notably, Landis and Baker previously teamed up for the cult-classic horror film

An American Werewolf in London (1981), with a predictable “man becomes monster” storyline that can be forgiven thanks to its incredible special effect feats. Landis’ approach to the filming of the man-to-wolf transformation provided film audiences with a graphic revelation, in bright light rather than shadowy view, of how the delicate human body must undergo an extremely painful alteration to become a distinctly, biologically different creature. For Landis’ and Baker’s efforts, *An American Werewolf* won an Academy Award and a Saturn Award for best makeup, and a Saturn Award for Best Horror Film.⁴⁹

Jackson wanted Landis and Baker to produce a similarly high-quality horror music video. “Jackson told Landis that he had seen *Werewolf* ‘a hundred times’ and wanted to turn into a monster. ‘That was his quote,’ Landis remembers. ‘That was what he wanted. He clearly was fascinated by the metamorphosis.’”⁵⁰ The result was a 14-minute music video—the first of its kind—at a cost of nearly \$1 million.

In the video, Jackson plays a teen named Michael on a date with his “girl” (Ola Ray). He and his date are dressed in 1950s “sock-hop” type-clothing with Michael driving a 1950s-era convertible when he runs out of gas in a remote, wooded area. The audience gets a glimpse of a full moon just as Michael turns to his date and shyly reveals that he is “different” and then proceeds to show the young woman just how unlike “other guys” he is when he turns into a werewolf, in an obvious play on the 1957 horror film *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. Of course, Michael’s caution about his being “different” can also be read as a triple-entendre speaking to Jackson’s evolving, transgressive body, odd stories that engulfed the pop star (e.g., attempts to buy the “Elephant Man’s” bones)⁵¹ and, later, charges of child sex abuse.

As the *Thriller* video progresses, it is revealed to the audience that they have really been watching a movie within a movie, as the scene changes to the modern day to show Jackson and his date in a movie theater watching the 1950s couple on the big screen. As Jackson and his date leave the theater walking toward home, Jackson sings his lilting horror song about lurking evil, doors slamming, cold hands, creatures creeping, and other frights that thought “you try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it.” The couple is alone on a dark street and suddenly passes a graveyard, at which point the rotting bodies of the undead begin rising from the graves. Jackson, too, changes into a zombie à la *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). These ghouls join the Jackson zombie (with *Frankenstein* undertones) for what has become one of the most iconic dance sequences in history. The video ends with Jackson striking a wolf-like persona with beastly yellow eyes and a menacing smile, thereby leaving an open ending like so many popular horror films of the 1980s.

Landis hoped the music video would bring back the theatrical short; however, CBS records, Jackson’s label, responded poorly: “‘CBS records told us to go fuck ourselves,’ Landis recalls. ‘Walter Yetnikoff, that was his exact words, ‘Go fuck yourself’; that is what he said to me on the phone.’”⁵² While the music video did not resurrect the film short, the video did go on to earn Jackson three MTV Video Music Awards for best video, viewer’s choice, and choreography.⁵³ It also set up the

direct-to-home-video or “sell-through” market, in which video rental stores were bypassed for sales directly to consumers—Jackson’s *Thriller* music video coupled with a behind-the-scenes *Making Michael Jackson’s Thriller* sold millions of copies even though both could be seen for free, and quite regularly, on television.

The success and profitability of the home video “paved the way for sell-through videotapes and DVDs, a cornerstone of Hollywood’s business model for the last twenty years”⁵⁴ and from which the horror genre in particular has greatly benefited. Ironically, white flight also plagued the film industry’s urban exhibition outlets, and the home video market worked to provide some relief from the trauma as “suburbanization shifted the locus of American popular culture during the postwar era and emptied downtown movie theaters in cities across the nation.”⁵⁵ Jackson, Landis, and Baker effectively moved the horror film out of the multiplex, and even away from late-night television and any remaining midnight movie showings, and placed it squarely onto daytime cable television (and later home video viewing). It also courted a demographic as young as 12 years old.⁵⁶

The “Thriller” video (and album) was so big, in fact, that it spawned a mini cycle of Black-featured horror musical projects, several involving Jackson himself. A month after the video’s release in December 1983, his longtime friend Kennedy Gordy, son of Motown founder Berry Gordy, released the single *Somebody’s Watching Me* under the stage name Rockwell. Performed in a darkly humorous, talking semi-rap style, the song is told from the point of view of a paranoid man who feels like he is constantly being spied on by people real and imaginary. The lyrics invoke horror touchstones by mentioning the movie *Psycho* (1960) and the TV show *The Twilight Zone*, while the music, with its eerie synthesizer and *Phantom of the Opera* (1962)-like organ, further immerses itself within the genre. The accompanying video truly brings it home with images of Rockwell menaced by a ghostly woman in black funeral attire, a disembodied, disfigured ghoul, a zombie mailman, a pig-faced dog, as well as the singer’s visions of his own death. As captivating as the video was, what no doubt sent it skyrocketing to number two on the pop charts is the fact that Jackson, returning to the Motown label on which he had spent his childhood, sings the chorus. Although Jackson does not appear in the video, his instantly recognizable voice turned anything it touched to gold in 1984. Rockwell’s Jackson-less follow-up single, “Obscene Phone Caller,” did not perform well, and he became known as a one-hit wonder.

Jackson would put his golden touch on another horror-infused tune that same year, this time with his brothers, the former Jackson Five, then known simply as The Jacksons. In September 1984, they released the second single from their reunion album, *Victory*, entitled “Torture.” Although the lyrics are metaphorical, describing the “torture” of heartbreak, they conjure horror imagery:

It was on a street so evil.
So bad that even hell disowned it.
Every single step was trouble.

For the fool who stumbled on it.
 Eyes within the dark were watching.
 I felt the sudden chill of danger.
 Something told me keep on walking.
 Told me I should not have come there.

The video is similarly dark, featuring goo-filled eyeballs, giant spiders, a Hellish pit full of clawed creatures, dancing skeletons, a disfigured man resembling the wide-mouthed titular character from William Castle's *Mr. Sardonicus* (1960), and a hooded female figure cracking a bullwhip. The latter figure in particular is noteworthy, as it incurred the ire of the Tipper Gore-founded group Parents Music Resource Center (P.M.R.C.), best known for lobbying record labels into adopting the "Parental Advisory" sticker in the same sort of Reagan-era conservative backlash that led to protests against violent horror movies like *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984). In a September 1985 Congressional hearing on the need for record labeling, Jeff Ling, a minister and P.M.R.C. consultant, called out the video as one of a slew of examples of sexuality and sadism run amok in popular music:

Even the Jacksons' mainstream pop music today: their song 'Torture' was released as a video and was shown on national TV. That video included pictures of women dressed in leather bondage, masks, with whips in their hands, in chains, and wrapped up in handcuffs.⁵⁷

What does not appear in the video is, again, Michael Jackson himself, who was busy with other commitments, although his brothers, knowing the power of his image, snuck in a group shot at the end showing them standing alongside Michael in a mannequin form.

Even projects with which Michael Jackson had no affiliation carried the air of his influence. The made-for-TV film *The Midnight Hour*, which oddly aired on ABC the day after Halloween 1985, is a monster movie with several prominent Black faces that aims to channel the appeal of the *Thriller* video, even going so far as to turn briefly into a full-on, choreographed music video for an original song performed by Shari Belafonte-Harper called *Get Dead*. Belafonte-Harper and LeVar Burton headline the film as high school students Melissa and Vinnie, who live in a small New England town whose documented history prominently celebrates the seventeenth-century defeat of Melissa's ancestor, Lucinda (Jonelle Allen), an enslaved woman who also happened to be "one of the most powerful witches who ever lived." In the present, on Halloween night, Melissa, Vinnie, and their friends inadvertently conjure Lucinda, who in turn raises not only the dead but also "all the legendary demons of Hell." The nonsensical array of creatures includes zombies, ghosts, werewolves, and vampires, the latter group to which Lucinda now belongs.

Despite being a slave who was hanged for witchcraft, Lucinda is not portrayed in a sympathetic light. She is not shown to have been wrongfully condemned,

as has been the case in other historical witch trials, real and fictional. She is not even shown as an antihero who committed evil acts in defiance of an institutional evil (slavery). She is not shown to be much of anything, in fact; her backstory is scarcely explored, and she has few lines, leaving us to judge her solely on her evil acts of leading a horde of monsters to exterminate the townspeople. Rather than exploring the narrative possibilities of Lucinda's character—or even Melissa, who is caught between her friends and her ancestor and would seemingly have some leverage to resolve the situation—*The Midnight Hour* shifts its focus to a love story between white teen Phil (Lee Montgomery) and the ghost of a blond cheerleader (Jonna Lee), who ultimately save the day. *The Midnight Hour* would have needed a star of Michael Jackson's magnitude to overcome the cinematic racial hierarchy of the day and entrust the film to a Black lead. In the 1980s, only a few Black actors—Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Bill Cosby—boasted such pull. As such, the movie falls back on the decade's familiar sense of white normativeness that eschews mentions of race other than Melissa jokingly calling her ancestor's legacy "that old black magic," putting a lighthearted spin on the tale of the hanging of a Black female slave. As Michael Jackson would frequently do in his ascent to superstardom, race is downplayed in favor of the universal appeal.

In 1996, Jackson would revisit horror film, this time under the direction of makeup and special effects wizard Stan Winston, who first worked with Jackson on *The Wiz* (1978) and whose claim to fame also includes sci-fi/horror films: *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976), *The Thing* (1982), *Aliens* (1986), *Predator* (1987), *Predator 2* (1990), and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). With a story conceived by horror fiction author and screenwriter Stephen King, the 40-minute horror film/music video *Ghosts* focuses on the odd "Maestro" who is liked by children but is misunderstood by adults who want to see him ejected from their community. In a scene shot in black and white (before the video turns to color), the adults, with children in tow, march up to the Maestro's castle with lit torches in hand à la *Frankenstein*. In a seemingly semi-autobiographical (if not inappropriate) tale, Maestro proceeds to transform himself into various demon figures in an effort to scare the adults away, leaving him alone with the children to play in his home. Jackson relied on makeup and special effects to exploit his face—which was already dramatically altered by plastic surgery and by then greatly resembled a skeleton—to cast himself as a fleshless, skeletal demon. Jackson, in a dual role, would also rely on special effects to transform himself into "the Mayor," an intolerant, overweight white man who is opposed to Maestro's presence in the community.

Though *Thriller* and *Ghosts* were on the rather light side of horrifying audiences, they did foreshadow something much more insidious going on inside of the singer himself, specifically his desire for a real-life bodily transmogrification that would eventually render Jackson quite literally monstrous. The themes of horror and bodily alterations would present themselves repeatedly for Jackson in his video/films *Captain EO* (1986), *Moonwalker* (1988), and *Black and White* (1991).

However, Jackson's real-life metamorphosis was more startling. Though he steadfastly denied the extent of his surgeries (just two minor nose surgeries), the physical evidence is clear—Jackson engaged in an obsessive reconstruction of his facial features. After his 2009 death at age 50, his autopsy report was disquieting: lips tattooed pink; eyebrows tattooed dark; frontal balding and little hair, but a tattooed hairline; a gauze bandage on the tip of his nose; and vitiligo. Still, he likened himself to Peter Pan, a fantasy character associated with rejuvenation and eternal youth fantasy.⁵⁸ Skal, in his book *The Monster Show*, sums up the “horror”-able Jackson affair, linking his real, corporeal body to the horror genre:

Perhaps it wasn't surprising that the star of “Thriller” should be intent on transforming his face into a kind of living skull. From some angles, the bone-white skin, cutaway nose, and tendril-like hair resembled nothing so much as Lon Chaney's Phantom of the Opera. The comparison is apt, because it underscores Jackson's and Chaney's parallel cultural function: the embodiment of a powerful transformation metaphors [sic] for a public basically unsure and fearful about the actual prospects of change in a supposedly classless and mobile society.⁵⁹

As such, Jackson's films are often complicated and nuanced in their mainstreaming of racial subjects. At times, Black monsters are oddly cute (*Thriller*) or function to challenge “Otherings” (*Ghosts*). Jackson's contributions to discourses of Blackness in horror are confounded by his seeming quest for phenotypical whiteness, as well as 1980s mainstream audiences' conservative desire for pop culture imagery sans (racial) commentary of any sort. Kobena Mercer, in “Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's Thriller,” describes Jackson's sexual and racial indeterminacy as being a social hieroglyphic—someone who “demands, yet defies decoding.”⁶⁰

Mouthy Black Men and Mute Black Women

As its movie poster boasted, the “most controversial film of the year!” *White Dog* (1982) is about a white, racist, dog; a film its director Samuel Fuller saw as speaking to “a disease created by man.”⁶¹ The film, based on a Romain Gary novel of the same name, tells the story of a single, young actress, Julie Sawyer (Kristy McNichol), living in the Hollywood hills. She comes upon a stray, large, white German Shepherd and decides to keep it for security and companionship. However, it is soon discovered that the dog has a darker side: it likes to sneak away from Julie's home to kill any Black person it encounters; whites go untouched. It mauls to death a Black male city worker and nearly kills a Black actress where Julie works. Assuming the dog was simply trained as an attack dog, Julie takes the dog to an animal training facility—Noah's Ark. There, the dog attacks a Black male groundskeeper. The facility's aged white owner, Mr. Carruthers (Burl Ives), reveals to Julie that she does not just have an attack dog, but a “white dog.”⁶² It is

explained that “white dog” is a colloquialism for dogs programmed to kill Blacks. The film claims there is a “white dog” history: originally “white dogs” were used to hunt down those running away from slavery and later runaway Black convicts.⁶³ More recently, “white dogs” are used by white supremacists to attack and kill any Black person that comes along. Hence, this animal horror film is rooted in a number of animal transgressions which, as this known about this horror sub-genre, it matters not that the transgressions are sparked by humans. There is dog training (often to facilitate positive human-dog companionship) gone wrong. There is also the use of the dog “as an instrument of hate” but entangled with the history of “negro dogs” which were “the basic equipment for slaveholders and slave patrols.”⁶⁴ Carruthers recommends immediate euthanization of Julie’s dog. However, a Black animal behaviorist, Keys (Paul Winfield), intervenes, volunteering to make it his very personal mission to try to rehabilitate the dog: “I’m going to make you learn that it is useless to attack Black skin.” However, in one particularly violent scene, the dog escapes from Keys’ care and ends up stalking a Black man. Pursuing the man into a church, the dog mauls him to death, leaving his shredded body on the altar. Oddly, Keys brings the dog back for more training rather than killing it, despite Julie’s and Carruthers’ pleas to put the dog down before it murders again.

Julie eventually meets the dog’s original owner, a poor, (stereotypically) white racist from “the trailer park.” The owner confirms he trained the dog to be the “very best” white dog. *White Dog* encourages its audience to despise, as well as to consider anomalous, the dog’s previous owner, who is costumed to look as though he just emerged from a 1930s rural farmland, complete with Southern drawl (though the setting is California). The film attempts to introduce provocative debates on racism: Is it nature or nurture? Should even racists be viewed as salvageable members of society? However, it fails to rise to a greater discursive challenge—to question the more subtle, post-Jim Crow racial quandaries that plague American society. As Keys continues to insist on trying to rehabilitate the dog, attempting to turn it back into “Dr. Jekyll,” his ideology of assimilation is coded as heroic as he continues to strive for reconciliation with the dog. The dog and his Black sponsor, then, serve as a metaphor for hope in improving race relations, even as that hope comes at the great expense of Blackness.

The film ends on a disturbing note. Though the dog has done its best to single-handedly wipe Blacks out of California, Keys has forced the dog to tolerate Black skin. In the film’s final scenes, the dog turns on the white Mr. Carruthers. Only then does Keys conclude the dog is absolutely not salvageable and shoots it. However, Schwertfeger (2015) introduces the theory that the dog attacks the white-haired Carruthers because he resembles the animal’s original, racist owner.⁶⁵ Hence, once started the cycle of hate continues. Fuller strays from the book’s original ending which saw Keys turn the dog into a racist aggressor against white people.



FIGURE 7.2 White Dog

Paramount Pictures/Photofest

From the start, *White Dog* was awash in controversy. The NAACP objected to the movie even before filming began,⁶⁶ and during filming the organization pressed for script changes.⁶⁷ The *Village Voice* reported:

[A]t the time the film was being made, amid an awareness of the need for strong Black images, Ku Klux Klan activity was on the rise. In this climate, the N.A.A.C.P. warned Paramount that the film, in which three Blacks are viciously attacked by the “white dog,” could be a dangerous incitement to racism.⁶⁸

Once the film was completed, Paramount Pictures, producers of the film, shelved *White Dog*, opting not to release it in the U.S. Paramount has claimed *White Dog* did not test well in Detroit.⁶⁹ Conversely, its filmmakers have claimed the studio wanted a film more like *Jaws*, but with paws—something the more cerebral *White Dog* was not.⁷⁰ It was not until 1991 that the film saw limited release in the U.S. largely as part of short-run film festivals.⁷¹ However, when it finally saw release, as Susanne Schwertfeger notes in her study of the film, “the reception was more favourable, and [film critic] Jonathan Rosenbaum initially labelled it that year’s ‘best American movie . . . , made by the greatest living American filmmaker’ and a ‘masterpiece.’”⁷²

John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982) presented audiences with an unlikely horror movie anti-hero—a scrappy, fiercely independent Black man who (presumably)

survives the monster. In the “Blacks in horror” film, a group of researchers housed in a remote Antarctic science station mistakenly admit a recently thawed alien into their camp. The alien has the single goal of survival at the expense of other living things. “The thing” not only has the ability to assume the appearance of any evolved living species (human, dog, other alien life forms, etc.) but can also fully assimilate that which it has consumed, taking on its behaviors and memories. The film is effective, observes Guerrero, because of its

technological ability to construct the monster not as a humanoid vegetable of 1950s vintage but rather as a much more potent and pathological xenomorph, an alien being that has the power to invade, absorb, and imitate to the finest detail any creature it comes in contact with.⁷³

As members of the all-male camp begin to perish at the hands of the *doppelgänger* monster, they become consumed by fear and paranoia (of each other). However, two men are tough under fire. The first is MacReady (Kurt Russell), a white helicopter pilot whose reasoning and quick action move him into a role of leadership. The second man is the bold, unflinching Childs (Keith David), a mechanic, and one of two Black men in the group. Unlike MacReady, who is cerebral and steady, Childs appears to be a mistrustful hot-head. As the body count and tensions rise, the group decides they need a leader to organize them in the fight for their lives. Childs volunteers himself as a leader, and automatically reaches for the weaponry that comes with the rank. However, Childs’ attempt to assume power is summarily rejected by MacReady—“It should be somebody a little more even-tempered, Childs”—and the group agrees.

Doherty reads the stranded group of men as

angry, unpleasant, and self-interested individuals, as chilly as the stark Antarctic landscape they inhabit. That men could live like this in close quarters—in total isolation, depending on each other for survival and success—and not develop a fraternal bond defies social reality and dramatic logic.⁷⁴

However, there is another reading of the group which can explain why and how they are “unpleasant” rather than fraternal. It is an interpretation which accounts for power relationships along class, education, and racial difference lines. The camp is predominately white, and among the group, there are obvious social hierarchies. The bulk of the group is made up of the educated, skilled, and trained—doctors, research scientists (biologists, geologists, and meteorologists), and technicians such as pilots—all of whom are white. A minority of whites are “lesser” in status, serving in roles such as radio operator, dog handler, and mechanic. The two Black men, Nauls (T.K. Carter), a cook, and Childs, a mechanic, do not “rank,” so to speak. In one scene, Nauls, who is playing his

radio, is asked by a resting, injured white crew member to turn down his music. Nauls, who is working in the kitchen, enacts small measures of resistance by defiantly ignoring the order. In another scene, he disparagingly refers to the outpost's white commander as "bwana" an East African term for boss and overused in horror jungle films by putting the word in the mouths of laboring natives. Similarly, Childs works to exert some authority by challenging the leadership and power bestowed upon MacReady, as well as questioning whether MacReady may be a "thing." In no way does Childs present a sacrificing or scared-Negro performance.

The narrative climax builds when Childs leaves the camp, disappearing into the harsh elements and, perhaps, running into "the thing." MacReady, who was also out of sight for a period and possibly assimilated, dynamites the camp with such an act of destruction, a horror staple as characters realize that "the house or tunnel may at first seem a safe haven, but the walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in."⁷⁵

The Thing presents a surprise ending. MacReady readies himself to die in the freezing elements as the lone survivor. If the alien is not in his body, without the camp to provide it shelter, the alien will freeze. If the alien is in his body, MacReady will freeze to death along with the alien that is in him. Just as MacReady is settling on his fate, Childs suddenly reappears. MacReady and Childs are unsure if either or neither one of them is "the thing." The film concludes with each not only eyeing the other skeptically but also establishing mutual respect. They share a bottle of booze as they wait to see what will happen next. *The Thing*, then, presents a rather open-ended conclusion in which the monster's and the men's fate is unknown. It is this narrative openness, writes Hutchings, that may be seen as "expressing an ambivalence about, or even a critique of, dominant social values."⁷⁶ Could such an ending where monster, Black man, and white man may survive be a critique of dominant values about power, or present a racial ambivalence? Guerrero pessimistically introduces his own theory:

[A]s the camera frames the survivors in medium close reverse shots of mutual suspicion, one can discern that the breath of the white man is heavily fogged in the Antarctic air, whereas the black man's is not. The implication is subtle but clear: *The Thing* lives on and, interestingly enough, its carrier is yet another socially marginalized form, the black male.⁷⁷

Whether Guerrero is on to something about who is "the thing" may not be as material for the history of horror as is the fact that Childs is part of that very discussion in the first place. He defies the stereotypical buddy, self-sacrificing, and Blacks-always-die-first roles. Childs' character, who stares down MacReady like Ben of *Night of the Living Dead* does with Harry, may be read as the survival triumph that Ben of *Night* was denied. Childs could be read as headstrong—which

has been worthy of the death penalty for a Black man in a horror film. His heroism alongside his flaws are what they should be—they are “real.” He also need not carry the burdensome expectations of hierarchies all alone. Indeed, the “apocalyptic dimension”⁷⁸ of *The Thing* allows the monster to take up some of that burden, as it represents a new interloping Other entering society.

Black women did not enjoy as much in the way of inclusion in the genre during this horror cycle. A notable exception was the “Blacks in horror” film *Vamp* (1986), starring entertainer/model/singer Grace Jones. The film capitalized on Jones’ striking look—a 5 foot 10, lithe, androgynous figure in haute couture—while casting her as the vampire Katrina, a strip club owner. The downtown club, the Afterdark, is in a desolate, trash-strewn part of the dead inner-city Los Angeles, far removed from the more vibrant city life that surrounds it. The club serves as a cover for Katrina’s nightly vampiric binging as her minions bring Katrina men (though she is “bi-vampiric” and will happily take a woman) to lustily feed on. Trouble ensues when three college students, Keith (Chris Makepeace), A.J. (Robert Rusler), and Duncan (Gedde Watanabe), whose non-urban campus is “200 miles from civilization,” drive to the Afterdark with the goal of bringing some strippers back to their university for a fraternity party.

A.J. is fed on by Katrina. Keith (who is white), Duncan (who is Asian), and “Amaretto” (Dedee Pfeiffer), a young, white woman whom they rescue from the club, fight to survive until sunrise. Notably, only Duncan dies, as he is turned into a vampire and then destroyed by fire. Even A.J., Katrina’s victim, unexpectedly lives on, but as a vampire who happily resigns himself to living as a night creature. Keith and Amaretto kill Katrina and walk off into the rising sun, enjoying their day.

Katrina is simultaneously beautiful and grotesque, cruelly deadly, and sexy. In her lair, she is surrounded by symbols that connote an ancient, foreign Otherness—her clothes, crypt, and other accouterments all hail an Africanness. The iconography is carried over to her body which is painted with emblems resembling hieroglyphs. Katrina conforms to the exotic, literally; although she is the club’s owner, and vampire leader, she also performs as an exotic dancer, putting on a highly sexualized dance routine where she affects a sex act with a prop chair. Katrina is, in fact, more sex-obsessed than blood-lusting. Sadly, there is little else to say about the Black woman that is Katrina, as she says so little in the film. Katrina is mute except for when she is making suckling sounds and moaning, or grunting and hissing wickedly. Hudson sums up the function of Katrina succinctly: “She is associated with hypersexuality and violence. Her agency is portrayed as animalistic: she grunts and howls as she licks A.J.’s body. . . . Because *Vamp*’s protagonists are white, [Grace] Jones stands out as the (muted or silenced) cultural other.”⁷⁹ Katrina’s lack of speech, perhaps, not only adds to the allure of her monstrosity but also limits it. Katrina’s absent dialogue coupled with the focus on her body means that her role is singularly as eye candy. There is little else to her.



FIGURE 7.3 The silent but deadly Katrina in *Vamp*

New World Pictures/Photofest

To find other star turns from Black women in horror cinema during the 1980s, one has to delve deep into the murky depths of little-seen, low-budget exploitation fare that has received some level of cult acclaim only in retrospect. One such “Black horror” film is *Black Devil Doll From Hell* (1984), noteworthy for being one of the very few horror features of the decade helmed by a Black director, Chester Novell Turner. It was also one of the very first shot-on-video (S.O.V.) horror movies released in the U.S.⁸⁰ S.O.V. was the ultimate do-it-yourself format, adopted by amateur filmmakers with limited resources who took advantage of advances in home video technology to record no-budget movies directly onto video cassettes instead of film, satiating the demand for content during the 1980s video store boom. Turner was one such bootstrapper, taking a filmmaking correspondence course via mail-order VHS tapes and filming *Black Devil Doll From Hell* with a camcorder in his spare time in and around his sister’s house in Chicago.⁸¹ Although it made little impact at the time of its release on home video, it has since gained notoriety for its scandalous content, dirt cheap production values, and inept technical execution, all of which lend a “so bad it’s good” appeal.

In front of the camera, *Black Devil Doll From Hell* is essentially a one-woman show featuring Shirley L. Jones as Helen, a demure, virginal, church-going woman who purchases a ventriloquist’s dummy that, according to the store owner, has the ability to give its owner their “heartfelt wish.” When she brings it home, the doll brings out Helen’s sexual repression, causing her to have impure thoughts and masturbate, much to her chagrin. It then comes to life, ties her up, and rapes her in an excruciatingly prolonged scene made all the more vile by the fact that Turner’s young nephew performed as the body double for the dummy in shots requiring movement beyond what was capable with the doll.⁸² The justification for the doll’s actions is that it is just fulfilling Helen’s “heartfelt wish,” and thus, she almost immediately begins to enjoy the violation. Despite the dummy repeatedly calling her a “bitch,” she begs for more. When she wakes up the next morning, however, the doll has vanished. Shirley takes on other lovers, seeking in other men the sense of sexual gratification she felt with the doll, but to no avail. She finally tracks it down at the store where she bought it, but when she brings it home and demands sex, the doll kills her with telekinetic powers.

Rudimentary and distasteful trappings aside, *Black Devil Doll from Hell* tries (but fails) to boast an admirable message of female sex positivity while undercutting the stereotypical male-female sexual power dynamics, as epitomized in one exchange between Helen and a man she picked up at a bar who failed to fulfill her sexual demands:

Man: “I’ve been told that I’ve got a way with the ladies, but you’re not doing anything for my reputation or ego.”

Helen: “That’s because I wasn’t trying to. I was only trying to satisfy my sexual needs that I have been suppressing foolishly for all these years.”

Unfortunately for Helen, she gets lusty-greedy. After getting in touch with her sexuality, she fixates on the doll, neglecting everything else in her life. An addict, she takes a path that leads to her inevitable downfall.

Breeders (1986) is a similarly sleazy blend of horror and wearisome sexual violence with a Black female lead, albeit with a much higher (though still modest) budget than *Black Devil Doll from Hell*. Theresa Farley stars as Gamble Pace, a Manhattan doctor who becomes suspicious when a string of female rape victims—all virgins, all horribly disfigured—comes through her hospital. Teaming with white police detective Dale Andriotti (Lance Lewman), she uncovers the truth: an insectoid alien living beneath the city is trying to impregnate human women to produce human-alien hybrid offspring.

Unlike Helen in *Black Devil Doll From Hell*, Gamble remains clothed and unviolated—practically the only female character in the film who can claim that, other than a couple of senior citizens. Gamble is a rarity for a Black female character in this era of horror: she is an educated, highly respected, white-collar professional—a doctor and not a nurse, as so many Black actresses played in the 1970s and 1980s. She is intelligent enough to uncover the mystery connection between the victims, and she’s take-charge enough to do something about it. She’s obviously physically attractive—not just to the audience, but to Dale as well—but she is not sexualized like the other women in the film, typically wearing shirts buttoned all the way up to her neck. Even though the final scene finds her nude in bed with Dale, post-coital, she remains under the covers, and it turns out to be a dream sequence providing a standard horror jump scare to end the film.

Equally ridiculous, but thankfully less focused on sexual brutalization, is *Surf Nazis Must Die* (1987). The film is set “in the near future” after an 8.6 earthquake has hit Los Angeles, throwing the streets into chaos that leaves the police helpless to prevent the beaches from being taken over by “themed” surfer gangs straight out of *The Warriors* (1979). The dominant gang comprises neo-Nazis who rob citizens, battle other gangs, and kill a Black man, Leroy (Robert Harden), after he stops the gang from stealing a woman’s purse. The film’s heroine ends up being Leroy’s feisty, Bible-thumping mother, Eleanor “Mama” Washington’s (Gail Neely, clearly not as old as her character), who breaks out of her retirement home to exact violent revenge. As outrageous as the concept sounds, *Surf Nazis* is surprisingly dull, told with a straightforward, dramatic tone that wastes its potential for camp. The pistol-packing, grenade-launching Mama is easily the most entertaining character, and her vengeance plot line is the most enjoyable in the movie, but the bulk of the running time is spent on the Nazis as they rumble with other gangs, fight among themselves, and surf in slow motion. While the film could (generously) be called a showcase for the Black female initiative to fight social injustice, it is more interested in the inane actions of the Nazis and Mama spouting “sassy” catchphrases like, “Taste some of Mama’s home cooking, Adolph!”

D.I.Y. Black Film

Despite the proliferation of Black-centric cinema in the 1970s, only a fraction of those movies involved Black filmmakers behind the camera. The situation became even more dire for Black creatives in the 1980s when studios, having grown fat on blockbusters, decided that Black movies did not make enough profit to warrant their effort, meaning the chances of a Black director getting a film released by a studio were slim to none unless tied to a bankable star like Richard Pryor or a hot trend like hip-hop, as with Stan Lathan's *Beat Street* (1984), Michael Schultz's *Krush Groove* (1985), *Disorderlies* (1987), and *The Last Dragon* (1985), and even the Sidney Poitier-helmed musical *Fast Forward* (1985).⁸³

Thus, many Black filmmakers took the independent route, long before it became a viable road to stardom, in order to get their movies to the public by any means necessary. As noted by journalist Sergio Alejandro Mims at the close of the decade in early 1990:

During the 1980's, Black independent filmmakers became increasingly outraged by Hollywood's blindness. Desperate to see some aspects of Black reality accurately portrayed on the screen, they began to reassert themselves and create a new life for the black independent film movement. This rekindled enthusiasm was coupled with innovative ways of combating the ubiquitous problem of financing through new methods such as foreign capital, outside investors and limited partnerships.⁸⁴

The do-it-yourself style was epitomized by the Black graduates of UCLA's film school from the late 1960s through the 1980s, collectively known as the "L.A. Rebellion." They included noteworthy names like Charles Burnett (*My Brother's Wedding* [1983]), Julie Dash (*Illusions* [1982]), Haile Gerima (*Ashes and Embers* [1982]), Billy Woodberry (*Bless Their Little Hearts* [1984]), and Jamaa Fanaka of *Welcome Home Brother Charles* (1975) fame, whose prison drama *Penitentiary*, released at the end of 1979, would be one of the rare independently produced Black movies to receive commercial success in the 1980s, earning over \$13 million on a \$100,00 budget and spawning two sequels.⁸⁵ Outside of the L.A. Rebellion, other Black filmmakers toiled to release shorts and arthouse works in relative obscurity, like Reginald Hudlin (*House Party* [1983], a short version of what would become his 1990 feature), Kathleen Collins (*Losing Ground* [1982], the first American feature from a Black female director since the 1920s), and Charles Lane (*Sidewalk Stories* [1989]), while the remarkably resilient Fred Williamson, who survived the Blaxploitation purge by producing and directing his own movies, continued to churn out actioners that "made money and disproved the myth that films with blacks cannot make money overseas."⁸⁶

In the horror realm, this can-do attitude took shape in the efforts of Chester Novell Turner (*Black Devil Doll From Hell* [1984]) and the anthology *Tales from the*

Quadead Zone [1987]) and the lesser-known Len Anthony, a New York City-based filmmaker from Jamaica. Like Turner, Anthony wrote and directed only a couple of movies: *Murderous Intent* (1985) and *Vampires* (1986), with a third, *Fright House* (1989), being a mashup of footage from *Vampires* combined with additional scenes to make a two-tale anthology. Anthony's work differs from Turner's in a number of ways, however. The most obvious is the look. It was shot on film and is more professional in appearance; cinematography on *Vampires* was even done by Ernest R. Dickerson, who shot Spike Lee's early films and went on to direct *Demon Knight* (1995) and *Bones* (2001). Anthony's casts are likewise more polished, though not exactly professional, one notable exception being a rare appearance in *Vampires* by Duane Jones of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Ganja & Hess* (1983) fame. Anthony's casts are also more interracial than Turner's, featuring both Black and white leads. While Turner's stories are straightforward horror, Anthony's have a more arthouse flair, with obtuse plots, slow pacing, meandering dialogue, and choppy editing, issues that likely result from the fact that he "originally set out to make several films, but was never able to finish any of them."⁸⁷ Although *Vampires*, about a prestigious prep school run by a vampiric headmistress, seems to feature a higher budget and more competent personnel, *Murderous Intent* is the more ambitious of Anthony's films. In the movie, a frustrated, middle-aged white man's suspicion that his younger, more successful wife is cheating on him manifests itself in the form of a dreadlocked Black musician who moonlights as an animalistic serial killer. Racial commentary about the nature of manhood and stereotypes about white male rage and Black male aggression hover beneath the surface, but it is all buried by disconnected imagery, pretentious monologues, superfluous musical numbers, and dangling plot points.

That said, even the less-than-stellar efforts of Black filmmakers during the early and mid-1980s served to keep Black cinema alive. Their endeavors built a bridge between the heyday of 1970s Blaxploitation and the impending Black film movement of the 1990s, which began to hit paydirt in the late 1980s with the breakthrough mainstream success of Spike Lee, Robert Townshend, and Keenan Ivory Wayans, setting the stage for the next generation of Black creatives.

Conclusion

The monsters of the 1980s generally worked against type as they were often white, male, and non-urban. In white suburban horror films, "race [became] a structuring absence in the milieu of the contemporary horror film where monsters, victims, and heroes are predominately white, a racially unmarked category."⁸⁸ Monsters of the 1980s had access to resources such as Santa costumes or miner's gear; they drove cars and made their own sophisticated weapons. These white "monsters whose faces come from a random assortment of high school yearbook, driver's licenses, and bathroom mirrors" could move about largely undetected as their evil was not immediately identifiable due to their lack of color coding.⁸⁹

If they did not reveal themselves to their victims via terrorization, for example, by inserting themselves into dreams, the monsters could have been largely invisible because they fit in so well.

Black characters were not so inventive. They were still stuck on islands or left behind in dead cities. Black characters saw imagistic recuperation only if they became the symbol of a unilateral, cross-racial devotion. While there was no exchange of kindness coming their way from the whites they sought to help, Blacks' reward was that they went to their deaths facilitating the continuation of whiteness. Surely, that was sufficient to get them past the pearly gates and keep them out of Hell. It would have to be this kind of self-sacrifice for Blacks (or super-duper magical mystical Negroes, as filmmaker Spike Lee called them),⁹⁰ as even their own magic could not be used for self-salvation. In the rare instances when Black characters—women in particular—were allowed to be central figures, they were confined to the cinematic shadows, the little-seen, micro-budget productions whose only hope to be remembered was to present shocking scenarios and scandalous imagery in hopes of earning a cult following.

Some scholars reflect upon the horror genre of this period as seeming to understand “the Other as a scapegoat,” thereby refusing “to see the monster as an aberration to be put down to secure bourgeois normality.”⁹¹ But, such a conclusion cannot be reached in the context of the treatment of “Blacks in horror” or the absence of “Black horror.” James Snead argues that omission, or exclusion, is not only the most common form of racial stereotyping but also the most difficult to identify because its manifestation is absence itself.⁹² Native Americans took the hit for Black representation, for a time, becoming a scapegoat for evil. But, really, the entire decade was a commentary on how to re-secure white bourgeois normality. One way, for sure, was to stay away from burial grounds or dead urban areas.

If Michael Jackson had not inserted a self-deprecating quip about his identity in *Thriller*, male heteronormativity would have remained unexamined. Conversely, it was women like sexy, silent Katrina who were to be looked at, but not heard from, who are thought to be “a problem, a source of anxiety, of obsessive enquiry” while men are not.⁹³

While Black and white communities occupied a “never the twain shall meet” existence in the 1980s, things begin to change dramatically in the next decade—the 1990s—as the urban would take center stage. The Black people who were left behind would finally be featured in rather serious tales of moral redemption—with Black women, in some cases, acting as very vocal and powerful heroes.

Notes

- 1 Harris, Mark. “Yelling at the Screen: The Black Die Young.” *PopMatters*, September 6, 2005. 1999–2009 PopMatters.com. August 13, 2010.
- 2 Nama, Adilifu. *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008. 137. Print.

- 3 Sobchack, Vivian. "Cities on the Edge of Time: The Urban Science Fiction Film." *East—West Film Journal* (December 1988): 4–19. Print.
- 4 Avila, Eric. "Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America." *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.68. Print.
- 5 Avila (53).
- 6 Venkatest, Sudhir Alladi. *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.7. Print.
- 7 Nowell, Richard. *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.20–21. Print.
- 8 Nowell (36).
- 9 Monaco, Paul. *The Sixties: 1960–1969: History of the American Cinema Volume 8*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001.9, 16. Print; "Attendance history—World cinema stats (23)." Screenville. Web. September 2, 2011. <https://screenville.blogspot.com/2011/09/attendance-history-world-cinema-stats.html>.
- 10 U.S. Department of Commerce. *U.S. Industrial Outlook 1971: With Projections Through 1980*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971.450–52. Print; Pautz, Michelle C. "The Decline in Average Weekly Cinema Attendance, 1930–2000." Political Science Faculty Publications, 2002.4, 13. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/pol_fac_pub/25.
- 11 Walker, David. "Introduction." *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009. ix. Print.
- 12 Guerrero, E. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993.105. Print.
- 13 "Black Oriented Films Seen Losing Ground." *Jet* 51 (1976): 98. Print.
- 14 "Civil Rights Comm. Told of Blight Among Black Actors." *Jet* 53 (1978): 59. Print.
- 15 "Is There Really a Plot to Kill Off Black Movies?" *Jet* 53 (1978): 59. Print.
- 16 Even pop music exploited the trend, with Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder buddying-up to sing "Ebony and Ivory" (1982), an ode to cross-racial teamwork.
- 17 Guerrero, E. "The Black Images in Protective Hollywood's Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties." *Black American Cinema*. Ed. M. Diawara. New York, NY: Routledge, 1993.237. Print.
- 18 Nowell (235–36).
- 19 Avila (65).
- 20 Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. "Context and the Creation of Meaning in Advertising of the 1988 Presidential Campaign." *American Behavioral Scientist* 32 (1989): 416, 417. Print.
- 21 Sneak Previews. "Season 5, Episode 28." IMDb.com video. 29:50. April 30, 1982. www.imdb.com/video/vi2776546073; *Death Wish II* (1982) even features an ongoing subplot about the debate over increased imprisonment versus rehabilitation for criminals, the movie's sympathy obviously falling with Kersey's "eye for an eye" approach. Later in the series, *Death Wish 4: The Crackdown* (1987) focuses on crack, as Kersey's girlfriend's white teen daughter buys crack from Black and Brown drug dealers and dies from an overdose, triggering this fourth round of vengeance.
- 22 Crane, Jonathan. *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996.8. Print.
- 23 Benjamin, Rich. *Searching for Whitopia: An Improbable Journey to the Heart of White America*. New York: Hyperion, 2009.1. Print.
- 24 Clover, Carol. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.222. Print.
- 25 Mathijs, Ernest. "Threat or Treat: Film, Television, and the Ritual of Halloween." *Flow TV*, University of Texas at Austin. October 30, 2009. Web. March 6, 2010.
- 26 Crane, Jonathan. *Terror and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.8. Print.

- 27 Rathgeb, Douglas L. "Bogeyman from the Id: Nightmare and Reality in Halloween and A Nightmare on Elm Street." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (Spring, 1991): 36–43. Print.
- 28 Riley, Michael J. "Trapped in the History of Film: Racial Conflict and Allure in *The Vanishing American*." Eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1998.64. Print.
- 29 In addition to being a scholar-teacher, I have served as a senior administrator (most recently, Chief Diversity Officer) across a number of universities. I remember one call that came into one of my offices' helplines. The call evidences how the trope of Native American ancient burial grounds radiating evil up into Whitopias can lead to real life panic. While this stereotype of evil is popularized in films like *Poltergeist*, it remains just that—a stereotype. The real impact of disturbing Native American sites is more complex than evil spirits simply attacking innocent white people. Nevertheless, the person who phoned was quite serious and nervous, as they tried to progressively deal with what they believed to be true. I have cleaned the transcript of the initial in-coming call to protect this person's identity: "Hi, I live in a very small town in [the southwest U.S.]. I have a little bit of a problem—this is going to sound insane, I'm so sorry—I don't know who to contact. Nobody is listening to me. There's something going on with the town. I think it's because there is a Native American burial site that was desecrated. And they found stuff in that burial site that dated back to the [12th and 13th centuries]. They made that like a sacred site . . . and they desecrated it, so—I mean if I was a Native American, I would be furious, right? I know that this is a very strong belief, I've lived here long enough to know that. So, there's things going on in my house that I can't ignore. My family is seeing them, and so I don't know what to do. . . . If you could please give me a call back." Stereotype busting is a central part of the work that academic leaders do.
- 30 Maddery, Joseph. *Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004.71. Print. This presses the point that the film was more about the family's "economic unease" than ghosts. That is, their lives are disrupted long before the horrors show up as they have sunk everything into this suburban home. The stress leaves them angry and vulnerable.
- 31 Maddery (73).
- 32 Freeman, Lance. *There Goes the Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004.51. Print.
- 33 In 1975, funk/soul band Parliament released the album *Chocolate City*. The album's title song famously talks about Washington, D.C. being a "chocolate city," that is, predominately Black in population, but also in politics, culture, and resources. It also acknowledges the rise of neighboring "vanilla suburbs."
- 34 Williams, Tony. "Trying to Survive on the Darker Side: 1980s Family Horror." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.164. Print.
- 35 In "Blacks in horror" sequels later in the decade, which were regularly severely panned by critics, there are minor Black characters who see the end of horror films, such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987) or *Jaws: The Revenge* (1987).
- 36 The pictures are oddly incongruous to Dick's character. However, they may function to reaffirm that his interest in Danny is truly "safe" and non-sexual.
- 37 Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997.53. Print.
- 38 Hughey, Matthew. "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magic Negro' Films." *Social Problems* 56 (2009): 544. Print.
- 39 Hicks, Heather J. "Hoodoo Economics: White Men's Work and Black Men's Magic in Contemporary American Film." *Camera Obscura* 53.18 (2003): 18. Print.
- 40 Hicks, Heather J. (28).

- 41 Bailey, Moya. *Misogynoir Transformed Black Women's Digital Resistance*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2021. Print.
- 42 Clover (*Chainsaws* 86).
- 43 Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.225. Print.
- 44 Heffernan (*Ghoul* 225).
- 45 Mesbur + Smith Architects. *Multiplex Cinema and Theater Architecture*. May 29, 2008. Web.
- 46 Harris, Martin. "You Can't Kill the Boogeyman: Halloween III and the Modern Horror Franchise." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32.3 (2004): 98. Print.
- 47 Crane (3).
- 48 Mercer, Kobena. "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's 'Thriller.'" *Screen* 27 (1986): 31. Print.
- 49 "The Academy of Science Fiction Fantasy & Horror Films." *Saturn Awards*. January 26, 2010. Web. saturnawards.com.
- 50 Lapeyre, Jason. "The Transformation: Filmmaker John Landis Created a Monster with Michael Jackson's *Thriller*." *Wax Poetics* 37 (October—November 2009). 77. Print.
- 51 Jones, Steve. "Michael King of Pop dies; Music icon, 50, helped shape a generation." *USA Today*, June 26, 2009. Web. March 6, 2010. usatoday.com.
- 52 Lapeyre (77).
- 53 "MTV Video Music Awards." MTV.com. January 26, 2010. Web. mtv.com.
- 54 Lapeyre (78).
- 55 Avila, Eric. "Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America." *Classic Hollywood Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.59. Print.
- 56 "MTV Music Television Profile." Cabletvadbureau.com. January 26, 2010. Web.
- 57 Record Labeling: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United States Senate, Ninety-ninth Congress, First Session, on Contents of Music and the Lyrics of Records, September 19, 1985. United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986.17. www.google.com/books/edition/Record_Labeling/ONgFAAAIAAJ.
- 58 Skal, David J. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. Revised ed. New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2001.230. Print. Skal.
- 59 Skal (318). Mercer (40) also makes such a connection to Chaney.
- 60 Mercer (29).
- 61 Schwertfeger, Susanne "Re-Education as Exorcism: How a White Dog Challenges the Strategies for Dealing with Racism." *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. Eds. Gregersdotter, Katarina, et al. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.126. Print.
- 62 The groundskeeper immediately recognizes that the dog is a "white dog," a dog trained to harm Blacks. He reveals that such dogs are fairly common by revealing his scars from a long ago, similar attack.
- 63 The film is based on the 1970 fiction book *Chien Blanc* [White Dog] by Romain Gary. The book, written in French, is an indictment of white liberals' (particularly Hollywood celebrities') participation in the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.
- 64 Schwertfeger, Susanne "Re-Education as Exorcism: How a White Dog Challenges the Strategies for Dealing with Racism." *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. Eds. Gregersdotter, Katarina, et al. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.128. Print.
- 65 Schwertfeger, Susanne "Re-Education as Exorcism: How a White Dog Challenges the Strategies for Dealing with Racism." *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. Eds. Gregersdotter, Katarina, et al. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.138. Print.
- 66 Scott, Vernon. "Minority Group Wins Cancellation of Television Movie." *UPI Hollywood Reporter*, January 12, 1984: sec. Domestic News. Print.
- 67 "NBC Drops Plan to Show Film 'White Dog.'" *New York Times*, January 20, 1984: sec. C23. Print.

- 68 Katzman, Lisa. "‘White Dog’ Is Set Loose at Last." *New York Times*, July 7, 1991: sec. 2.17. Print.
- 69 Katzman (sec. 2.17).
- 70 Hicks, Chris. "Wide Release of ‘White Dog’ Is Long Overdue." *Deseret News*, January 23, 2009. Web. www.deseretnews.com/article/705279597/Wide-release-of-White-Dog-is-long-overdue.html.
- 71 In 2009, the film was released on DVD.
- 72 Schwertfeger, Susanne "Re-Education as Exorcism: How a White Dog Challenges the Strategies for Dealing with Racism." *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. Gregersdotter, Katarina, et al. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.127. Print.
- 73 Guerrero, Edward. "AIDS as Monster in Science Fiction." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 18.3 (1990): 88. Print.
- 74 Doherty, Thomas. "Genre, Gender, and the Aliens Trilogy." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.181–199. Print.
- 75 Clover, Carol J. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.79. Print.
- 76 Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. London: Pearson, 2004.18. Print.
- 77 Guerrero ("AIDS").
- 78 Sharrett, Christopher. "The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 21.3 (1993): 100–110, 108. Print.
- 79 Hudson, Dale. "Vampires of Color and the Performance of Multicultural Whiteness." *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.134. Print.
- 80 Ziemba, Joseph A. and Dan Budnik. *Bleeding Skull! A 1980s Trash-Horror Odyssey*. London: Headpress, 2013. 27. Print.
- 81 Abrams, Jon. "Returning to the Quadead Zone: The Resurrection of Chester N. Turner." Daily Grindhouse. October 11, 2013. Web. <http://dailygrindhouse.com/the-wire/returning-quadead-zone-resurrection-chester-n-turner/>; Kai Perrignon. "Chester Novell Turner on making his debut, Black Devil Doll From Hell." Static Vision. September 16, 2020. <https://youtu.be/oNy5XVCphKw>.
- 82 Abrams.
- 83 Several other hip-hop movies, including *Wild Style* (1983), *Breakin'* (1984), *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984), and *Rappin'* (1985), came from white filmmakers.
- 84 Mims, Sergio Alejandro. "A New Life: Independent Black Filmmaking during the 1980's." *Black Camera* 5.1 (1990): 3. Web. www.jstor.org/stable/27761419.
- 85 "Jamaa Fanaka." Xenon Pictures. Web. <https://xenonpictures.com/wp/jamaa-fanaka/>.
- 86 Walker, David. "Fred Williamson." *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009.181. Print.
- 87 "Murderous Intent." *American Genre Film Archive*. Web. www.americangenefilm.com/theatrical-film-catalog/murderous-intent/.
- 88 Pinedo (111).
- 89 Crane (9).
- 90 Foley, Kevin. "Spike Lee Speaks to Spring Fest." *The University of Vermont, University Communications* 24 (2002). Web. January 5, 2010. www.uvm.edu/~uvmpr/?Page=article.php&id=409.
- 91 Sharrett ("The Horror Film," 100).
- 92 Snead, James. *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- 93 Neale, Steve. "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema." *Screen* 24(6): 2–17.19. Print.

8

BLACK IS BACK! RETRIBUTION AND THE URBAN TERRAIN

1990s

But is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passer-by a culprit?

—Benjamin (256)¹

The horror film genre celebrated its first century in high, cinematic style by offering what can only be described as “prestige” horror films.² *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), directed by Jonathan Demme, took its horror seriously, enlisting Academy Award winner Jodie Foster and nominee Anthony Hopkins to deliver nauseating, psychological chills. Respecting the genre paid off, with *Lambs* going on to earn a whopping five Oscars—Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Writing. The film set the stage for an exciting, horror-filled decade. Neil Jordan’s *Interview with a Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (1994) brought sexy back to horror with a matinee idol triple-threat through Antonio Banderas, Tom Cruise, and Brad Pitt. That strategy worked as well, securing the film two Oscar nominations, and over a dozen other cinema awards. As Abbott notes, the 1990s represented America’s love affair with horror, with Hollywood putting some serious star power and big budgets behind their horror film efforts.³ Oscar winner Francis Ford Coppola, of *The Godfather* trilogy fame (1972, 1974, 1990), took on the task of directing *Dracula* (1992). Actor Jack Nicholson, the winner of two Oscars and the star of the horror film *The Shining* (1980), returned to horror in *Wolf* (1994). Likewise, actor Robert De Niro, also a double Oscar winner (*The Godfather, Part II* [1974]; *Raging Bull* [1980]) and star of the horror film *Angel Heart* (1987), revisited the genre to star as the Creature in *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994). There were more films—many, many more—in the 1990s, such as the action/monster blockbuster movie *The Mummy* (1999) and the

haunting, desperately sad *The Sixth Sense* (1999). And then there was the surprise hit of the decade, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), made for less than \$100,000 but driven to box office gold (to the tune of over \$130 million in its first few weeks of release) by drumming up internet buzz. Horror had become so sizzling hot that, in 2004 while riding the wave of popularity generated by 1999's *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns* (2001), Universal Studios Hollywood theme park even introduced its rollercoaster, *Revenge of the Mummy—the Ride*.⁴

Black participation in these prestige horror films was notably limited, begging the question, what did the horror genre mean for Blacks in the 1990s? The good news was that “Black horror” was back with a vengeance (pun intended) in the decade, with a force that had not been seen since the 1970s Blaxploitation-era horror cycle. One stand-out film, *Def by Temptation* (1990), was reminiscent of Spencer Williams’ 1940s religious-horror films *The Blood of Jesus* (1941) and *Go Down, Death* (1944), breathing new, scary life into morality messages. Likewise, “Black horror” films such as *Tales from the Hood* (1995) updated the Black Power message offered in films such as *Sugar Hill* (1974), to address the wave of gang and drug violence plaguing some Black communities. More importantly, finally, in the 1990s, there were plain ole “Black horror” monster movies, such as *The Embalmer* (1996), in which Blacks got to slash and scream, live and die just like anybody else featured in the genre.

There were few so-called prestige films in “Black horror,” but if anyone was going to be behind such a project it would be Oprah Winfrey, with *Beloved* (1998). Otherwise, “Black horror” was lucky to have any financing at all (e.g., *Bugged* [1997]). Fortunately, or perhaps not, given their wavering quality, countless “Black horror” films were made, fueled by the exploding home video market. In short, while “Black horror” was not racking up awards or setting box office records, it was making inroads by featuring Blacks in substantive roles, not just bit parts, as evidenced by the Eddie Murphy vehicle *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995).

“Blacks in horror” films, likewise, were abundant. *Candyman* (1992) played on old stereotypes by again placing a blond beauty in peril at the hands of a Black boogeyman. Notably, “Blacks in horror” films also introduced the Black superhero, with *Blade* (Wesley Snipes) and *Spawn* (Michael Jai White), men driven to revenge after white villains destroy their lives.

There were red threads running through many of the “Black horror” and “Blacks in horror” films. One unifying theme of the 1990s was that the urban, specifically the Black inner city, was deadly real estate. In several “Black horror” films, the inner city was depicted as dangerous and troubled, but worth fighting for and cleaning up (e.g., *Urban Menace* [1999]). By contrast, the “Blacks in horror” film *Predator 2* (1990) depicted the urban much as 1920s and 1930s movies represented the jungles of Africa—as teeming with predacious animals, both otherworldly and human. Still, Black characters were back, busting the modern horror genre wide open.

Yielding to Temptation

The 1990s opened with *Def by Temptation* (1990), an earnest, independently produced “Black horror” film that closely resembled the work of Spencer Williams’ *The Blood of Jesus* (1941). Distributed by Troma Entertainment, infamously known for their large catalog of cheesy, low-budget exploitation and horror films such as *The Toxic Avenger* (1984) and “Blacks in horror” movie *Surf Nazis Must Die* (1987), *Temptation* stood out for its relative quality and was hailed by Troma’s President Lloyd Kaufman as the “best” in the Troma collection.⁵ Like *Blood*, *Temptation* was stymied by budget, and like *Blood*, *Temptation* made up for it through imagination and highly stylized sequences.

Temptation was written, directed, and produced by the Black actor James Bond III, a first-time director, who also stars in the film. It presents a talented Black cast, with Samuel L. Jackson, Kadeem Hardison, Bill Nunn, and Bond (all of whom had appeared together in Spike Lee’s 1988 *School Daze*) and boasts cameo appearances by singer/theater performer/TV actress Melba Moore, jazz saxophonist Najee, and slow jam crooner Freddie Jackson, performing his top 10 R&B hit “All Over You.” The film serves as noted television and film producer, writer, actor, and director Nelson George’s first foray into production. Additionally, award-winning cinematographer and director Ernest R. Dickerson (horror credits include *Tales from the Dark Side*, 1984–86; *Dexter*, 2008–13; *Day of the Dead*, 1985; *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight*, 1995; *Bones*, 2001; *The Walking Dead*, 2010–14; *The Purge*, 2018) serves as the cinematographer.

The film’s focus is 20-year-old Joel (Bond III), a starchy seminary student from North Carolina making his first trip to New York and visiting his worldly-wise actor friend “K” (Kadeem Hardison) in Brooklyn. He leaves behind his “Grandma” (Minnie Gentry), who raised him after his parents’ untimely death in a car accident. The story centers on Joel’s attempts to be certain of his decision to follow in his clergyman father’s footsteps by, himself, becoming a minister. Brooklyn, as a Northern big city, is depicted as home to a number of corrupting influences—sexual escapades, infidelity, spiritualism, booze, and, in one dramatic scene, even television literally becomes deadly. By contrast, the small-town South is portrayed as a place out of which righteous wholesomeness radiates. The South is “down home,” the Black utopian fantasy of nurturance, piety, community, and memory. Southerners meet in churches, not bars; their women adorn themselves with crosses, not heavy makeup; they are connected by shared folkways and history. *Temptation* presents what Reid calls a “regional moralistic dualism,” in that Southern culture is akin to decent, forthright sensibilities and in direct opposition to the North.⁶

In the film, a demon spirit named Temptation (Cynthia Bond) is, according to the film, an “it” who uses sexuality to hold morality hostage. The spirit, over the centuries, has been incarnated into fleshly form, seducing sinners. However, its diversion of choice is luring in a true innocent—such as a God-fearing

minister—getting them to succumb to temptation. Temptation takes on a female form in the film and, reminiscent of the film *Abby* (1974), preys upon men, killing them during sex. The black widow's victims, who she picks up at a bar, are often guilty of transgressions (often based on a rather socially conservative view of sin). To illustrate, there is the man who encourages one of his girlfriends to get an abortion (hence, a pro-life message). There is also a bar patron who removes his wedding ring before picking up Temptation (perhaps, anti-polyamory). Here, after having sex, Temptation taunts the man: "Honey, I've given you something there's no cure for. It's going to grow and grow until it consumes you." The man responds to the beautiful Temptation—"It don't look like you got anything" (further advancing a monogamy-equals-safe sex message). The man, now infected with a sexually transmitted disease, instantly begins to deteriorate, making his sin visible to his wife who, in response to his infidelity, shoots him (which in this movie is tolerable).

However, the film reserves its most graphic violence (punishment) for a gay man. He is coaxed by Temptation, with her pressing him to try her out sexually just this once because "a woman, it's much better." In Temptation's bedroom, as the man readies himself for a night of intimacy, Temptation abandons the seductive performance, one that she maintained with her other male victims—all of whom were straight. Sensing her intensifying malevolence, the man asks if he has done something wrong, to which she spits, "yes," before violently raping him. Here, Temptation becomes an "it" inserting an unseen object or body part into the man's rectum, with him questioning "Where'd *that* come from?" before screaming for Temptation to stop and take it out. He bears the full brunt of her anger, with Temptation's growls drowning out the man's screams as she penetrates and slashes him, leaving her bedroom soaked in his blood. The most barbarous scene in the film is a sickening depiction of anti-gay violence aligning with and, as a morality tale, giving tacit approval for, the real-life fatal violence sexual and gender minorities can be targeted with. For example, a 1989 report, issued one year before *Temptation*, revealed that 5% of gay men and 10% of lesbian women polled reported being the victim of anti-gay violence, while 47% of all gay people polled reported some form of (non-violent) discrimination based on their sexual orientation.⁷

Eventually, Temptation sets her sights on Joel, who is depicted as clearly out of place and out of step with Brooklyn's energy and esthetic. K, who is dressed "sharp as a tack," sports the latest fashion—expensive sweat suits and boasts a collection of sneakers. His talk is hip and peppered with slang and profanity. Conversely, Joel arrives in khakis, a button-down collar shirt, and "ugly brown" loafers. He is unschooled in colloquialisms, responding, "Fornication is a sin" when asked by K if he would "jump in them draws" if he met an attractive woman. Joel, from his "small town," where he proverbially "swats flies and milks cows and shit" has to be given a primer in dress, and urban vernacular.⁸

K grows suspicious of Temptation and with the help of an undercover federal agent, Dougy (Bill Nunn), who investigates paranormal crimes, plans to

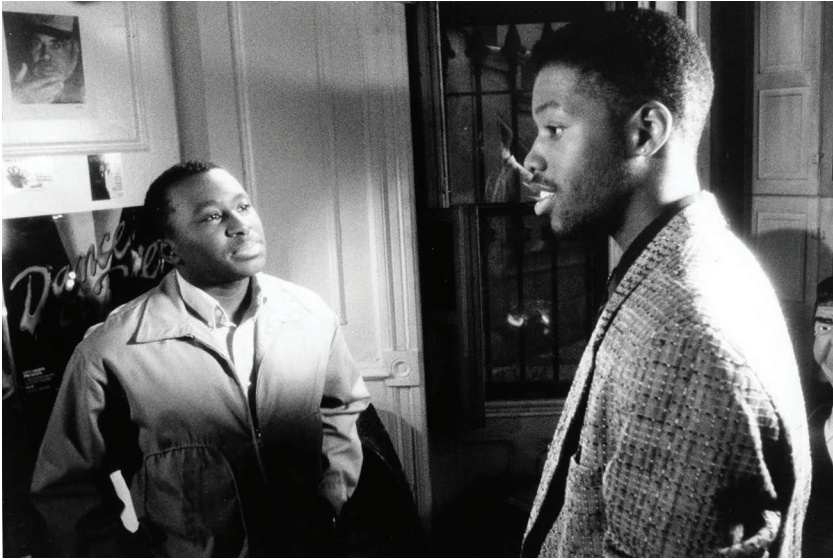


FIGURE 8.1 Joel and K in *Def by Temptation*

Troma Films/Photofest

kill her. But, *Temptation's* story turns on the heroism of a woman. K and Dougy are killed, leaving the guileless Joel in peril. Suddenly, Grandma arrives on the scene from North Carolina to save her grandson, reminiscent of an earlier Troma release, the inferior *Surf Nazis Must Die* (1987). Armed with Joel's Bible (which he left behind at home) and a wooden cross, Grandma kicks down Temptation's door, ready to engage in some spiritual warfare by shoring up Joel with a bit of preaching. Together Grandma and Joel form a powerful duo to fight Temptation. Grandma embodies a kind of womanist theology in action—a concern for the Black community and its salvation as a whole—while showing the “resiliency of women-centered family networks and their willingness to take responsibility for Black children.”⁹ *Temptation* holds on to and celebrates the notion of a grandmother or surrogate kinfolk stepping in, particularly during a time and in an urban place where such community connectedness is increasingly elusive.

The portrayal of this kind of mother figure is a significant departure from non-Black horror films. The “mother-as-devouring-and-poisonous figure” is anomalous in “Black horror,” with Black women, if depicted, generally revered.¹⁰ In “Black horror,” the central narrative does not regularly focus on Black mothers producing “bad seeds,” or “psychos,” nor does it often twist religion with abusive cruelty to give rise to supernatural, monstrous children (e.g., *Carrie* [1976]).

In the film's climax, Joel chooses God, proclaiming, “Demon, I rebuke you!” Thanks to the cross Grandma brought along, Joel destroys Temptation by holding

it up to her, revealing her true grotesque demonic form before it explodes. Joel and Grandma, then, represent family and faith restored. The film ends on a cautionary note as the dead K and Dougy have been resurrected as evil and are now luring women. However, back on the straight and narrow, Joel assures viewers that he is ready to fight for righteousness. As such, the film asserts, “the only answer to urban strife and decadence is Jesus.”¹¹

Temptation was hailed in the *Washington Post* as being “light-years ahead of *Blacula*,” possessing “depth and emotional detail generally absent from such films,” and avoiding some of the stereotypes too often offered “by the white film establishment.”¹² The film was also cited for being low budget. However, if the film is evaluated outside of Hollywood frameworks (as Troma’s President did), it cannot be simply dismissed as a B-movie. Rather, as the *Post* review reveals, this is a Black film with unique narrative conventions, conventions that should not be “glossed over as technical and artistic liabilities.”¹³ Instead, it contributes to a Black film-making tradition that does not work to replicate the sensibilities or esthetic leanings, or, in the case of horror, special effects obsessions, of Hollywood.

Black Is the New Black

As with the Blaxploitation era, studios saw potential dollar signs by tapping into the underserved Black market, particularly with movies made as inexpensively as *Temptation*. A 1991 *New York Times Magazine* profile of young Black directors entitled “They’ve Gotta Have Us” declared “Black film properties may be to the 90’s what the car phone was to the 80’s: every studio executive has to have one.”¹⁴

One such studio was New Line Cinema, which dipped its toe into the 1990s Black film pool early on with comedies like *House Party* (1990), *Talkin’ Dirty After Dark* (1991), *Hangin’ with the Homeboys* (1991), and *Who’s the Man?* (1993). The company’s decision to do so actually tied back to its tracking of horror consumption in the 1980s. Although horror was frequently denied Blackness on screen throughout that decade, Black viewers still flocked to theaters to support fright films, accounting for 25% of the moviegoing public despite making up only 12% of the American population. According to New Line executive Janet Grillo, Black attendance of the studio’s signature horror franchise—*A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984–2010)—colored its decision to tailor movies toward that demographic in the 1990s: “Elm Street helped us identify our market niche. . . . Our research said there was a significant segment of young Blacks attending these films. So we began to think of other movies that they—as well as others—might find appealing.”¹⁵

Perhaps not coincidentally, when New Line took over the iconic (and heretofore very white) *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise (1990, 2003, 2006), it injected a dose of Blackness in the form of Ken Foree as co-star of *Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III* (1990). Having starred in the revered *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Foree carried with him a horror cache that few Black actors could claim. Even in

this era of Black embrace, it's debatable whether New Line would have entrusted its entry into the world of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to a Black actor as unknown as the white cast members in the third film. (Although Viggo Mortensen has a prominent role as one of the cannibal clan, he had yet to achieve stardom.) Foree was by far the most recognizable face in the cast, but the true star of the film, as indicated by the title, was the faceless "muscle" of the backwoods Texas cannibal family. The movie poster evidences this clearly not only by featuring the chainsaw-wielding Leatherface as the sole figure but also by not listing a single cast member in the credits at the bottom (the "billing block"), since the true star is fictional.

Foree plays a middle-aged weekend warrior named Benny who does not appear on screen until almost 30 minutes into the movie, which allows an initial focus on a young white couple. When they crash their car, Benny helps. In a reversal of the racial prejudice of the real world, the fact that he's Black means that this stranger can be trusted; throughout the film (and the franchise), white would-be helpers turn out to be members of the cannibal clan. Benny's Black skin literally colors him as safely unrelated to the sadistic family. Although he initially seems like a textbook case of the expendable ancillary character that was the de facto Black role in 1980s horror (see his role in *From Beyond* [1986]), Benny ends up playing hero, boasting both the physicality and the weaponry to kill multiple members of the villainous family and rescue the white female lead, surviving the ordeal along with her. He is even important enough that another white character sacrifices herself to save him when Leatherface gets the jump on him.

A much higher profile instance of a middle-aged Black character helping a young white couple in 1990 was Whoopi Goldberg in the supernatural romance *Ghost*. As with *Leatherface*, *Ghost* spends its opening 30-plus minutes on the young, attractive white protagonist couple, Molly (Demi Moore) and Sam (Patrick Swayze), while Goldberg's character, Oda Mae Brown, is introduced only when she is needed to get them out of a jam. In the film, Sam is killed during a mugging attempt, and his ghost, invisible to the living, follows the culprit to pre-gentrified Brooklyn, where he stumbles upon a shop run by "spiritual advisor" Oda Mae promoting her ability to "contact the dearly departed." Oda Mae is a huckster pretending to be a psychic, but to her surprise, she actually can hear the dead Sam when he speaks. He coerces her into helping him warn Molly of the killer's return. Though, unlike Benny in *Leatherface*, she does not help voluntarily but only when Sam goads and annoys her with his incessant singing. Using Goldberg's comedic skills, Oda Mae fulfills the traditional cinematic Black role of comic relief while simultaneously taking on the more modern Black role of "magical Negro." As is typical of magical Negroes, she is merely a tool that the white leads use to overcome their obstacle. Oda Mae tries to extricate herself from the situation on a number of occasions, only to have Sam drag her back; rather than being a hero, she herself needs to be saved at the end by Sam's ghost.

For her performance, Goldberg earned only the second ever Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress awarded to a Black woman, more than 50 years after Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). The role of Oda Mae served as a reminder that despite the increased exposure and recognition that Black performers received in the 1990s, Hollywood still generally allotted parts along racial lines, even for a major star like Goldberg. The only other minority character of note is the mugger/murderer/would-be rapist who kills Sam, played by Puerto Rican actor Rick Aviles.

Reflective of the era's sometimes surface showcase of Blackness is the 1990 remake of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, executive produced by Romero and directed by horror makeup maven Tom Savini. A pre-Candyman Tony Todd stars in the iconic role of Ben, but while Todd received top billing in the film, Ben ends up taking a backseat to Barbara (Patricia Tallman). Unlike the original movie, in which Barbra (spelled differently) is virtually catatonic throughout, in the remake, she plays the moral center between the two Type A men, Ben and Harry (Tom Towles), vying for control of the group of survivors taking shelter in a farmhouse. She admonishes the men for their testosterone-driven bickering "like a bunch of two-year-olds," as do the other female characters, who collectively show restraint that the men lack. In the debate between Ben's strategy to barricade themselves upstairs versus Harry's preference to hide downstairs, it is Barbara who ends up having the best idea, the one that ultimately keeps her alive: "They're so slow, we could just walk right past them." Although Ben is clearly the more likable of the two men, they shoot each other as the film nears its climax, unlike in the original, where Ben shoots and kills Harry. A mortally wounded Ben then turns into the sacrificial mode, urging Barbara, "Go on, get out of here!" while he holds off the incoming zombies. Barbara escapes, as she had theorized, by simply outrunning the slow creatures and returns to the house in the morning with a rescue party/posse. There, they find a zombified Ben and shoot him—rightfully, in contrast to the first movie, in which the posse shoots a still-living Ben, mistaking him for one of the undead. Without this scene, the stinging racial subtext of the original, intended or not, is lacking. In its place is a message of female empowerment that, while an improvement over Barbra's ineffectuality reflects the established cinematic standards of the just-ended 1980s: the heroic white Final Girl superseding the subordinate, sacrificial Black character.

Reinventing the Black Urban Image

White folks, flee!
 Still—here's me!
 White folks, fly!
 Here am I!

—Langston Hughes¹⁶

Horror and science fiction films such as *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *Them!* (1954) assured white people that they made the right decision in rejecting urban life as Martians and giant ants—“spectacular representations of the alien Other and its violent onslaught”—wrecked cities.¹⁷ But horror was all about fear and chaos through disruption, and over the years, the genre brought terror to these purportedly idyllic enclaves by showing that white monsters (no Blacks allowed!) could move in, too.

With monsters such as Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers busy pureeing white suburbanites, “Black horror” film took advantage of the representational gap left when white horror fled to the suburbs, as well. These urban-based horror movies presented narratives that were Black-centered, that is, drawing on Black folklore, histories, and culture. The aesthetic was Black, with expressions of style, music, language, and overall cadence—culturally specific references and insider talk—speaking to Blackness, as well. The films brought a social realism, revealing that what was most threatening to urban Blacks, the stuff that haunted them while awake and in their dreams, was lingering racism, socioeconomic disparities, health crises, and specific forms of criminality, such as gun and gang violence and rogue cops. Although the moralistic *Def By Temptation* painted the city as sinful, it was also well aware that its residents were preyed upon by sinful sociopolitical practices. As K schools Joel on the ways of the world, he shows sympathy for the wayward “knuckleheads” in the neighborhood, explaining to his naive friend that they are “victims of economies, environment, and Reaganomics”—the latter a reference to the Reagan administration’s “trickle down” economic plan that reasoned that when the wealthier (whiter) classes have more money, their excess cash will “trickle down” to the lower (Blacker) classes. Later, when K meets his demise—sucked in and “eaten” by his possessed television—a sinister, inflatable Ronald Reagan looks on, laughing menacingly. Another Black man literally chewed up and spit out under Reagan’s watch.

Blacks were depicted not only as urbanites but also as living in the dead inner city, which was not to be confused with cities’ downtowns, which were still home to businesses. The inner city was tied to Black people depicted as piteously poor or participating in illegal, underground economies such as drug sales. Only the most violent, dangerous, and depraved thrived in these inner cities, while the innocent, those who could not get out, were held hostage. This image of lawlessness attached a stigma to Black films of this era, regardless of whether or not they revolved around gangs, drugs, or realistic violence—so much so that, according to Lloyd Kaufman, while *Temptation* “Did O.K. in the theaters. . . . The problem was the video stores. They wouldn’t take the video. They were worried that Black people would come in and burn the stores down. I mean, that was literally the mindset.”¹⁸ The paranoia that Black films would incite violence was so great that even movie posters were censored; Ernest Dickerson’s directorial debut *Juice* (1992) featured Tupac Shakur holding a handgun near his face, but producers found it too provocative and had it airbrushed out, despite the fact that the movie

Kuffs (1992) opened a week earlier with a poster showing white actor Christian Slater similarly holding a handgun in front of his face.

There were also moves in Black film, horror and otherwise, to recast how Black neighborhoods were portrayed. They were not always merely inner cities or, as they had been described in the 1970s, “the ghetto.” Now, “the ’hood” was the moniker, with the ’hood in some cases accommodating the spatial image of the ghetto, while also allowing “greater flexibility . . . to describe and delineate locality—literally, one’s neighborhood and the space to which one relates as a local home environment.”¹⁹ The ’hood, then, was also a place that had real meaning as it pertained to identity construction and understandings of community. For example, it was a place where Blacks were “real,” authentically Black. While some Blacks “got out” through, for example, work or education opportunities, sell-out Blacks were those who turned their backs to their relationships with, and memories of, the ’hood. While the ’hood had a difficult reputation, it was still Black home and had much to offer, including making seminal contributions to all facets of Black culture. For this cultural and rhetorical freedom, the hip-hop generation can be specifically thanked for centering relationships with one’s communities, describing them as complex as they were protective, thereby rejecting hackneyed conventions.

Hip-hop culture—the music, the dancing, the clothing, the swagger, the urbanness—in many ways informed the 1990s Black film movement, as evidenced by *Boyz n the Hood’s* (1991) co-opting of the title of Eazy-E’s 1987 “gangsta rap”-pioneering song “Boyz-n-the-Hood.” In horror, the “def” in *Def By Temptation* was urban slang for “cool”—epitomized by the hip-hop record label Def Jam—and was added when Troma picked up the movie, initially called simply “Temptation,” for distribution. Studios who tapped into the Black movie business were well aware of the increasing popularity of rap music—and more importantly, the increasing popularity of rap music with white, middle-class teens who lived far from the urban centers of hip-hop but who were drawn to the edgy music and dressed in the baggy, low-hanging style of their favorite rappers. Hip-hop had been a driving force that kept Black-led films alive throughout the 1980s, with the likes of *Breakin’* (1984), *Beat Street* (1984), *Krush Groove* (1985), *Rappin’* (1985), *Disorderlies* (1987), and *Tougher Than Leather* (1988), and now that it had taken hold of suburban whites with disposable income, studios sought to cash in on the music’s far-reaching appeal.

Rappers, having honed their stage personas as purveyors of ’hood realness, were natural actors, and studios tapped them to star in “urban” fare throughout the 1990s, primarily dramatic “hood films” in the early part of the decade, like Ice Cube in *Boyz n the Hood*, Ice-T in *New Jack City* (1991), Tupac in *Juice*, and Queen Latifah in *Set It Off* (1996), and once that well had run dry, branching off into action, comedy, and even romance later on. The biggest on-screen star emerging was Will “Fresh Prince” Smith, who would headline mainstream blockbusters like *Bad Boys* (1995), *Independence Day* (1996), and *Men in Black*

(1997). These rappers-turned-actors also turned to horror, and wherever they went, they brought their street cred with them, be it L.L. Cool J in an underwater research facility in *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), Queen Latifah in a different underwater facility in *Sphere* (1998), Ice Cube in the Amazonian jungle in *Anaconda* (1997), or Snoop Dogg in the urban jungle in *Urban Menace* (1999).

Fighting for the 'Hood

Black director Rusty Cundieff's "Black horror" film *Tales from the Hood* (1995) was not quite Hollywood, but it did have impressive backing from Spike Lee's production company, 40 Acres and a Mule. The film borrowed from the *Tales from the Crypt* 1950s comic book stories, film (1972), and HBO television series (1989–1996), in which short, often comical horror vignettes are presented that show how someone met their untimely death. *Hood* worked to signal it was different from *Crypt* by focusing on Black stories and presenting its version of the Crypt Keeper, the *Crypt* narrator and mascot (a decomposing skeleton). *Hood* offered a black skeleton with a bandana tied, gang-style, around its head, while wearing dark sunglasses, and with a gun in its hand. *Hood* presents four vignettes, introduced by a spooky funeral home director, Mr. Simms (Clarence Williams III), who is also charged with revealing the story behind the deaths of those in his parlor. In the film, his audience is three young, Black drug-dealing gang members.

In the first story, a distinguished Black activist, Martin Moorehouse (Tom Wright; the character's name recalls the historically Black, male Morehouse College), who is trying to rid the 'hood of racist, rogue white police officers, is murdered by three cops. Among the trio is a virulent racist named "Strom," a likely reference to segregationist Strom Thurmond, Governor of South Carolina (1947–1951) and U.S. Senator (1954–2003), who infamously proclaimed in 1948, "And I want to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that there's not enough troops in the Army to force the Southern people to break down segregation and admit the nigger race into our theatres, into our swimming pools, into our homes and into our churches."²⁰ The officers kill Moorehouse and plant drugs on him, thereby posthumously ruining his reputation as well. The entire affair is witnessed by a Black rookie cop, Clarence (Anthony Griffith), who fails to intervene on the police violence. Maddened by the guilt, Clarence quits the force and becomes a drunk. On the one-year anniversary of the murder, Moorehouse's ghost exacts a series of gruesome acts of deadly revenge on the cops. However, Moorehouse reserves his express contempt for Clarence, demanding, "Where were you when I needed you, *Brother?*" In the second vignette, a Black child named Walter (Brandon Hammond) is the victim of physical abuse by his mother's boyfriend, whom he calls Monster (David Alan Grier). The horror twist is that when Walter draws Monster (as a green beast) on pieces of paper, he can tear up the drawings, mangling the man. Walter eventually burns the picture of Monster, thereby burning up

his abuser. The story features a caring, involved teacher, Richard Garvey (Rusty Cundieff), who works to help the boy (perhaps akin to his potential namesake, Marcus Garvey, Pan-Africanism movement leader). Richard is hailed as the kind of upright, caring man that Black communities need.

The third story focuses on a white Southern politician, Duke Metger (Corbin Bernsen), a name that recalls Tom Metzger, the founder of the White Aryan Resistance, and David Duke, a member of the Ku Klux Klan and politician. Metger is depicted as running for office on a no affirmative action, no reparations platform, supported by a “White Hands” commercial featuring a white man’s hands crumpling up a rejection letter after losing out on an employment opportunity because of racial quotas. Here, the film reproduces the real 1990 controversial “Hands” political ad supporting the candidacy of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms.²¹ In the film, Metger hires a Black image manager who tells racist jokes and who is promptly killed in a fall down the stairs in Metger’s home. Metger has purchased the plantation home where a massacre of enslaved Black people occurred nearly 200 years earlier. Not long after the slaughter, a Black Voodooist, Miss Cobb (Christina Cundieff), buys the property, seeking to put the murdered souls to rest by placing their spirits into dolls. The home becomes a memorial of sorts, and after Miss Cobb’s death, it remains untouched until Metger buys it against the wishes of the Black community. The dolls and Metger battle, with Metger meeting his death at the hands of the dolls while questioning why he should be their target since he was not the one actually responsible for their enslavement and deaths. The failure to understand the lingering effects of slavery and the contemporary cruelty of racism on the Black community is a theme that would be more deeply explored in the film *Beloved*, in which the audience is prompted to consider whether Black people have even been able to secure their psychic freedom from slavery and whether those who were not direct participants in the slave trade, but benefit from its legacy, are still culpable.

The final vignette brings the film full circle as the young men, with whom the funeral director is talking, hear the story of someone they killed. They learn that after a shootout with a rival named Jerome aka “Crazy K” (Lamont Bentley), Jerome enters a liminal stage between life and death and is given the opportunity to modify his gangster behavior under the supervision of a scientist, Dr. Cushing (Rosalind Cash). Jerome is delivered in chains and caged next to a white supremacist who thanks him for killing “niggers,” telling Jerome, “You cool with me.” Jerome is shown a series of images aligning gang violence with Klan terrorism. The film also invokes religious metaphors linking Jerome to Cain, a man who killed his brother, by asking Jerome, “How many Brothers have you slain?” Interestingly, Jerome is being attended to by women dressed in dominatrix-stripper nurse’s costumes, women whom Jerome ogles. Presumably, the women function to dispel any notions that Jerome’s heterosexual masculinity is being compromised at the hands of a female scientist who has all but stripped him bare of both his clothes and his emotions. Finally, Cushing demands that Jerome take personal

responsibility for his actions, explaining that he cannot blame his parents, teachers, or the world for his aberrant behaviors. Jerome fails to accept change and dies. It is revealed to the three young men in the funeral parlor that they too died in a revenge killing carried out by Jerome's friends. All are in Hell with the Devil, who turns out to be the funeral director.

The film was a blunt commentary on Black unity and commitment. While *Temptation* identified a range of sins, for *Hood*, there was only one principal sin—selling out Black people and Blackness—which was punishable by death. In contrast to films of the past, notably, it is the Voodoo woman who stands as a heroic agent of justice.²² *Hood*, then, also had a message for the horror genre—selling out Black religion would no longer be tolerated either.

Temptation and *Hood* are post-Civil Rights era, social problems films, which simultaneously cast Black communities as possessing not only dangerous pitfalls but also full of enormous pride and talent. For Denzin, films such as these located the responsibility for the 'hood's problems "with the media, the police, and other apparatuses of the state. These films make these structures at least partially responsible."²³ Indeed, such films claim that Black people's problems are externally inflicted, such as drugs and guns being delivered into the Black communities, or poverty as a result of misguided economic policies. The films caution that though Black communities are victimized by these phenomena, Black people should not succumb.

The films of this decade also present the idea that those most susceptible to the dangers found in the 'hood are Black youth, specifically those invested in gangsta rap culture. The films evidenced a concern over the glamorization of the Black "gangsta" lifestyle as the real and imaged violence associated with it dominated headlines in the 1990s. For example, the explosive, phenomenally popular members of NWA, or Niggaz With Attitude, introduced themselves as a "gang," not a rap "group," dressed in their "gang" colors of black and silver, and talked about kicking off violence in the 'hood, all as part of their image-making.²⁴ The films revealed the profound concern among some individuals over the blurring of mythical and real-life violence with Blacks targeting each other. For example, in 1991, rapper Dr. Dre admitted to attacking another rapper, Dee Barnes, "it ain't no big thing—I just threw her through a door." (Barnes says it was, indeed, a 'big thing' and far more violent—she was thrown down a flight of stairs, beaten, slammed into a wall, and had her fingers stomped on.)²⁵ In between 1992 and 1995, the late "thug life" rapper Tupac was associated with a string of crimes, including sexual abuse and assault, and was jailed for both. Suge Knight, co-founder of "Death Row" records also saw a range of charges and convictions and was present for the drive-by shooting death of Tupac in 1996. In 1997, New York's late rapper Biggie Smalls was gunned down as well. The decade ended with Puff Daddy of Bad Boy records being arrested twice, once for assault and a second time for a shooting in a nightclub.

Tales from the Hood attempted to fight back against such gangster culture with more traditional forms of folkloric storytelling while rewriting the most common

plots of horror films, linking them to bigotry and inequality: “zombie movies and police brutality; monster movies and domestic violence; ancient curse movies and White supremacy accompanied by co-option; mad scientist movies and gang violence as self-hatred”—it was an innovative way to get young people’s attention.²⁶ More, *Hood* popularized a trend in presenting Blackness-centered, cautionary tales in a short story, anthology style. For example, *Street Tales of Terror* (2004) featured three blood-drenched stories warning against violence against or by women, while *Urban Evil: A Trilogy of Fear* (2005) showed how the ’hood “had gone to hell,” and *Hood of Horror* (2006) similarly worked to explain why “it *ain’t* all good in the ’hood.”

The *Crypt* franchise, the inspiration for *Tales from the Hood*, even featured Black characters in *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* (1995), directed by Ernest Dickerson. In the film, a Black woman, Jeryline (Jada Pinkett), rises to world-saving hero status to keep an ancient, powerful relic filled with the blood of Jesus out of the hands of the Devil. Jeryline, a thief from Wormwood, New Mexico, survives a night of demon attacks; in no small measure with the help of Irene (C.C.H. Pounder), a self-sacrificing Black woman. Jeryline is chosen to carry on as a guardian angel because she is much like Sirach, a thief present on the night of Jesus’ crucifixion who first stole the relic but upon discovering its power (to keep the Devil at bay) ended up protecting it. In the film, one of the demons seeking the artifact changes the appearance to fit the context in which he is hunting. For example, when the demon arrives in New Mexico, it appears as a white male and



FIGURE 8.2 Snoop in *Hood of Horror*

Arclight Films/Photofest

dressed as a cowboy. As Jeryline leaves New Mexico by bus to begin her journey of protecting the relic while dodging demons, her demon appears and is a young Black man. The film leaves its audience to guess where the two Black warriors will go to try to blend in.

Dickerson pushed for Pinkett to be cast as Jeryline based on her performance in the 'hood film *Menace II Society* (1993) as a proud single mother in South Central Los Angeles trying to keep her young son from going down the wrong path.²⁷ Like many Black creatives who would go on to work in horror, Pinkett received an early career boost in 1990s hood cinema, including *Jason's Lyric* (1994) and *Set It Off*. Dickerson, of course, made his directorial debut with *Juice* before shooting *Demon Knight* and later, *Bones* (2001). *Menace II Society* directors Albert and Allen Hughes would helm the Jack the Ripper mystery *From Hell* (2001), starring Johnny Depp. Darin Scott, a producer on *Menace II Society*, later produced *Tales from the Hood* and directed several horror movies after the turn of the century, including *Deep Blue Sea 2* (2018), *Tales from the Hood 2* (2018), and *Tales from the Hood 3* (2020).

While Pinkett was not cast for her race, Dickerson hoped that he could use it to subvert viewers' expectations. As a Black prisoner on work release, Jeryline is not a typical movie hero, and as Dickerson explained,

I wanted Jada because I just thought she would be a good feisty young heroine, but the fact that she's African American. . . . Usually in movies like this, they're the first folks to die. . . . So, I was hoping that I would get the audience to think, "Ah, she's not gonna last too long."²⁸

Jeryline thus undermines horror conventions for the fate of Black characters, reflecting the decade's apparent openness to Black star power. She also reflects the power of having Black personnel behind the scenes in positions of power, like Dickerson, who can influence the casting of Blacks in front of the camera.

You Don't Always Get What You Pay For

Certainly, money is not everything, but in film, box office sales are incredibly important and horror films featuring Blacks were attracting audiences. *Demon Knight* opened on 1,729 screens and earned \$10,019,555 in its opening weekend.²⁹ While *Temptation's* exact budget is unknown, and it earned a mere \$54,582 in an initial, limited 11-theater release, *Temptation* received some important critical kudos, eventually earning \$2,218,579 (not bad for an indie film with no theater play), and is a popular commodity for Troma.³⁰ By contrast, the "Black horror," comedy-tinged film *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995) boasted a budget in excess of \$14 million, was released in over 2,000 theaters, earning \$7,045,379 in its opening weekend, and was panned, by Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* succinctly summarizing the reviews by describing the film as a "disorganized

mess.”³¹ This is in spite of the film’s (white) veteran horror film director Wes Craven, who made several horror films that focus on Black characters. For example, Craven directed *Swamp Thing* (1982), which featured a Black boy, Jude (Reggie Batts), as a reluctant helper (with a subtle, deadpan wit) to the film’s co-star Alice (Adrienne Barbeau) after Alice is accidentally caught up in a murder plot. The director would again feature a Black boy, the unfortunately named “Fool” (Brandon Adams), as savior, in the “Blacks in horror” film *The People Under the Stairs* (1991). Craven also directed the retro, 1940s-esque “Blacks in horror” film *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), about Black Haitians, Voodoo, and the white people who want to appropriate its power of zombification.

Vampire was largely a Black affair, starring Black comedian/actor Eddie Murphy, written by members of the Murphy clan—Eddie, Charles, and Vernon Lynch, and co-produced by Ray Murphy Jr. The film had a predominantly Black cast, though Eddie Murphy did sport some whiteface to portray a white character. The film updated *Blacula* (1972), sharing themes of a lost love and a Black vampire wreaking havoc on a Black urban community. While *Blacula* was inspired by the wave of interest in Black nationalism and connection with the African “motherland,” *Vampire* absented itself from Black political movements, opting to signal its connection to Black culture through its inner-city location.

Vampire stars Murphy as Maximillian, or “Max,” a “nosferatu” who is in search of “the last of his kind,” a female vampire and police officer, Rita (Angela Bassett), who does not know she is “mixed-race,” half-human, half-vampire. Max travels the world looking for Rita, finding her in Brooklyn, where he hopes to draw her into vampirism, and ultimately to him.

Vampire did little to challenge the notion that the urban, specifically Brooklyn, is a dreadful place. Black Brooklyn is filthy, covered in graffiti, and littered with trash. It is a slum in which gambling (numbers running) and Italian-led gangland murders are not uncommon. The police have more than their share of crimes to solve, and it takes several days for them to discover one of Max’s victims hanging Christ-on-the-cross-like from a bridge tower. In fact, dead inner-city Brooklyn is depicted as so deplorable that Max is forced to cast spells to create the illusion of a liveable space for himself, thereby camouflaging its dismal conditions.

Like so many “Black horror” films, the *Vampire* narrative rises and falls on the actions of a Black woman, and this time it is the tough, resourceful cop, Rita (Angela Bassett). Rita’s vulnerability is represented through a new twist on the tragic mulatto stereotype as she portrays a moody, sorrow-filled soul, torn between two racial worlds—the human race and the vampire “race.” Already teetering emotionally, Rita is pushed further into madness by way of a love triangle forcing her to choose between her human work partner, the obviously named Justice (Allen Payne), and Max. Caught between abject boundaries of insanity and love and vampiric possession, Rita must figure out how to find her way through, restoring herself.

When Rita's racial quandary is momentarily resolved by her leaning into vampirism, the film turns against a white woman. In a brief scene, a monied, selfish woman (Jerry Hall), during a walk through the park, complains to a companion that her Cuban maid's sick young son is a nuisance. In a comic scene, Rita and Max materialize ready to feed as the panicked woman scrambles to explain that she is actually sympathetic to the plight of downtrodden Blacks who are victims of a racist system. The scene, though played as no more than a bit of comic reprieve, is important when one considers the history of Black man/monster and white female/victim dynamics in horror. Hutchings notes that while the victim is a caricature, the attack is disturbing precisely because it comes from a Black man. Its irony and comic inflections are insufficient.³² However, the scene also supports another key function, to secure a bit of retribution for all of those horror movies before (and since) in which white womanhood is so prized. Max's violent attack (against the nameless white woman) is a highly politicized moment of comeuppance, for example, for the nameless coachman in *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) who silently endures a white woman's patronizing dismissals of the brutalities of slavery. Indeed, Max is a monster, but with Rita present for the attack, he reminds the viewer that white women are not really as special (to Black men) as horror makes them out to be. In fact, the vast majority of Max's victims in the film are, in a racial reversal, (nameless or uncredited) white people, and their deaths are largely inconsequential.

Justice arrives to play savior but is beaten back by the monster. Rita rejects vampirism and, by donning a necklace with a cross, embraces Christian Godliness. *She* is the one who destroys Max, thereby—Enduring Woman style—saving Justice as well as herself.

But Black horror movies with significant budgets like *Vampire in Brooklyn* were more the exception than the rule. In the 1990s, the direct-to-video (DTV) avenue—movies that skipped theatrical release and went directly to home video—was an increasingly viable alternative for moviemakers, thanks to both advances in video technology that lowered the cost of entry into the filmmaking world and the expansion of video stores whose clientele craved a steady supply of new movies. This broadening of viewing options further helped Black films connect with their target audience, as Guerrero noted early in the 1990s Black film movement:

The rise of the VCR has allowed the filmmaker with a racial, "other," or emergent perspective to better find his or her constituency through the audience segmentation that occurs when one rents a tape that appeals to one's particular orientation (racial, sexual, political, ethnic, . . .) from among the thousands of films on the rack at the video store.³³

Thus, independently made Black horror and "Blacks in horror" movies shot on shoestring budgets began to proliferate on video store shelves. In the same year as *Def by Temptation*, Rocco Karefa joined James Bond III as another Black writer-director starring in his own star vehicle, *Demon Cop* (1990), about a vigilante probation officer who turns into a monster after a tainted blood transfusion.

Ax 'Em (1993) was perhaps the first-ever Black slasher, featuring students from Baltimore's historically Black Morgan State University being stalked by a killer at a cabin in the woods. *House of the Damned* (1996) was the debut of prolific microbudget filmmaker Sean Weathers, who would go on to write and direct more than a dozen genre movies. *Backroad Diner* (1997) was a survival thriller in the vein of *Deliverance* (1972), with vacationing Black and Brown urbanites being targeted for death by small-town white citizens and police. *Ragdoll* (1999), about a demonic doll conjured by an aspiring rapper to take revenge on a shady record producer, was the first in a string of "urban horror" releases from Full Moon Features, a DTV production company founded in the late 1980s that overtake Troma as the leading distributor of Black-led B-movie horror.

Straight Urban Horror, No Chaser

S. Torriano Berry is a professor of film studies at Howard University in Washington, D.C. His published scholarship focuses on Black film across all genres. He has a special relationship to horror as he has spent the last decade researching and restoring the circa 1930s films of James and Eloyce Gist, which include the "Black horror" film *Hellbound Train*. He worked as a cinematographer on the "Black horror" Troma film *Bugged* (1997). In the film, Black scientists (rarely seen since Dr. Jackson in *Son of Ingagi* [1940] and Dr. Pride in *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* [1976]) invent a formula to create a superhuman, which accidentally finds its way into a supply of bug spray. The formula transforms bugs and an all-Black, male crew of rather intelligent exterminators, dressed in uniforms sporting patches of kente cloth, into monsters. Most notably (for the purpose at hand here), Berry wrote, directed, and produced the independent "Black horror" film *Embalmer* (1996). *Embalmer* is plain 'ole bloody horror in which Zach (Dexter Tennie), a funeral home operator, in a fit of rage, slaughters his dotting wife and children. Crazy with guilt, Zach stalks and preys on his community to secure the necessary body parts he needs to put his family back together and reanimate them (which he successfully does). The mortician gets unexpected help from his latest target, Chiffon (Jennifer Kelly), who, in a pact with this Devil, delivers the man two victims—a wicked couple—so that she may live.

Embalmer, though low in budget and targeting the home video market, is not dissimilar from horror (franchise) movies such as *Halloween*, with Michael Myers, or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, with its Freddy Krueger, in which the monsters troll their neighborhood in search of their next victim. *Embalmer* is far from an A-list movie and does not have the same quality cast as *Temptation*, but it is important in that it puts Black characters at the center of a routine horror story. The film's star, Chiffon, is a bit like *Halloween's* Laurie Strode in that she enjoys the company of her friends and they hers, she is an orphan, and there is a mad man stalking her. More, like Laurie, Chiffon is a resourceful, quick-thinking "Final Girl" who takes on the monster, using her wits to assure her survival. She allows the scientist to

bring an end to his hunt for victims by delivering the last two bodies that he needs in the form of her abusive adoptive parents. More, with her parents attempting to adopt a new child to abuse, Chiffon is a hero, protecting her community from predators. As such, Chiffon also becomes an Enduring Woman; understanding that monsters can assume any form, she turns resilient, helping one monster to eliminate two. The community that Chiffon ultimately protects, Washington, D.C., is presented quite differently from other depictions of D.C.'s Black neighborhoods. This Black D.C. is home to gorgeous architecture, clean streets, and assiduous homeowners. The funeral home, which is in disrepair, stands out as an eyesore. The home is so anomalous that an explanation is explicitly offered in the film as to why it has not yet been demolished, thereby restoring the wholeness of the neighborhood—it was part of the underground railroad and it holds historical significance. Importantly, the funeral home itself is noteworthy for its absence of squatters or criminals, or trash and graffiti blighting its interior. This is a dramatically different representation of dead cities with their abandoned property presented in films such as *Vampire in Brooklyn* and *Candyman*, which rely on images of filth and squalor.

Home Is Where the Heart Is: Out of the Urban

Despite the “urban sprawl” of 1990s cinema, *Temptation's* Samuel L. Jackson and *Predator 2's* Danny Glover starred in two eerie Black dramatic films, *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) and *Eve's Bayou* (1997), that would prove that one cannot paint Black cinema with a single, uniform stroke. *Anger*, directed by the acclaimed Black director Charles Burnett, is horror inspired, focusing on an evil trickster of a man, Harry (Danny Glover), who has entered the house of a God-fearing family in a Black middle-class Los Angeles neighborhood. Harry brings with him a range of superstitious rituals (tossing pinches of salt to ward off bad luck) and folkways (folk medicine, charms) from “home”—the South. However, these rituals seemingly no longer apply in the Northern Christian home, thereby “stirring tensions between the latent values of the rural South and those of contemporary Black urban culture.”³⁴ After Harry falls victim to one of his superstitions and dies, the family shakes free of his evil and avoids killing each other.

The equally haunting dramatic film *Eve's Bayou* (1997), directed by the award-winning, Black, female director Kasi Lemmons, places Black folk religion as central to her narrative. It begins with a memorable voiceover from its star Eve (Jurnee Smollett): “Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain. The summer I killed my father, I was ten years old.” With this phantasmagoric prologue, this film makes clear it is something special, something more than what much of horror has offered to date. Set in a small town in Louisiana in the 1960s, the film tells the story of the Baptiste family, descendants of a white slave owner and an enslaved Black woman. The family includes the young Eve (Jurnee Smollett), who, like her aunt Mozelle (Debbie Morgan), has

the gift of “sight.” As a professional “psychic counselor,” Mozelle prays to Jesus before “seeing” on behalf of her clients. However, this is not Voodoo and Mozelle denies knowing how to perform Voodoo, that is, until a woman desperate for help leaves Mozelle with no other option than to apply its power. Likewise, there is a conjure woman, Elzora (Diahann Carroll), whose power is ambiguous, but is nevertheless believed in, fueled by traditional belief systems and understandings of ancient Black religious folkways. The story centers on Eve’s discovery that her father, Louis (Samuel L. Jackson) a respected doctor is cheating on her mother with the young, sexy Matty (Lisa Nicole Carson). Eve’s slightly older sister, Cisely (Meagan Good) is especially attached to their father, Louis, and one evening while he is intoxicated and she is emotionally vulnerable she nearly finds herself being molested. When Louis snaps out of his liquor-fueled fog, he slaps Cisely, setting off a series of events that leads Eve to seek revenge. But, understanding and memories are complicated, and death is too final a solution under these circumstances. For its brilliance and gorgeousness, Roger Ebert awarded the film his top review of four stars, writing:

Eve’s Bayou resonates in the memory. It called me back for a second and third viewing. If it is not nominated for Academy Awards, then the academy is not paying attention. For the viewer, it is a reminder that sometimes films can venture into the realms of poetry and dreams.³⁵

Another rural effort was *Spirit Lost* (1996), a rare horror film that was nearly an all-female affair. *Spirit Lost* is based on a book of the same title by Nancy Thayer. In the book, wife and husband Willy and John leave the bustling life of Boston to live quietly in an old home in Nantucket. Their peace is disturbed when a sexy female ghost seduces John. The screenplay was written by Joyce Lewis, who changed the New England location to Catch Hook Island, presumably much farther south. The independent straight-to-video “Black horror” film was directed by Neema Barnette, the rare (Black) female horror film director, who has an extensive television-directing portfolio. *Spirit* is interesting in that it moves “Black horror” out of the urban to the seaside while recuperating out-of-the-Caribbean Voodoo myths. In the film, Willy (Regina Taylor) desperately wants a baby but is unable to get pregnant until she and her husband John (Leon) arrive at the peaceful, racially diverse Catch Hook Island. There, Willy encounters a host of helpful women—a white antique shop owner, her Black customers, a white doctor, and Vera (Juanita Jennings), a Black Jamaican who immediately senses Willy and John’s house is haunted and talks to the ghost in it.

Spirit is a love story about an enslaved woman, Arabella (Cynda Williams), who 200 years earlier was won in a poker game by a slave trader and sea captain, John Wright (Christopher Northrup). Wright promises to marry Arabella, even building her the house that Willy and John, generations later, move into. However, Wright proves false, abandoning Arabella to “marry a proper English

woman.” Shattered, Arabella haunts the home waiting for her John to return. In her grief, she terrorizes Willy, causing her to lose their baby and, confusing Willy’s John for her own, seduces him while also driving him insane. Most interesting, Arabella is sent to her (peaceful) death by Vera and two helpers performing a Black religious ceremony. Vera fights her way into the house along with two priestesses³⁶ who want to remove the “lost soul.” The women present themselves as pure in their motives and in their religiosity, even dressing in white and covering their hair in a white head wrap. The three perform a ritual (to the soundtrack of a single, steady drumbeat) of cleansing John by rubbing salt on his hands and splashing blessed water over him; they then blow tobacco smoke into the air to see Arabella. Finally, they assemble an altar with clean water and white candles at its center, praying over it. Arabella disappears. It is Black religion that saves this Black couple, a theme that would play out on a much larger scale a couple of years later under the guidance of one of the biggest Black stars in the world: Oprah Winfrey.

The Midas Touch

“Black horror” took on epic proportions when, in 1998, the genre was touched by Oprah Winfrey with her film *Beloved*. The rare “Black horror” film with a (non-horror) Black literary origin, *Beloved*, was based on a novel by Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison. In her 2017 book, *The Origin of Others*, Morrison describes how she found a newspaper clipping with the “intriguing” headline, “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child.” In the newspaper article, published February 1856 Reverend Bassett describes how he went to visit Margaret Garner who fled Kentucky for the Ohio:

She said, that when the officer and slave-hunters came to the house in which they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children in the head, and then took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other—that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all. . . . I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once and thus end their sufferings than have them taken back to slavery and be murdered by piece-meal.³⁷

Morrison goes on to reflect on the further tragedy of Garner’s life—her children were mixed-race signaling her rape at the hands of slave owners; after the killing of her children, she was re-enslaved; two years after Bassett recounted meeting her, Margaret Garner was dead from typhoid. Morrison in her novel writes into existence her murdered child explaining, “in this iteration, for me the author, *Beloved* the girl, the hunter, is the ultimate Other. Clamoring, forever clamoring for a kiss.”³⁸

The novel was adapted into a screenplay by the Black actress Akosua Busia (who played Nettie alongside Winfrey in the 1985 film *The Color Purple*, adapted from Alice Walker's book of the same title) and co-produced by Winfrey's Harpo Films. The film featured a predominantly Black, award-winning, all-star cast led by Winfrey herself. Its director was Jonathan Demme, a white director, who won an Oscar for his horror film *The Silence of the Lambs*. In *Beloved*, the wicked she-ghost turns out to be the victim. The killer turns out to be a protector. The pedophile turns out to be a casualty of the ghost and the committed lover of the killer. And the real evil most assuredly continues to be slavery. The whole thing plays out in a house in which things (and even a dog) fly around, crash and break. Scott writes, "the narrative of the story (with its hauntings, its living dead, its air of mystery, its sickening violence, and its exorcism) is itself horrific enough to substantiate its connection to the horror genre."³⁹ But as Anissa J. Wardi notes, *Beloved* was not supposed to be a nineteenth-century *Poltergeist*. Indeed, the translation of the novel to the big screen, in the hands of a horror-film director, "reduced the complexity of the text, creating in its stead nothing short of spectacle."⁴⁰

The film opens in 1865, the year slavery is abolished through the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, in the modest home of Sethe (Oprah Winfrey), on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio. In the home live Sethe as well as her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs/Grandma Baby (Beah Richards), an elderly bedridden woman, who is living in the home and who has turned the home over to Sethe. Sethe has three children, a young daughter, Denver (Kimberly Elise), and two teen-aged sons, Howard (Emil Pinnock) and Buglar (Calen Johnson). A ghost is laying waste to everything it can get its hands on. Howard and Buglar flee, never to return. The film moves eight years ahead, with Baby Suggs dead and Denver a young woman. An old friend, Paul D (Danny Glover) arrives to reacquaint himself with Sethe, and they become lovers. The two share a gruesome history of being enslaved on a Kentucky plantation called Sweet Home, owned by a sadistic slave owner called Schoolteacher (Jude Ciccolella).

In response to the arrival of Paul D (who immediately understands the home to be haunted), the unseen apparition takes on physical human form, arriving as Beloved (Thandi Newton) to compete for the attention and affections of Sethe. Beloved is an infant in a young woman's body as she can barely speak, opting to growl until she is taught how to mumble a few words. Her newness is marked by her delicate skin, drooling, and staggering about on legs she has just discovered. She knows no modesty. The longer Beloved stays, the deeper Sethe falls into madness in an obsessive preoccupation over Beloved that neither Paul D nor her daughter Denver can understand. The ghost is equally obsessive about Sethe and works to alienate her from those who love her. Beloved tempts Paul D, and he succumbs, having sex with her. Not long after, Paul D leaves Sethe's home. As Beloved uses up all of the love and resources Sethe has, the young Denver is left

to her own devices and seeks work to support herself and her family by leaving home and securing work in the city.

The plot centers on Beloved's identity, and why she has come to haunt Sethe. Their connection is revealed during a flashback and here, the film mirrors the book which mirrors the story laid out by Rev. Bassett. While a slave and advanced in pregnancy, Sethe was raped by her enslaver and his sons. She and her husband Halle (Hill Harper) plot their escape from Sweet Home, aiming for the home of his mother Baby Suggs, an elderly freed woman. They send their children ahead, but Halle is unable to get away, leaving Sethe to seek out freedom without him. Not long after she arrives at Baby Suggs, slave catchers arrive to reclaim Sethe and her children. Rather than see them returned to such brutality, she decides to take her children's lives. Sethe is able to cut the throat of her baby, Beloved, before being stopped. At the sight of her with the infant and an old hacksaw, the slave catchers leave her, believing Sethe is too insane to take back. Beloved, then, is the physical manifestation of conjoined cruelties: the first is Sethe's act, for which Beloved returns to portray Sethe's guilt; and the second is the cruelty of slavery, which led to the infanticide in the first place. *Beloved* asks who is to carry the responsibility and memory of the cruel institution.

Ellen Scott, in her essay *The Horrors of Remembrance*, observes that the film recovers a narrative of emotional, physical, and political pain that is effectively erased in most other popular treatments of slavery:

Beloved begins to enunciate a profound and difficult question, one repressed by traditional representations of slavery and one which is particularly important to African Americans in the post-Civil Rights, post-Black power era: what (moment, place, feeling) defines freedom for African Americans?⁴¹

The film challenges its audience to consider what it means to declare the legacy of slavery as having come to an end, particularly if one can claim historical distance from holding slaves. *Beloved* shows that the destruction (end) of the monster that is slavery does not mean freedom, or, as Scott argues, healing. *Beloved's* real contribution, given the history of the horror genre, is its poignant attention to the effects of slavery. Horror had long been built on colonial fantasies of Black servitude in which whites were simply, heroically negotiating their white man's burden, dragging Blacks along into civilization. Because horror obsessively focused on Voodoo and other out-of-Africa/Caribbean "savage" rituals threatening European and American whites, the films invoked a distorted history of slavery while glossing over its effects. More, by adding the myth of zombism, slavery was denied, replaced with the wishes of unthinking, silent, obedient automatons who labor tirelessly. *Beloved* put the brakes on such delusions, forcing horror audiences to see if they could stand real atrocities while restoring Black history.

The film reaches its climax when, as Sethe slips deeper into a mental breakdown, a large group of women—"the Thirty Women," as they are called in the



FIGURE 8.3 Sethe and Beloved in *Beloved*

Touchstone Pictures/Photofest

film's credits—arrive at her home, Bibles and crosses in hand, to pray over her. They are there on behalf of Denver, who is breaking down under the weight of her home life. In *Temptation*, it was Joel and Grandma united in prayer; *Spirit* brought in three priestesses. *Beloved* called upon 30. Praying and singing, the women hold their ground even as Beloved emerges from the home in a shocking state—completely nude, heavily pregnant, and oozing (she is both sweaty from the heat and drooling). She is “physical form to a history of individual and collective racial violence . . . repeated through time . . . the ghost and the woman.”⁴² This view of Beloved, the revealing of her body, the presentation of her pubic hair, coupled with earlier views of her vomiting, soiling her bed, and her animalistic hunger, makes Beloved not just monstrous but an exotic, grotesque, freak.⁴³ The trouble here is that in the novel, Morrison does not write Beloved as a monster or freak but as a metaphor for history, memory, and trauma. Morrison's story is neither horror nor spectacle.

Beloved disappears under the power of prayer as well as when Sethe comes to the realization that, perhaps, she took the hacksaw to the wrong person—she should have tried to take out the slave catchers, not her baby.

They're Baaaack! Monsters in the 'Hood

Predator 2 (1990), a “Blacks in horror” film, did double damage, returning to the dead inner-city trope, casting it as a despicable, crime-ridden, hyper-violent place, while also resurrecting old stereotypes of Black terrains as savage lands, places one enters to hunt, kill, and conquer. In this bloody “coming of age tale,” the monster Predator is tasked by his elders with proving himself an undefeatable, intergalactic warrior by laying waste to the toughest, most loathsome creatures in the cosmos.⁴⁴ In the film, the Predator selects his challengers on Earth, in a hyper-violent Jamaican drug “posse” who emerge from disgusting alleys to run wild through steamy Los Angeles. It is explained in the film that the Predator is indeed on safari; his prey is described in animal terms: “Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my!” The film's strategy is, first, to reveal how brutal the posse is to in turn show that they are the right kind of sport for the Predator. In the first glimpse of the posse, the Jamaicans have the upper hand over their rivals, the Colombians. A Colombian gang leader is seen hanging upside down by his ankles from the ceiling of his apartment. Stripped of his clothing, the Jamaican posse is preparing to skin him alive. Though the posses seem to be the toughest things going, the film adds to their dreadful mystique that they also practice a wicked form of Voodoo, thereby making them appear all the more outside any bounds of civility. This scene of the warring posses exploits foreignness, as the men have thick accents as if newly arrived from their countries to wreak havoc in the U.S. The confrontation turns blood-drenched when a third, otherworldly illegal immigrant—the Predator—finally arrives; his accent is a growl. The Jamaicans and the Predator are depicted as mirror images of each other. Both are armed with knives

and firearms, both hang their prey upside down to skin them, and both have the same appearance, sporting ropes of dreadlocked hair. Clearly, they are kin in their monstrosity.

Eventually, the Predator engages in a showdown with the posse's fearsome leader, King Willie (Calvin Lockhart), and the two are again aligned imaginatively from their hair to their spears, and even to their accessories of bones. Though the Predator kills throughout the movie, it is the death of the Jamaican leader, in his own territory, that works to evidence the Predator's power. In a single, quick move, the Predator reaches inside of the leader's body, ripping his spine and head from his body. The result is a gruesome trophy—the head of the leader, with his face frozen in a horrifying scream, dangling from his exposed spine. Hence, the Predator has conquered Willie's 'hood.

Notably, *Predator 2* stars Black actor Danny Glover (also in *Beloved*) as the resourceful, though hot-headed cop Lt. Mike Harrigan. Harrigan is introduced by way of his personnel file that lists dozens of police brutality complaints, but in this film, he is necessarily fearless and a hard-nosed in his tactics. This film, then, becomes a three-way battle between Black drug lords, a Black cop, and an alien who roughly resembles a Black man. Harrigan pursues the monster relentlessly, and with the inner city as his (literal) stomping ground, he is able to maneuver capably over its terrain. Harrigan proves to be the Predator's biggest challenge and the film ends with the monster meeting its demise at his hands. The film's final scenes are to be seen as mildly comical but function to be racially painful. As the aliens take off in their ship, Harrigan is covered in the soot of their exhaust, whitening him. His white-skin/wide-eyed appearance recalls Earnest "Sammy Sunshine" Morrison in *Haunted Spooks* (1920), with the spooked child dipped in flour.

Candyman, Candyman, Candyman, Candyman, Candyman

What does it mean when the genre violates conventions by locating violence in the city where it is most expected, and furthermore plays openly on prevailing cultural anxieties by marking the monster as a racial Other?

—Pinedo (112–113)⁴⁵

The 1992 Bernard Rose "Blacks in horror" film (Clive Barker's) *Candyman* continues to exploit fears of the inner city by making a Chicago, Illinois, housing project the fearsome home to gang violence, social decay, and a most violent Black monster.⁴⁶ The film centers on Daniel Robitaille, the son of a former slave. Robitaille's father made his fortune after inventing a device enabling the mass production of shoes. As a result, Robitaille, sophisticated, elegant, and cultured, attended the best schools where he learned to become an accomplished artist.

In 1890, he is commissioned by a wealthy white Illinois landowner to paint his daughter's portrait. The two fall in love, and she becomes pregnant. Outraged at the interracial love affair-turned-miscegenistic violation, the woman's father mounts a lynch party, whose members rundown Robitaille. Catching him, they exact the most gruesome of tortures. They saw off his right hand with a rusty saw blade, strip him naked, smear his body with sweet honey from a nearby apiary (hence, Candyman), and leave Robitaille to be stung to death by hundreds of angry bees. He is then burned, and his ashes scatter over the Cabrini-Green Homes, a Chicago Housing Authority public housing project.

A century later, the Candyman story rises to mythic proportions, particularly among Black people, and spawns a popular urban legend: peering into a mirror while calling the name Candyman five times will summon Robitaille as the vengeful Candyman monster who will rip you with his hook of a hand from groin to gullet. Graduate student Helen (Virginia Madsen), a white woman, is researching urban legends for her thesis, and with her friend Bernadette (Kasi Lemmons), a Black woman, in tow, she makes (or safaris) her way to the Cabrini-Green to investigate rumors (gleaned from two Black women working as custodians at her university) that the monster holds the place hostage.

Their visit to the high-rise complex sets the racial tone of the film. Bernadette, armed with mace in her bag, is petrified about entering the looming concrete complex that is controlled by gang members, covered in graffiti, and strewn with filth—from mounds of trash to feces. Helen, on the other hand, is undaunted and opportunistic, leading Bernadette by the hand through the project's maze of hallways in search of the information she hopes to acquire. They encounter the rare Black woman in the building, Anne-Marie (Vanessa Williams), a young single parent with a newborn and a large guard dog. Anne-Marie repeatedly refers to Helen and Bernadette, who is Black, as "white folks" while accusing them of snooping around a Black space they presume is deficient and worthy of yet another exploitative story. The two women are whitened through class positioning and education level by Anne-Marie, who views both as the root of Black exploitation in this space.

The film does work to be aware of its racial themes at times by addressing the kinds of systemic racism Black people experience head-on. It begins by making it clear that Robitaille was lynched out of racism. Though Cabrini residents call for police protection from violence in the complex, the film makes explicit that when Helen returns to the project alone—since, as a woman of privilege, nothing is off-limits to her—and is (of course) attacked, the police rush to her rescue because she is white. It gestures toward a critique of gentrification and racial segregation by noting that Helen lives in a building that is Cabrini's twin, but on the wealthy side of the tracks, buffered by a highway. While she feels free to visit the Cabrini building, of course, Cabrini residents know they are not welcome in hers. To re-conjoin the two locations, Helen's city and Anne-Marie's dead inner city, *Candyman* turns to the "ever-elastic paradigm of the detective story, with

its gumshoe on the prowl, here rooting out the clues contained in [inner-]city lore.”⁴⁷ The problem remains, however, that both locations are talked about and viewed in the film through a lens of whiteness.

Though Helen’s questions about whether Candyman is real challenge his precious myth which keeps him alive by exhibiting a fearsome control, he does not kill her (even as she calls his name five times, summoning him). Instead, he turns his rage on Black people. He beheads Anne-Marie’s guard dog, and then he kidnaps her infant son, Anthony (Lanesha Martin/Latesha Martin) to burn him alive later. As for Helen, he courts her, hypnotizing her, asking her to join him—“be my victim”—he loves her. As Helen continues to disrupt Candyman’s world, he continues to give Helen a pass. There are many other white people to whom Candyman gives a pass to as well. He does not enter Helen’s building to, for example, take out her cheating husband, Trevor (Xander Berkeley). Rather, he breaks in to kill the visiting Bernadette and then leaves. Even the location of his actual murder at the hands of whites is well within reach for this specter, but he opts out of rampaging in the exurbs to instead make Black people’s hell. Candyman is not looking for revenge, he is looking for love . . . but not from Black women. He only wants to kill them.

Company executives were nervous about the racial tones of the script and monster. Jackson reports, Bernard Rose had to meet with the NAACP,

because the producers were so worried, and what [the NAACP] said to me when they’d read the script was “Why are we even having this meeting? You know, this is just good fun.” Their argument was “Why shouldn’t a Black actor be a ghost? Why shouldn’t a Black actor play Freddy Krueger or Hannibal Lector?”⁴⁸

Candyman is to be viewed as a tragic, wounded creature, perhaps *Frankenstein*-esque in that he was created, made by monstrous people. However, the film strays from the monster-with-a-heart-of-gold theme by playing on fears of the big Black boogeyman coming in, King Kong-style, to take away the white woman. The film’s producer, Alan Poul, acknowledges the filmmakers “were using a very loaded imagery,” such as that seen in *The Birth of a Nation*, by showing a Black monster trying hard to seduce a white woman, even as they worked hard not to “exploit the same kinds of stereotype views.”⁴⁹ Candyman is not the monster to fall in love with. He is no charming vampire. Indeed, when Candyman and Helen (who is only partially conscious) finally have a consummating kiss, the moment of miscegenation is punished as “bees stream from his mouth. Thus . . . horror operates here to undermine the acceptability of interracial romance.”⁵⁰

In the end, this is a movie about celebrating white womanhood. Helen rejects Candyman’s love and vengefully Candyman is prepared to add another Black victim to his belt—the infant Anthony, burning him alive in a garbage heap. But Helen saves the boy, sacrificing her life to do so. While Helen is



FIGURE 8.4 Candyman invites, “be my victim,” in *Candyman*
Tri-Star/Photofest

blamed for the deaths,⁵¹ the Black community is depicted as knowing better. At Helen's funeral, attended by just a few white people, including Trevor and his new girlfriend and a professor who antagonized Helen about her intellectual chops, there is little mourning until a large procession of Blacks, led by Anne-Marie, parade in from Cabrini. They have found Candyman's hook and bury it with Helen, honoring her heroism in death. Even though she conjured the monster who traumatized the community, she is hailed as a white savior, reaffirming the American racial (im)balance that sparked the Los Angeles uprising in response to the acquittal of police officers who beat motorist Rodney King less than six months before Candyman's release. Still, the film, which has developed cult-classic status, was well-received earning over \$25.7M in box office receipts.⁵² *The New York Amsterdam News* described it as "one of the most spine-chilling horror films to come along in a long time . . ."⁵³ *The Los Angeles Sentinel* gave the film a 9 out of 10 rating, noting that it "did well in capturing horror and romance together."⁵⁴ *The Chicago Tribune* was unimpressed with the movie that made its people look bad, writing an article that outlined six major concerns: the hulking Black boogeyman; a superstitious Black community; Cabrini-Green as a "house of horrors;" Candyman directing his anger toward his own race; the obsession with a white woman; and a Black community "made up of amorphous faces" celebrating a white woman.⁵⁵ In the end, Candyman disappears along with the history of racism that bore him. It is all about Helen. As a white woman, she can do what Candyman would not: terrorize those on the other side of the tracks. She rose from the dead as a woman scorned, exacting her revenge on Trevor.⁵⁶

The 'Hood Comes to the Suburbs

The People Under the Stairs (1991) was the rare horror film of this period in which the 'hood and the suburbs stood in confrontation against each other with the 'hood proving victorious—though at great cost. In this Wes Craven "Blacks in horror" film, a wealthy, white suburban couple, "Mom" and "Dad" (Wendi Robie and Everett McGill), are slumlords living in a cavernous mansion home packed with money and other loot (e.g., trunks of gold coins and silver). Three thieves intrude on Mom and Dad's suburban home, a location marked by their ability to "smell" but not see "the ghetto from here." There is Spenser (Jeremy Roberts), a white man and career thief, Leroy (Ving Rhames), a Black man, who is a thief as well as a pimp, and the unfortunately named Black boy "Fool" (Brandon Adams), whose sister, a tarot card reader/prostitute, is being pimped by Leroy. For the men, the goal is simple robbery. Fool's motivation is Robin Hood's altruism. He hopes to rob from the rich to give to his poor sister, her babies, and his cancer-stricken mother who cannot afford medical care *and* is facing eviction from their decrepit slum apartment (owned by Mom and Dad). Mom and Dad want to turn their building into luxury condos.

Mom and Dad, living incestuously as husband and wife, are actually brother and sister. While the 'hood is depicted as home to the poor driven to crime, the suburbs are shown as being the ideal place for providing cover to the truly grotesque and wicked. Piling on to their sexual deviance, the pair are depicted as sadomasochists, and it is strongly implied that Dad molests little girls who serve as his daughters. More, the couple has abducted dozens of white children in their search for the perfect child. When a child disappoints the pair, they invoke a hear, see, or speak no evil rule by cutting out the child's tongue, eyes, or ears, then feeding the parts to the family's dog. They then discard the children, filthy and starving, into the basement, hence "the people under the stairs." The couple represents a bundle of horrible taboos: (1) food (forced cannibalism); (2) death (they murder the two thieves); and (3) incest (among themselves and with their "daughters").⁵⁷ Central to the narrative is that these are horrors easily hidden behind wealth and whiteness; two positions of power that mean one would seldom be suspected of, or can get a pass for, evil.

After the men are killed in booby-traps while trying to rob the home, Fool becomes trapped inside. He discovers an abducted white girl, Alice (A.J. Langer), who helps him hide from the couple, and in return, he becomes focused on saving her. Mom and Dad's concern is that a Black man has entered their lair—a "filthy" boy who might defile a white girl. He does not, but he is guilty of entering the boudoir, and for that, Dad announces, "It won't be his ear I cut off!" After several dramatic brushes with death, Fool escapes the house but is forced to leave Alice behind. Fool phones the police to save the girl, but when the officers arrive, they glance around, judging the neighborhood, the home, and Mom and Dad as symbols of normalcy.

Released near the end of George H.W. Bush's presidency—and three consecutive Republican terms in the White House—*The People Under the Stairs* targeted the white, politically conservative status quo of 1980s America in particular. A conspicuous clip of Gulf War footage on the basement dwellers' TV is just a hint of the movie's condemnation of governmental policies that had enabled the racial wealth gap depicted in the film. With their outdated wardrobe (when not in S&M black leather) and warped morality, Mom and Dad—echoing Ronald Reagan's "Mommy" nickname for First Lady Nancy—are a perverted caricature of 1950s-era American perfection. They are Reagan-esque figures who practice a perverse version of conservative "family values" that sanctions violence (and gun ownership that would make the NRA proud).

Jeffrey Dahmer: Serial Killer, Zombie Maker, Presumed Safe White Man

The People Under the Stairs, released in theaters four months after the July 1991 arrest of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, anticipated the kinds of social passes white people receive. Dahmer lived and hunted for his victims in a Milwaukee, Wisconsin

inner-city neighborhood, home to a diverse, lower socioeconomic community of non-whites (e.g., Blacks and Laotians). When two Black women spotted their 14-year-old neighbor Konerak Sinthasomphone drugged, beaten, and nude, staggering in the street, the women phoned police for help. Law enforcement arrived on the scene just as Dahmer, already a convicted sex offender, arrived on the scene to reclaim the boy. Dahmer, a white male, was reported as calmly presenting himself to the white officers. He explained that Konerak was really his young adult lover and that they had just quarreled. Dahmer was there to take his boyfriend home. The women protested the story and even tried to prevent Dahmer from retaking the boy. The officers reported that the women somehow just did not seem credible and personally escorted Sinthasomphone back to Dahmer's home. They failed to check Dahmer's identification, which would have revealed his violent past and, importantly, dismissed the odor of rotting bodies coming from his apartment. After the police left, Dahmer killed, dismembered, and partially consumed the boy—making him one of at least 17 known victims. The women's follow-up calls to police about the boy, who was soon after reported missing by his family, were brusquely dismissed, and their calls to the FBI were ignored. Later, the scenario was repeated when a Black man, Tracy Edwards, fought off and escaped Dahmer while the killer was trying to handcuff him. Battered and with cuffs dangling from his wrist, Edwards flagged down authorities, leading them back to Dahmer's apartment. Again, Dahmer's whiteness was enough to mute all other red flags and the police prepared to leave when Edwards pointed out to the officers pictures of real, mutilated bodies strewn about Dahmer's apartment as well as the knife Dahmer threatened him with. And then there were the body parts on display and in the fridge . . . and of course the smell.⁵⁸ A successful lawsuit filed against the city by Sinthasomphone's family argued that police had to go to great racist and homophobic lengths to fail to see Dahmer as the monster that he was. Likewise, they had to go to great lengths to see Sinthasomphone, a child and victim, for what he was not. As for Dahmer, he explained that he was taking the men, drugging and raping them, before drilling holes into their frontal lobes and pouring in chemicals to create silent, zombie (sex) slaves. When his victims died, he would variously keep their body parts around, engage in necrophilia, or eat them. His escapades were later turned into a novel called *Zombie* by Joyce Oates.⁵⁹

The People Under the Stairs aligned with the real-life case of Dahmer in revealing racism, white privilege, Black oppression, and a range of taboos. The film also offered the reminder that children could be victimized and that they could not always be protected. "No longer," writes Crane,

would the young be treated delicately, snatched out to safety by loving arms before something awful could transpire. . . . The guiltless child in peril offered a grim lesson: relative innocence is no blessing. The pure will inadvertently suffer along with those who might seem more deserving of punishment.⁶⁰

While “bad seeds,” over-sexed teens, and demon-possessed girls had a terrible time in non-Black horror, “Black horror” films tended to avoid the regular destruction of its innocent youth. This film takes the middle ground; when the police fail to act, Fool turns heroic savior, breaking into the home again, alone, to do battle with Mom and Dad and to save Alice. He also ends up freeing the remaining surviving children and putting the hidden, ill-gotten wealth into the hands of his community.

Black Urban Superheroes: Emotional Wrecks

Spawn's (1997) Al Simmons (Michael Jai White), a Black military assassin, would seek the protective cover of the inner city after he is killed and resurrected as Hell Spawn, or Spawn for short. Based on the popular Todd McFarlane comic book of the same title, *Spawn* tells the story of Simmons, a Marine and deadly mercenary working for a covert government agency. Jason Wynn (Martin Sheen), Simmons' boss, has made a pact with the Devil, and on the Devil's request, Wynn kills Simmons, burning him alive. The Devil wants Simmons to lead an army of wicked souls to take over Heaven for the start of Armageddon. Promptly sent to Hell, Simmons becomes Spawn and is invited to make his own Faustian deal: he can return to Earth, and even see his wife and child, if he leads Hell's Army.

Spawn is much like Candyman, motivated by love. He returns to Earth desperate to see those (family and friends) he loved and who once loved him. However, he discovers that a true reunion with his suburban family is impossible. In his first attempt to connect with his family, he appears outside of their cheery, white picket-fenced home. However, Spawn is now a charred body and his burned, monstrous appearance makes it impossible for him to move about the neighborhood. Observing his former home from a thicket of bushes in the backyard, Spawn discovers that five years have passed and his Black wife, Wanda (Theresa Randle), has remarried, taking as her husband his white best friend, Terry (D.B. Sweeney). Spawn is unhappy, destitute, and enveloped in evil and violence. Hence, Spawn retreats from the suburbs, seeking refuge deep in the place that film says the monstrous can effectively hide in plain sight—inside the inner-city's dead, filthy, forgotten back alleys—“Rat City.” He lives miserably, much like Candyman, among the drunken homeless, those suffering from mental illness, rats, and seeping garbage. In the end, Spawn is able to save his family, his old friend Terry, and Earth, by keeping the Devil at bay. Though Spawn's true identity is made known to his loved ones and he has saved the world, he still cannot dwell in their world. The inner city is where his kind is confined.⁶¹

Urban Day Walker

Blade (1998), a “Blacks in horror” film based on the Marvel Comics character of the same name, like *Vampire in Brooklyn*, took up the tragic mulatto theme, but by tripling the threat: half-human, half-vampire, not quite Black. The Black

vampire, Blade (Wesley Snipes), is a brooding, vengeful vampire seeking retribution against the race of monsters who made him. In the film, through flashback, it is revealed that Blade's mother, Vanessa (Sanaa Lathan), was attacked and bitten by a vampire while pregnant with Blade. Though not directly bitten, Blade was infected with vampirism in utero. He was delivered from his dying mother, emerging half-human, half-vampire, making him a one-of-a-kind specimen. He is a "day walker," or immune to the destroying power of the sun, and garlic does not affect him. He is unusually strong, filled with hate for his vampire kind, and constantly at war with his thirst for blood.

In the film, in the present day some 30 years later, in what is to be a particularly heart-wrenching scene for Blade, he discovers the truth behind his odd, parentless life. Vanessa did not fully die during his birth but returned as a vampire, choosing to pursue a life among vampires rather than with her son. More, not only is the man she is coupled up with, Deacon Frost (Stephen Dorff), a (very) white man and Blade's principal adversary, but it is also Frost who cruelly, mockingly reveals the secret behind Blade's identity—Frost is, in essence, Blade's white "father," having been the one who turned him vampiric, thereby replacing Blade's unseen Black father.

Though Blade is an adult, the film asks that audience grieve for this motherless child, an unnatural infant who becomes a sympathetic victim as a result of a denial of parental love, and whose "special powers are justifiably provoked," while his rage becomes understood.⁶² Blade quickly moves from callous killer, to anti-hero, to superhero when his history becomes part of his motivations. Vanessa, not Blade, is depicted as the one who is ghastly. An ageless, beautiful woman forever about Blade's age, she caresses her son seductively, her lips brushing against his as she sets him up for death. She again sacrifices her son for Frost. When Blade survives and kills his mother, she is made to suffer for her betrayal and for his racial tragedies.

Through the film *Blade* comes the rare depiction of the poisonous, consuming Black mother. However, Blade finds her replacement in Whistler (Kris Kristofferson), his white surrogate father, with whom he fights side-by-side in a war against vampires. Whistler is a "whitewashed" character, replacing Blade's Black father figure in the comics, Jamal Afari, a rewrite made presumably to avoid having the three primary protagonists being Black, for fear of alienating white audiences. Perhaps the relationship between Blade and Whistler "suggest[s] a servile relation to white paternalism"; however, the film does not exploit such a connection in ways that the genre has in the past through, for example, the loyal sidekick/servant.⁶³ Rather, the film depicts a complex relationship of mutual friendship and love, first born out of tragedy and goals of revenge (Whistler's family was killed by vampires), ultimately evolving into years of an isolated life on the run together.

Blade denies any further exploration into the men's years of professional and domestic partnership, opting to color Blade with traditional hypersexual, hyper-masculine stereotypes. For example, Blade is brought back from the brink of

death by Dr. Karen Jenson (N'Bushe Wright)—a Black, female hematologist, who must allow Blade to suck her blood from her neck if he is to survive. The scene of Blade “taking” Jenson is a violent, extraordinarily erotic display as Blade becomes engorged, and when fulfilled produces a reverberating, orgasmic yell.

Blade, like *Vampire in Brooklyn*'s Max, has no such encounter with men. Max turns men by dropping a bit of blood onto their tongues, with the film explicitly noting that he “ain't got to pull that Blacula shit.” While Max does turn his victims, turning them into ghouls, he does not do so Blacula style with a bite to a man's neck or any other body part. Max reserves that kind of close encounter only for women, as does Blade. Blade and Max function to remind the viewer of the “lasciviousness of female sexual desire,” as well as of their ability to fulfill that desire, as purportedly only men can, while conflating “sexuality and apocalypse.”⁶⁴ However, such a conflation is not confined to the vampire, as male monsters (e.g., Candyman) are frequently masculinized by promising women a sexual encounter so out of this world it sends them to the afterlife—the ultimate rough sex/rape, sadomasochistic fantasy.

In the end, Blade, like *Spawn*, would keep a watchful eye over the human race, not letting the monsters win. They are the über police; the kind of social regulators one could expect to patrol hostile environments. In the case of *Blade*, the portrayal was extraordinarily popular. *Blade* was ranked #1 in its opening weekend, earning \$17,073,856 and going on to earn over \$70 million domestically. The willingness of a studio to commit to a \$40-million Black superhero movie is a testament to the drawing power of Black-led cinema during the 1990s. In fact, Black films from earlier in the decade were a touchpoint when pitching *Blade*, according to producer Peter Frankfurt, who described the original concept as “an under-10-million-dollar movie that would be tough and street like *Juice*—kind of a hip-hop *Marvel* movie.”⁶⁵ When the script expanded and the budget grew past that \$10 million mark, however, New Line's commitment to Black-led stories was put to the test, and according to writer David Goyer, the studio proposed a drastic—and eventually rejected—change to make the film more marketable and worthy of its budget: make *Blade* white.⁶⁶ The film would spawn two more films starring Snipes and a television series with rapper Sticky Fingaz in the titular role before being rebooted for the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* with two-time Academy Award winner Mahershala Ali.⁶⁷

Conclusion: Horror Is the New Black

After 100 years of uneven participation in the horror genre, Black was back in the 1990s, playing a central role in producing its chills and thrills. Black was everywhere—in “Black horror” and “Blacks in horror” films, in independent films and Hollywood films, in high-budget blockbuster features and low-budget straight-to-video efforts. Black characters such as *Blade* and *Spawn* were “superhero” monsters, ripped from the pages of comic books and turned into lucrative

franchises. Blacks led sci-fi horror like Laurence Fishburne in *Event Horizon* (1997) and Denzel Washington in *Virtuosity* (1995), serial killer thrillers like Morgan Freeman in *Kiss the Girls* (1997) and *Seven* (1995), and supernatural shockers like Washington in *Fallen* (1998) and Taye Diggs in *House on Haunted Hill* (1999). Black evil corrupting white women was seen before, but in *Candyman* audiences were actually asked to side with the monster, rooting for the beast to enter the boudoir and convince a white woman to be his victim. It did not seem to matter that Candyman suffered as a result of sleeping with a white woman in the first place.⁶⁸ Importantly, Blacks not only did not die first in horror, but often they did also not die at all or they did the killing.

Blacks stormed the suburbs and (white) monsters wandered back into the urban as well. In 1995, the film franchise *Children of the Corn* left rural Nebraska's farmland and took up residence in Chicago. In *Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest*, the kids and their scythes laid ruin to those hanging around an abandoned inner-city industrial park. The corn-worshiping kids should not be conflated with those whites who made their way back out of the suburbs to regentrify the urban. Rather, these kids are rural white people, the "disregarded."⁶⁹

The horror genre itself was showing signs of turning stale, such as the coming trend of rehashing films (e.g., *Night of the Living Dead* [1968], *Night of the Living Dead* [1990], and *Night of the Living Dead 3D* [2006]). For Black portrayals, the horror genre was still fresh. Market and technological changes opened up new spaces for representational intervention. The DTV market gave rise to the habitual viewer—one who would rent a stack of movies at a time, some specifically desired, most randomly selected. Horror was again faced with the proposition of meeting the need, and in a repeat of the 1940s and 1970s all manner of "Black horror" went into quick, cheap production. The films were not all new, as the video industry was looting entire back catalogs, shoehorning hundreds of films into the bursting market.⁷⁰ There would be much for audiences to choose from as access to digital technologies (from cameras to software) made filmmaking accessible in ways unimagined just a few years earlier.

The crush of films, offered by professionals and up-and-comers alike, meant that with the arrival of the twenty-first century, no longer could one easily list the horror films Blacks appeared in. Still, racial and spatial divides remained. The box office failure of the prestige horror *Beloved* in particular would be a hurdle to the Black cinema in general (effectively ending Harpo's five-year deal with Disney after just one movie) and Black horror in particular to overcome for years to come.⁷¹ With a reported budget between \$53 million and \$80 million, the period film earned only around \$23 million in theaters, despite positive reviews and the popularity of star/producer Oprah Winfrey.⁷² Its failure to successfully break Black horror out of the B-movie mold meant that studios would fall back on Black imagery that had historically scored with audiences—that is, the 'hood—or would simply not release Black horror at all.

Black cinema as a whole would face new challenges at the turn of the century. There was an inevitable backlash against the wave of Black imagery by some who could view it only as reverse racism or some sort of heavy-handed social statement—as with *Los Angeles Times* movie reviewer Kenneth Turan’s criticism that Eddie Murphy’s *Boomerang* (1992) amounted to “a reverse world from which white people are invisible except when comic relief is called for.”⁷³ Black filmmakers who had been so highly sought after in the early 1990s discovered that, by the late 1990s, Hollywood viewed them as a fad and had moved on. Young directors like Matty Rich (*Straight Out of Brooklyn* [1991]), Julie Dash, Darnell Martin (*I Like It Like That* [1994]), Charles Lane, Leslie Harris (*Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* [1992]), and Theodore Witcher (*Love Jones* [1997]) had trouble getting a second shot from the major studios. “If you’re Black, you really can only fail once,” opined Witcher in 2019.⁷⁴ In the mid-1990s, L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Jamaa Fanaka (*Welcome Home Brother Charles* [1975]) even sued the Director’s Guild of America (DGA) for failing to uphold its standards for affirmative action but lost.⁷⁵

The industry’s reasoning was similar to the demise of Blaxploitation in the 1970s: the perception of limited box office potential for Black movies. Although they were consistently profitable (in part because they were consistently allotted modest budgets), Black movies in the 1990s were not seen as having blockbuster potential, just as in the 1970s, according to Richard Pryor’s agent David M. Franklin, “The thinking is that no Black film will make more than \$20 million, so there’s a limit to the amount of production costs and up front dollars a studio will put up.”⁷⁶ By the end of the 1990s, studios were more reticent to put up money for a Black film movement that was increasingly viewed as a “fad,” the sort of trend-oriented mindset that actress Rosalind Cash recognized after the decline of Blaxploitation, leading her to correctly opine that “Black will come back in vogue.”⁷⁷ And so it did, again and again.

Notes

- 1 Benjamin, Walter. “A Small History of Photography.” *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Ed. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: NLB, 1979.256. Print.
- 2 Abbott, Stacey. “High Concept Thrills and Chills: The Horror Blackbuster.” *Horror Zone*. Ed. Ian Conrich. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.29. Print.
- 3 Abbott (29).
- 4 Ndalians, Angela. “Dark Rides, Hybrid Machines and the Horror Experience.” *Horror Zone*. Ed. Ian Conrich. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.1. Print.
- 5 Kaufman makes these comments in a President’s message (which he often offers on Troma films) at the start of the VHS release of *Temptation. Def by Temptation*. Dir. James Bond III. Perf. James Bond III, Cynthia Bond, Samuel L. Jackson. Bonded Filmworks, 1990. Film. As Jones succinctly explains, “there are bad movies and there are Troma movies.” Admittedly, it isn’t hard to be the best at Troma. This is the company that takes a film, “for peanuts,” and starts “counting the cash.” See: Jones, Alan. *The Rough Guide to Horror Movies*. London: Penguin, 2005.42. Print. Still, *Def by Temptation*, a

- rather well done, smart film, seems out of place among Troma's exploitation/horror films titles.
- 6 Reid, Mark A. *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.66. Print.
 - 7 According to Gregory M. Herek, "in March—April of 1989, the *San Francisco Examiner* commissioned Teichner Associates to conduct telephone interviews with a gay and lesbian national sample ($n = 400$) as well as a sample of gay residents of the San Francisco Bay Area ($n = 400$). Approximately 27,000 calls were made to obtain 800 responses; 6.2% of the national respondents and 10% of the Bay Area respondents identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual to the interviewer (Herek). Although the sample is biased by the willingness of respondents to identify themselves as gay to a telephone interviewer, the poll represents the first published study of its kind in the United States." See: Herek, Gregory M. "Stigma, Prejudice, and Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men." *Homosexuality: Research Implications for Public Policy*. Eds. John C. Gonsiorek and James D. Weinrich. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991.60–61. Print.
 - 8 In Spencer Williams' *The Blood of Jesus*, Martha is similarly out of place, and her Temptation, Judas, has to even provide her with the appropriate city attire.
 - 9 Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.197–198. Print.
 - 10 Picart, Caroline Joan and Cecil E. Greek. "The Compulsions of Real/Reel Serial Killers and Vampires: Toward a Gothic Criminology." *Monsters in and Among Us: Toward a Gothic Criminology*. Eds. Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil E. Greek. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2007.236. Print.
 - 11 Gateward, Frances. "Daywalkin' Night Stalkin' Bloodsuckas: Black Vampires in Contemporary Film." *Gender Online Journal* 40 (2004): n.p. Web. July 19, 2010. www.genders.org/g40/g40_gateward.html.
 - 12 Harrington, Richard. "Def by Temptation." *Washington Post*, June 5, 1990. Web. July 20, 2010. www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defbytemptationrharrington_a0aae9.htm.
 - 13 Harrington.
 - 14 Bates, Karen Grigsby. "They've Gotta Have Us." *The New York Times Magazine*. July 14, 1991. Section 6, 15. Web. www.nytimes.com/1991/07/14/magazine/theyve-gotta-have-us.html.
 - 15 Bates (15).
 - 16 Yearwood (113).
 - 17 Avila, Eric. "Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America." *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.53. Print.
 - 18 Kaufman, Ernest. "Ernest & Lloyd." *Def By Temptation. Blu-ray. Directed by James Bond III*. Bridgeport, CT: Vinegar Syndrome, 2018.
 - 19 Forman, Murray. *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.65. Print.
 - 20 Welch, William M. "Former Senator Thurman Dies." *USA Today*, June 26, 2003. Web. August 12, 2010. www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-06-26-strom_x.htm.
 - 21 See: "Jesse Helm's 'Hands' Ad." YouTube.com. YouTube, LLC, 2010. Web. August 9, 2010.
 - 22 Pinedo, Isabel Christina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997.128. Print.
 - 23 Denzin, Norman K. *Reading Race*. London: Sage, 2002.112. Print.
 - 24 NWA describe themselves as a "gang" in their title track *Straight Outta Compton* (1988).

- 25 Barnes, Dee. Here's What's Missing From Straight Outta Compton: Me and the Other Women Dr. Dre Beat Up. 2015, August 18. www.gawker.com/heres-whats-missing-from-straight-outta-compton-me-and-1724735910 [Accessed April 1, 2022].
- 26 Fulmer, J. "Men Ain't All"—A Reworking of Masculinity in *Tales from the Hood*, or, Grandma Meets the Zombie." *Journal of American Folklore* 115(457/458) (2002): 423. Print.
- 27 Dickerson, Ernest. "Commentary." *Tales of the Crypt Presents: Demon Knight, Collector's Edition. Blu-ray. Directed by Ernest Dickerson*. Los Angeles, CA: Shout! Factory, 2015.
- 28 Dickerson, "Commentary."
- 29 "Demon Knight." IMDb.com. Box Office Mojo, n.d. Web. July 23, 2010. Also: Reid (*Black Lenses* 69).
- 30 "Def by Temptation." IMDb.com. Box Office Mojo, n.d. Web. July 23, 2010.
- 31 For financial estimates, see: "Vampire in Brooklyn." IMDb.com. Box Office Mojo, n.d. Web. July 23, 2010. Ebert, Robert. "Vampire in Brooklyn." *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 27, 1995. Web. July 20, 2010. For a collection of the film's reviews, see: "Vampire in Brooklyn." Metacritic. CBS Interactive Inc., 2010. Web. July 20, 2010.
- 32 Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. Essex, England: Pearson, 2004. 109. Print.
- 33 Guerrero, Ed. "Black Film: Mo' Better in the '90s." *Black Camera* 6.1 (1991): 2–3. Web. www.jstor.org/stable/27761425.
- 34 Guerrero, Ed. "Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film." Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993. 179. Print.
- 35 Ebert, Roger. Review: *Eve's Bayou*. 1997, November 7. www.rogerebert.com/reviews/eves-bayou-1997 [Accessed April 1, 2022]
- 36 In a fairly significant gap in the script, it is never explained who these women are or what they are, except that they have power, through religious ritual, to talk to the dead and drive out bad spirits. The credits for the film list one of the women as a Yoruba priestess; however, the film does not assert this.
- 37 Morrison, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 77–78, Print.
- 38 Morrison (91).
- 39 Scott, Ellen C. "The Horrors of Remembrance: The Altered Visual Aesthetic of Horror in Jonathan Demme's *Beloved*." *Genders Online Journal* 40 (2004): 6. Web. August 8, 2010.
- 40 Wardi, Anissa J. "Freak Shows, Spectacles, and Carnivals: Reading Jonathan Demme's *Beloved*." *African American Review* 39 (2005): 513. Print.
- 41 Scott, Ellen.
- 42 Booth, Addie C. Hell [is] a Pretty Place, Too: The Ecology of Horror in the Film Adaptation of *Beloved* (p. 764). *College Literature*, 47.4: 752–776. Print.
- 43 Wardi (525).
- 44 In *Predator* (1987) the targets are Brown people—usually South Americans.
- 45 Pinedo (112–113).
- 46 Based on the Clive Barker story "The Forbidden," which appears in *Books of Blood*. London: Penguin Group, 1984. The story is set in modern Britain and has no Black focus. Making *Candyman* Black was Rose's idea.
- 47 Lott, Eric. *Spirit of the Ghetto: Postindustrial City Space and the Specter of Race*. Leeds: American Research Seminar, University of Leeds. Lecture. February 5, 2007.
- 48 Jackson, Kevin. "Interview/The sweet smell of excess: Bernard Rose has an Oral Fixation: Kevin Jackson talked to him about the appetites behind his new horror film, *Candyman*." www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interview-the-sweet-smell-of-excess-bernard-rose-has-an-oral-fixation-kevin-jackson-talked-to-him-about-the-appetites-behind-his-new-horror-film-candyman-1497390.html [Accessed April 6, 2022].

- 49 *Candyman*. Dir. Bernard Rose. Perf. Tony Todd, Virginia Madsen, Xander Berkeley. Special Edition. Polygram, 1992. DVD.
- 50 Pinedo (131). Tony Todd confirms that he received \$1000 per bee sting; he was stung approximately 27 times.
- 51 Some fans theorize that Helen became so enraptured with the myth she became Candyman and was responsible for the murders.
- 52 Box Office Mojo.
- 53 Jones, Debra. "There's Nothing Sweet About 'Candyman'." *The New York Amsterdam News*, 1992, 17 October, p. 25.
- 54 Washington, Jr., Booker T. "'Candyman': Horror Comes to the Projects." *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1992, 10 December, p. B4.
- 55 Lovell, Glenn. "Black Slasher: 'Candyman Draw Fire Over 'Racist' Depictions." *Chicago Tribute*, 1992, October 29, p. C11D.
- 56 However, it was Candyman who fans loved, and he returned for three more films. For a comprehensive investigation of Candyman, from origins to reception, see Jon Towlson's *Candyman*. Print. Auteur: Britain.
- 57 Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.69. Print.
- 58 Helbig, Bob and Mark Edmund. "Family of Konerak Sues City." *Milwaukee Journal*, January 20, 1995. NEWS: 1. *NewsBank*. Web. August 12, 2010; Stanford, Gregory D. "A Paper Trail of Intolerance." *Milwaukee Journal*, January 25, 1995. OPED: 11. *NewsBank*. Web. August 12, 2010; Davis, Don. *The Milwaukee Murders: Nightmare in Apartment 213—The True Story*. New York, NY: St. Martin, 1995. Print.
- 59 Oates, Joyce. *Zombie*. New York, NY: Plume, 1996. Print.
- 60 Crane, Jonathan. *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994.113. Print.
- 61 There is a similar fate for the Black superhero Hancock (Will Smith) in *Hancock* (2008). In the film, Hancock says goodbye to his former wife and her suburban life. While he can live anywhere, as long as it is not near her, lest their powers cancel each other out, he opts for the grittier streets of New York.
- 62 Sobchack, V. "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. B.K. Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.150. Print.
- 63 Hutchings (109).
- 64 Sharrett, Christopher. "The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21 (1993): 107. Print.
- 65 Greenblatt, Leah. "Blade oral history: Wesley Snipes and the cast look back at a modern cult classic." *Entertainment Weekly*, July 16, 2018. Web. <https://ew.com/comic-con/2018/07/16/blade-oral-history-wesley-snipes/>.
- 66 Greenblatt.
- 67 Abbott (39).
- 68 Schneider, Steven Jay. "Mixed Blood Couples: Monsters and Miscegenation in U.S. Horror Cinema." *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*. Eds. Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Inc., 2004.85. Print.
- 69 Sharrett (104).
- 70 Jones, Alan (46).
- 71 "Harpo marks Disney deal." *Variety*, November 5, 1995. Web. <https://variety.com/1995/film/features/harpo-marks-disney-deal-99129206/>.
- 72 While *Beloved's* status as a box office bomb is warranted by those numbers, it should be noted that, typical of studio treatment of Black films, it was released in a significantly lower number of theaters than competing mainstream (white) movies. In fact, it was released in fewer theaters than any other film in the top 10 on its opening weekend,

- including approximately 1,000 fewer than the top two movies opening that weekend, *Practical Magic* and *Bride of Chucky*, both of which had smaller per-theater averages than *Beloved*. Had it been released on a level comparable to *Practical Magic* (77% more theaters), *Beloved* would have finished at number 1 with \$14.4 million in its opening frame instead of \$8.2 million and would have ended its run with around \$40 million. Granted, it still would have been a financial disappointment, but perhaps not quite a “bomb.”
- Box Office Mojo. Web. www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl2990835201/weekend/.
- The Numbers. Web. www.the-numbers.com/movie/Beloved#tab=summary.
- 73 Turan, Kenneth. “Boomerang: Eddie Murphy’s Romantic Fling.” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1992. Web. www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-07-01-ca-1033-story.html.
- 74 Ugwu, Reggie. “‘They Set Us Up to Fail’: Black Directors of the ’90s Speak Out.” *New York Times*, July 3, 2019. Web. www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/movies/black-directors-1990s.html.
- 75 “L.A. Rebellion: Jamaa Fanaka.” UCLA Library Film & Television Archive. Web. www.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/jamaa-fanaka.
- 76 “Is There Really a Plot to Kill Off Black Movies?” *Jet* 53 (1978): 59. Print.
- 77 “Is There Really a Plot to Kill Off Black Movies?” (61).

9

GROWING PAINZ

2000s

They claim we're products from the bottom of hell 'cause the Black is back and it's bound to sell.

—Public Enemy¹

At midnight of January 1, 2000, the world breathed a collective sigh of relief when the feared Y2K “Millennium Bug” did not shut down our computerized society as we know it. The 1900s went out with a whimper, not a bang, and the future, fueled by the new frontier of the World Wide Web, looked bright. But the decade would soon morph into an age of innocence lost: the “Dot Com Bubble” burst, triggering a stock market downturn that lasted until 2002; a famously controversial presidential election in which results from the deciding state, Florida, were exceedingly tight (less than 1,000 votes difference) and contested, bringing the term “hanging chad” into the national consciousness; the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 shook the national sense of security and spurred not only the subsequent “war on terror” and invasion of Iraq but also rampant Islamophobia; Hurricane Katrina battered the South in the summer of 2005, exposing America’s vast wealth disparity between rich and poor and the racial component that accompanies it;² the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007 that disproportionately impacted “low-income and racially marginalized neighborhoods” that would ultimately bleed into the global Great Recession;³ the Space shuttle Columbia exploded upon re-entry into the Earth’s atmosphere in February 2003, killing all seven on board.

All of this occurred before one of the most pivotal moments in American politics—the election of the U.S.’s first Black president, Democrat Barack Obama, in 2008. Obama’s presidency provided many Americans with a glimpse of hope

(epitomized by the viral “Hope” campaign poster by artist Shepard Fairey) that he could heal “the American psyche, wounded by and guilt-ridden over slavery and racism [which] longed for the health and wholeness that would be signified by the election of a black president.”⁴ However, his election and tenure were marked by increasing political polarization fueled by the growth of the conservative cable network Fox News Channel, launched in 1996, which used yellow journalism techniques to target Obama, exploiting America’s ingrained racial and xenophobic fear and anger in attacks targeting his Blackness and perceived foreignness.

Horror during the first decade of the twenty-first century would reflect the trauma of these trying times. A collective disillusionment, anxiety, frustration, and anger over the events of 9/11 and the bombardment of disturbing imagery coming out of the ensuing war on terror lent a somber, nihilistic, even apocalyptic tone to genre fare. Amid the mayhem, the Black film would struggle to similarly adapt and find its voice, as Black issues were pushed to the back burner with the national focus trained elsewhere. Black-led cinema as a whole, including “Blacks in horror” movies, would become increasingly polished and popular, but it failed to speak to the Black experience with a consistent sense of originality and artistry. “Black horror” in particular, while also growing in popularity, would stagnate creatively, lacking the refinement to address Black issues as racial frustration within communities of color, which mounted and would explode in the coming decade.

A Brave New World

The dawning of the year 2000 was a time of optimism and prosperity for much of America, including Black cinema. The summer of 2000 was trumpeted as “a sizzling period for the ‘black’ Hollywood blockbuster film,” due to a number of Black-led movies that earned over \$50 million at the U.S. box office, a heretofore rare feat outside of films starring Eddie Murphy or Will Smith.⁵ Although the studios were releasing fewer Black-led films than in the “gold rush” of the early 1990s, there were prominent breakthroughs in 2000 that crossed over to mainstream (white) audiences, like *Nutty Professor II: The Klumps* (2000) and *Big Momma’s House* (2000) which topped \$100 million in ticket sales each. These movies, however, arrived with questions of representation that threatened to undermine their financial success. The mammy figures played by crossdressing Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence in *Nutty Professor II* and *Big Momma’s House*, respectively, received criticism for both emasculating Black men⁶ and injuring the Black female psyche.⁷

The highest earner of all Black films in 2000, however—and a record breaker at the time for highest-earning film ever from a Black director (over \$150 million in the U.S.)—was the “Black horror” spoof *Scary Movie* (2000). The brainchild of the Wayans family, it was directed by Keenan Ivory Wayans, creator of the hit 1990s sketch TV series *In Living Color*, and co-written by his younger brothers Marlon and Shawn Wayans. Playing in the vein of parodies like *Airplane!* (1980) and *Hot Shots!* (1991), *Scary Movie* lampoons 1990s slasher hits *Scream* (1996) and *I Know*

What You Did Last Summer (1997). While neither of those two films featured Black characters, the Wayanses notably added three Black actors—the two younger Wayans and Regina Hall—to the primary cast, each playing a problematic one-note role to generate extraordinarily low-brow laughs. Hall plays a loud, brash, uncouth, promiscuous “hood rat”; Marlon Wayans is her dim-witted “weed head” brother; and Shawn Wayans is her jock boyfriend who’s “on the down-low” about his gayness, which emerges in bouts of stereotyped flamboyance. Even after the Wayans brothers left the series after *Scary Movie 2* (2001), the films maintained a significant Black presence, thanks to the precedent set. That said, the main protagonist in each of the five entries in the franchise has been white, a fact that did not prevent the first movie from receiving “a black film’s budget” of \$19 million, reflecting an unwritten rule limiting films targeted to Blacks to a sub-\$20 million budget despite the average studio film at that time costing around \$50 million.⁸

But by this time, Black-oriented films no longer had to be subjected to the whims of the studios to find distribution. The ever-increasing availability and affordability of digital filmmaking technology allowed amateur directors to make movies on shoestring budgets, and the popularity of the DVD format, which would surpass VHS rentals in 2003, ensured that video stores would make room on their shelves to keep up with consumer demand.⁹ Thus, the direct-to-video Black horror market exploded throughout the decade, the year 2000 kicking things off with a pair of prominent “urban” follow-ups to 1999’s *Ragdoll* from Full Moon Features: *The Horrible Dr. Bones* and *Killjoy*, followed in 2001 by *The Vault*. Including *Ragdoll*, all four films had some level of Black influence behind the scenes. *Killjoy* had a Black director (Craig Ross Jr.) and writer (Carl Washington), *Dr. Bones* had a Black writer (Raymond Forchion), *The Vault* had a Black director (James Black) and writer (Washington again), and all four featured a Black producer, Mel Johnson Jr. Despite the Black backing, the Full Moon films epitomize the shortcomings of DTV Black horror of the 2000s—they are campy affairs with low production values and threadbare plots trafficking in stale, overused Black portrayals of violent ‘hood life and Voodoo vengeance. Full Moon would largely abandon Black-oriented horror after just a couple of years, however, save for Charles Band’s killer African doll movie *Ooga Booga* (2013) and perhaps the seven *Evil Bong* movies, whose primary “Black” character is the titular sentient bong with the voice and personality of a “sassy” Black woman. Consistent with Full Moon’s shift away from Blackness are the *Killjoy* films, whose four sequels feature not only white directors and writers, but also the face of the franchise, killer clown Killjoy, switches from a Black actor (Angel Vargas) to a white one (Trent Haaga).

Black Horror: It’s Not Just for Theaters Anymore

There was a time in the history of the horror genre when an accounting of “Black horror” films could be easily achieved. In some decades, be it “Blacks in horror” films or “Black horror” films, Black images were so few and far between,

one could count them on their fingers. However, the presence of Black people in the genre experienced an explosion in great part due to the DTV market, a means of distributing movies either with studio support or independently, for purchase and/or rental by consumers. In the 1980s, the emerging video market was marred by a reputation for being the dumping ground of only sub-par films. In the twenty-first century, it became a viable route to produce films that cost significantly less than a theatrical film, thereby permitting a film to be shot on a small budget but with potentially greater profit earnings. Even the major studios realized that there were tremendous profits to be made in the video market, frequently with horror sequels to theatrical releases, like *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (1999). *Candyman 3* represents those films that do not merit the investment of a full theatrical push, which can cost upward of \$35 million for prints and advertising.¹⁰ Placing a movie franchise in video has proven to be good business:

[Film distributor] Mike Elliott saw the celluloid disaster [*Turbulence*, 1997] and thought one thing: *Turbulence 2* (1999). A low-budget sequel wherein a “fear of flying” class goes for the ride of their lives. And then, improbably but inevitably, *Turbulence 3* (2001), featuring a heavy-metal band in concert aboard a 747. And here was the surprise ending: The sequels made money. Good money, actually . . . with *Turbulence 2* reaping \$10 million in rentals on a \$4 million investment.¹¹

The Black DTV approach would resurrect the *Leprechaun* film series, with the mythical Irish monster in *Leprechaun in the Hood* (2000) looking for his charming flute in the ’hood among gun-toting wannabe rappers, which he destroys in a most gruesome way. The whole thing went so well that the Leprechaun returned for *Leprechaun: Back 2 tha Hood* (2003) to smoke weed and snatch gold teeth.

Even cable television got in on the video action. For example, Showtime Entertainment took its low-budget horror shorts directed by some of the biggest names in the genre—John Carpenter, Tobe Hooper, John Landis, and Ernest Dickerson—to the DVD market. Likewise, the Syfy cable television channel, branded as Sci Fi until 2009, regularly released its self-produced horror movies to video. Still other filmmakers sold DVDs directly online, providing teasers through a variety of internet formats (e.g., video sites such as YouTube).¹²

Black audiences became a key target demographic for distributors of DTV fare. One study found that by 2006, the average Black consumer purchased an average of 12.8 DVDs in a six-month span, versus only 8.8 DVDs for the average white consumer.¹³ Doug Schwab, a former buyer for Blockbuster and founder and President of Maverick Entertainment Group, reported that he pressed the major studios beginning in the early 1990s to offer more “urban product,” from horror to gospel, because such fare was in great demand. Unable to convince the majors, he began Maverick in 1997, and by 2005, the distribution company had taken over the Black horror mantle from Full Moon, even though Maverick’s

output was typically even lower budget and lower quality than Full Moon's. Maverick scoured "film schools, small production houses, and independent movie makers" for films, releasing more than 40 Black-oriented horror movies since the mid-2000s.¹⁴ As early as 2004, however, there were concerns that the DTV market would become "oversaturated with too much low-priced, low-budget, low-production-value urban product."¹⁵ That worry has become less pressing in the era of on-demand/streaming video, which has reduced the cost of producing and distributing hardcopy video discs and has eliminated the need for shelving space in now-defunct video stores.

"Black Horror" Goes Green: Recycling Lots of Horror Stories

Maverick and other purveyors of "Black horror" in the first decade of the twenty-first century struggled to match their quantity with quality, frequently not only rehashing racial stereotypes but also delivering warmed-over horror themes. The 'hood was back, but absent the substantive sociopolitical critiques that marked the 1990s. For example, the "Blacks in horror" films *Leprechaun in the Hood* (2000) and *Leprechaun: Back 2 tha Hood* (2003) did nothing for the image of the inner city nor did it satisfy anyone who cared in the least about a sound plot. These *Leprechaun* films join other films, such as *Predator 2* (1990), in which monsters storm the urban to tear into Blacks while also exposing the inner city as a place that even makes evil do a double-take at its neglect. The two films sent the damaging message that the only thing to do with the deficient denizens of the inner city is to kill them, since they are already tearing up their homes, smoking weed, selling dope, and hoping to be, at best, gun-toting rappers. The films managed to cast the Leprechaun as the sensible one among fools. One film, *Hood Rat* (2001), which takes up the theme by presenting residents of a tenement doing battle against their slumlord seemed to be a holdover from the 1990s. This rat movie, a sort of *Willard*-in-the-inner-city, offers lessons about cleaning up the 'hood and advocating for the underclass.

Other "urban" retreads proliferated throughout the decade. The film *The Evil One* (2005) follows *Candyman* (1992), revisiting "Chicago's most dangerous neighborhood," and includes a monster abducting children. In the film, a Black community that is weary of "perverts preying on our people" is terrorized by a white boogeyman from the year 1896 with a Candyman-esque passion for kidnapping Black children to reassert his mythical status. Another retread was *Bloodz vs. Wolvez* (2006) which borrows the monster wars of *Underworld* (2003), recasting the clash as a Black-on-Black, New York City turf-war battle between the sophisticated Bloodz vampires, who own downtown real estate and financial institutions, and the crude werewolves or "Wolvez," who control and terrorize uptown's ghettos with muggings. Then there was the film *Killjoy*, featuring a Michael Jackson-esque avenging clown, which borrows heavily from the campy

1988 *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, in which murderous clowns and ice cream trucks figure prominently, as well as Stephen King's demonic clown miniseries *It* (1990). *Cryptz* (2002), Full Moon's last "urban" effort of the decade is basically a riff on *Vamp* (1986) or *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), about a strip club run by vampires. The whodunit slasher *Cutthroat Alley* (2003), featuring a black-hooded, masked killer (in the 'hood, of course), seems obviously inspired by *Scream* (1996).

Another "Black horror" film that used *Scream* for inspiration is *Holla* (2006)—Black slang for "scream"—but it does so in a relatively novel manner by rejecting the typical "Black" hood setting in favor of a typical "white" horror setting: a rural cabin. Like *Scream*, it toys with genre conventions, this time adding race to the mix, as reluctant camper Freida (Robbyne Manning) notes, "[There's] just some things Black folks don't do . . . and I think hanging out in the woods is very high on the list." The film even goes a step further in exploring the intraracial class divide, with Stacy (Kimberly Barnett) replying to Freida's complaint with "No, Freida, some Black folks do enjoy hanging out in the woods. It's niggas that don't. And at some point, sweetie, you have to decide which one you are." In the movie, hapless urbanites fall victim to a butcher knife-wielding woman who has escaped from a mental hospital. In a playful twist on horror clichés, the token white character is the first to die. The filmmakers also take pains to portray the Black characters' actions in a realistic light—that is, exceedingly cautious, unlike typical horror scenarios that have traditionally put Black people in harm's way. According to writer/director H.M. Coakley:

Typically, in mainstream horror films, you know, the white folks usually kind of hang around a little bit longer to figure out what happened, and we don't do that. We tried to show that here, how typically, Black folks, you know, soon as something happens, they're gone, and then, once they're safe, they tend to ask questions then.¹⁶

Interestingly, the film nearly failed to materialize, as Coakley explains, "No one could understand what we were trying to do." As a result, the film's already modest \$3 million budget plummeted to \$10,000 before an investor came in at the last minute with an additional \$140,000—still meager by filmmaking standards.¹⁷ In the end, *Holla* was successful enough to spawn a sequel, *Holla II*, in 2013.

Kracker Jack'd (2003) similarly presents some interesting innovations that separate it from derivative DTV fare. In this comedic slasher movie, a group of rowdy Black male students savagely beats a white male student who has completely appropriated a narrow definition of Blackness—hip-hop style, including calling Black people "nigger." In this "Black horror" film, only Blacks can deploy the racist slur, which they do voluminously. In *Jack'd*, as the students begin to meet their fate, the "white boy" is suspected as the murder. However, the film presents a significant narrative twist in that the killer is actually LaShawn (Mark Anthony

Riveria), a smart Black student mockingly nicknamed Carlton (as in the nerdy Carlton from TV sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*).¹⁸ LaShawn, in explaining why he committed the murders, snaps: “Brother can’t be light-skinned and educated without some bling bling, ghetto-assed, West Side, dick grabbin’ mother-fucker talkin’ that high yellow house nigger bullshit.”

Three equally novel horror films from this decade share a medical theme. In the “Black horror” film *Crazy as Hell* (2002), Man (Eriq LaSalle, who also directs), a mysterious, self-assured, charming patient in a mental hospital, believes himself to be Satan, and with the arrival of a cocky doctor, Dr. Ty Adams (Michael Beach), Man works to teach him a thing or two about humility. However, Man is a trickster, a real-life Devil, forcing Dr. Adams to confront his failures, or what Fulmer describes as “the limits of amorality.”¹⁹ These failures include his dogged insistence that he is infallible as a doctor.²⁰ Dr. Adams is implicated in the suicide of a patient and fails to come to terms with the death of his young daughter, a death that he could have prevented. The doctor is finally confronted by demons that include Satan, who shape-shifts into his true form, a white man, Delazo (Ronny Cox), who initially presented himself as a kindly hospital administrator. It is Delazo who welcomes Dr. Adams to Hell.

The “Blacks in horror” film *Sublime* (2007) presents a white man, George (Tom Cavanaugh), who goes into the hospital for a routine procedure, but emerges from anesthesia semi-comatose and the victim of several amputations. His nurse, a white woman, is a seductress jeopardizing his commitment to his wife. His orderly, Mandingo (Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs), is a Black man who figures prominently in George’s time in the hospital. Mandingo is a sadist who torments the anguished George by climbing on top of him in his bed, taunting and berating him before using pruning shears to chop away at George’s already damaged body. *Sublime* is about stereotypes and fears as the man discovers he is trapped in his own unconsciousness and that his mind has manifested his latent misogyny and racism into stereotypical figures that victimize him.

Finally, the award-winning *The Final Patient* (2005) presents innovative casting depicting septuagenarian actor Bill Cobbs in the role of Dr. Green, a retired country doctor/researcher who has uncovered the fountain of youth and superman-like strength in his concoction of rattlesnake venom and herbs from China.²¹ Keeping his discovery a secret, which he used on himself, Dr. Green is exposed as extraordinarily powerful when comes to the rescue of a child who, involved in an accident, is being crushed by a tractor. He easily and with his bare hands lifts the tractor off a child thereby making himself the target of thieves who want the drug. The poachers meet their deaths in Dr. Green’s farmhouse at the hands of his hidden, but equally powerful wife, who is partly transformed by the snake venom into a monster who kills everyone.

Further innovation during this time came from outside the U.S. in the Canadian “Blacks in horror” film *White Skin* (2004), a thoughtful, high-concept take on vampire lore that raises intriguing racial issues. Set in Quebec, the French-language

tale, released in America as *Cannibal*, revolves around a young white man, Thierry (Marc Paquet), who begins dating a white woman, Claire (Marianne Farley), who is secretly a reluctant vampire. It turns out that vampires favor feeding on victims with dark skin, whom they find more irresistible than pale-skinned people. While this is good news for Thierry, it is very bad news for his Black best friend Henri (Frederic Pierre). Henri has a bit of a Black militancy streak, and his left-wing theories lead him to inadvertently stumble upon the reason for vampires' desire for melanin: since Black is the original color of humanity, whiteness is a mutation. They need an infusion of Blackness to correct their genetic abnormality.

Tales From Hip-Hop

Like the horror genre as a whole, films featuring Black characters (though not necessarily written, directed, or produced by Black creatives) were skewed toward young people by saturating its horror with hip-hop culture. For example, *Urban Menace* (1999), about a ghost killing off criminals preying on the inner city, features rappers Snoop Dogg, Big Pun, Ice-T, and Fat Joe. In a bit of self-reflexivity, acknowledging its low quality, the DVD release permits viewers to skip the film's dialogue entirely and simply listen to Ice-T rap its soundtrack. Ice-T also appears in *Hood Rat* and *Leprechaun 5: in the Hood*, the latter ending with the titular Leprechaun (Warwick Davis) (unfortunately) rapping a song called "Lep in the Hood." The rapper Coolio co-stars in films like the vampire-in-space *Dracula 3000* (2004), the modern-day dinosaur tale *Pterodactyl* (2005), and the killer shark movie *Red Water* (2003). The hip-hop group Public Enemy's hypeman Flavor Flav plays a Crypt Keeper-type host in the horror anthology *Nite Tales* (2009). *Dead Heist* (2007) boasts a trio of rappers in Big Daddy Kane, E-40, and Bone Crusher. Even though *Carnivorous's* (2009) DMX and *Cutthroat Alley's* Mack 10 and Bizzy Bone have relatively small parts, they are the lone credited cast members on each film's DVD cover art. *Da Hip Hop Witch* (2000)—a *Blair Witch Project* (1999) in the 'hood—ups the rapper quotient by featuring a whopping 24 rappers, including Eminem, Charli Baltimore, Professor X, Ja Rule, Pras, Vanilla Ice, Rah Digga, and Mobb Deep in what amounts to little more than brief, impromptu interviews. Over 100 hip-hop-inspired "Black horror" films were released in the first decade of the twenty-first century alone.²²

Horror titles did their best to signal their relationship to hip-hop, often by disrupting traditional spelling to reflect hip-hop's style of deconstructive language, often adding "z" to film titles—*Cryptz*, *Voodoo Tailz* (2002), *Vampz* (2004), *Vampiyaz* (2004), *Zombiez* (2005), and *Bloodz vs. Wolvez*. Or, they used slang in their titles like "holla": *Holla*, *Holla If I Kill You* (2003),²³ and *Holla If You Hear Me* (2006). Simply, "Black horror" learned some important lessons about how to survive by carving out a popular and profitable niche coupling youth, hip-hop, and the home video market.

Even mainstream "Blacks in horror" fare with larger budgets and theatrical distribution came to recognize the potential of hip-hop star power during this

era. Ice Cube had major roles in *Anaconda* (1997) and *Ghosts of Mars* (2001). Queen Latifah is featured in *Sphere* (1998) and the Denzel Washington thriller *The Bone Collector* (1999). Method Man appears in *Venom* (2005), while Redman appears (as himself) in *Seed of Chucky* (2004). LL Cool J survives *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (1998), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), and *Mindhunters* (2004). Busta Rhymes even saves the day in *Halloween Resurrection* (2002), and Rah Digga does the same in *13 Ghosts* (2001). The fact that rappers could play such prominent roles in movies that were not seen as or marketed as Black products is an indication that hip-hop had become an indisputable crossover pop culture commodity.

The 1980s marked a surge in the development of the hip-hop music genre. Rap styles were becoming increasingly diverse, from the radio-friendly, disco-inspired Sugar Hill Gang and the machismo-based lyrics of LL Cool J, to the political pronouncements of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and the gangsta preachings of Ice-T. In the midst of this flurry of music activity, horror was present, and the two popular culture forms easily synced. In 1988, the rap duo DJ Jazzy Jeff (Jeff Townes) and the Fresh Prince (Will Smith) released their album *He's the DJ, I'm the Rapper*, featuring the song "Nightmare on My Street." The album's debut happened to coincide with the release of *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (1988), with the song, performed by the Fresh Prince, serving as an unofficial tribute to the popularity of the film franchise:²⁴

I walked in the house, the Big Bad Fresh Prince/But Freddy killed all that noise real quick/He grabbed me by my neck and said, "Here's what we'll do. We gotta lotta work here, me and you. The souls of your friends you and I will claim. You've got the body and I've got the brain."

The song anticipated Smith's eventual move into horror as a new Black (super) hero for the twenty-first century. Smith's arrival marks a dramatic departure from tragic, disaffected Black horror superheroes, such as Spawn and Blade, in battle with otherworldly, other-racial creatures.²⁵ Smith rode in on a different kind of horse, playing Black male savior (though in a shocking act of art imitating life, he slapped Chris Rock at the 2002 Academy Awards playing savior on behalf of his wife Jada Pinkett-Smith). On screen, Smith purged the world of all manner of alien invasion. In the science fiction films *Independence Day* (1996) and *Men in Black I and II* (1997, 2002), Smith's iconic status is on display as he portrays an upright (notwithstanding his stripper fiancé in *Independence Day*), affable, and quick-witted monster slayer. His mega-stardom and race have been "made to play nice together," leading to claims that Smith transcends race.²⁶ Presumably, his monsters—stinky octopi and giant bugs—transcend race as well.

Smith's turn in the "Blacks in horror" film *I Am Legend* (2007) represents, in some ways, absolutely nothing, neither progression nor regression for Blacks in horror. The film is based on the 1954 Richard Matheson novel *I Am Legend*, about the last human in a world of vampires. The novel has been the basis of several movies, including

Smith's *Legend*.²⁷ For example, *Last Man on Earth* (1964) stars Vincent Price as Dr. Robert Morgan, who is immune to the vampire plague. The film depicts hopeless solitude as Morgan watches his family and the world around him un/die. Though he discovers a cure in his own blood for the affliction, in the film's tragic ending Morgan represents an unwanted minority in a vampire-dominated world, resulting in his extermination—he is killed by vampires in a heavily metaphorical scene in which he perishes on a church altar stretched out in a Christ-on-the-cross pose.

In *Omega Man* (1971), Charlton Heston portrays Robert Neville, whose maddening solitude is unexpectedly interrupted when he discovers there are a few other survivors of a plague that has turned the world's population into sun-averse mutants. Neville becomes romantically involved with a Black woman, Lisa (Rosalind Cash), who eventually succumbs to the plague, betraying him to the mutants. Neville is killed, his body, too, falling into a crucifixion-of-Christ pose. Like Morgan, Neville's blood is the antidote to the plague, and just before his execution, Neville delivers salvation as he is able to harvest his blood and put it into the hands of untainted humans who will begin the process of restoring humanity.

In Smith's *I Am Legend*, he also portrays Dr. Robert Neville who is a desperately lonely survivor of a plague that has produced bloodthirsty monsters. His seclusion is disrupted by a female monster that he has captured to study, as well as by an uninfected woman and child who are in search of an outpost of other survivors. However, Smith's Neville is denied the racialized, caste commentary afforded Price's Morgan or Heston's Neville, as well as the "blood of Jesus" salvation iconography they each shared. Notably, Smith's Neville does not draw the cure for humankind directly from his veins—from his Black blood. Rather, the cure comes from the monster's blood after he has injected her with a serum—a mixture of his purified blood and a medley of chemicals. Salvation is delivered through a soup of the natural, the tainted, and the fabricated. He is even denied his Christ pose, as he is blown up in a fireball instead. While Smith's Neville is no Jesus, he is a savior of a different kind, one born from modern movie conventions. As a Black character, his act of self-sacrifice carries with it the weight of a history of dubious Black cinematic "heroism"—supposedly positive portrayals of selflessness that translate into the marginalization of Blackness by way of offering Black lives in order to save white ones (in this instance, to save the "white" world). Smith's Neville has even drawn parallels to "magical Negro" roles like Smith's Bagger Vance, but "instead of redeeming one single broken white person, [Neville] save[s] (what's left of) all of corrupt or infected humanity."²⁸

Here Smith's stardom, action star persona, and race are indeed made to play nice at the expense of the deeper meanings previous portrayals and the original novel made available. Though viewers learn a bit about Smith's Neville—the audience sees his wife and daughter before the tragedy, he likes bacon, he loves Bob Marley's music—he is socio-cultural window glass. That is, there is not much complexity to him, a recurring issue in "Blacks in horror" portrayals that is emblematic of an era of "colorblind" casting that, despite increased representation from decades past, tends toward sterile characterizations that lack a sense of Black identity and concerns.

Kristen Warner poignantly writes in her book *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* that such seemingly “small and subtle methods” continue to “trap us as a society into this vicious and painful cycle.”²⁹ Neville can be appropriately contrasted to *Night of the Living Dead’s* (1968) Ben (Duane Jones), who the audience is told virtually nothing about. Though Ben’s Blackness is never mentioned, Ben is still a complex, meaningful symbol of race histories and relationships as he, the only Black man, works to survive attacking whites/zombies. The comparison between the two representations—Neville and Ben—is not a forced one. Rather, director George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* was inspired by Matheson’s novel, from which Romero borrowed the shuffling undead reaching through boarded-up windows to get at the final human, as well as a dying child, burning victims in a pyre, and the death of the story’s protagonist.³⁰

Similarly, in a send-up of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), the straight-to-DVD film *Day X* (2006) places Frank (Ken Edwards) in an abandoned steel mill when a zombification virus is accidentally released. He is the only Black man and assumes control of 10 white people (a few of them hostile) who have wandered in for protection. The film’s tension carries a racial overtone, which is addressed head-on during a brief deadpan comic comment, referencing *Night of the Living Dead*, in this otherwise deadly serious movie: “You ever see that movie with that Black guy in that house?” (Add to this the Blackening of the character Riddick in *Pitch Black* [2000] who is racially “outed” with the sardonic line that he will ride as a prisoner “all back-of-the-bus.”) However, Smith’s Neville does not invite, for better or worse, a deepened reflection on his positionality, even as a military officer he is enmeshed in a global trauma presumably shifting his attention from political war (e.g., Afghanistan), and a freshly post-9/11 New York, to a world in the grips of an epidemic in which political, cultural, and moral uncertainties (e.g., is experimenting on and killing the monsters ethical?) dominate. There are no easy answers to the situation, as Neville truly is benefiting humanity in the long run, but the infected are also certainly justified in feeling victimized and standing up for their human rights. The trouble is, Neville never really sees them as humans; they are little more than test subjects, like his lab rats. Much like the U.S. government, “Neville remains astonishingly, pathologically unaware of the possibility . . . he might himself be seen as an agent of terror and perpetrator of incomprehensible violence.”³¹

The Darker Side of Hip-Hop

For every metropolis there is a necropolis.³²

—Adam Simon, producer, *Bones*

If one is looking for sociopolitical reflection, hip-hop horror rarely disappoints, hitting audiences over the head like a sledgehammer with tales of morality

and social responsibility. Snoop Dogg has taken the lead with, to date, three morality-horror features. The straight-to-video *Urban Menace* (1999) showcases Snoop in the starring role of someone lamenting the violence permeating his community by, ironically, returning from the dead and killing as many gangsters as he can.

Snoop's next film *Bones* (2001) boasted a moderate budget of \$16 million, the backing of New Line Cinema, and the accomplished director Ernest Dickerson.³³ In the film, Jimmy Bones (Snoop Dogg) is a 1970s living legend "gentleman gangster" numbers runner who is respected by members of his Black community. His 'hood is thriving until crack cocaine is introduced by a crooked white cop who recruits Black locals to distribute the drugs. The scenario is a microcosm of the popular theory in Black communities that the CIA flooded inner cities with crack during the 1980s, a concept that is lent credence by the revelation that the CIA turned a blind eye to (or even protected) drug dealers in America who were funneling money to the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Contra rebels.³⁴ When the movie jumps to the present day, there is a scene that co-signs on the CIA drug-peddling narrative. Jimmy's traitorous right-hand man, Jeremiah (Clifton Powell), is a "sell-out" who used drug money to leave the 'hood behind, move to the suburbs, and marry a white woman. Jeremiah confronts his sons for suggesting that the government brought crack into the 'hood by chiding, "Stop poisoning your mind with that ghetto paranoia." He then further expounds on his conservative, anti-affirmative action beliefs by declaring, "That's all just the ways of people justifying their own failure." When one of his sons states that he wants his 40 acres and a mule, Jeremiah responds, "Personally, I don't need a mule. I've got myself a Lexus. And nobody gave it to me."

The movie returns to the 1970s with Jimmy killed for refusing to join up with the drug dealers. The dealers and the corrupt cop plunge knives into his body, reminiscent of Christ being nailed to the Cross. Jimmy becomes a folk legend only to return two decades later as a vengeful, violent ghost. He exacts bloody revenge on those who killed him, contributed to the demise of the 'hood, and who continue to deprive the 'hood, thereby leaving it derelict under a plague of drugs. Until Jimmy's return, drugs have become an "uncontrollable capitalism" untouched by corrupt law enforcement and ignored by civic leaders and community activists. Only something out of the gangster culture, evolved into an angry spirit, can rein the terror in.³⁵

In a move of intertextuality, *Bones* features Pam Grier as Jimmy's girlfriend Pearl, depicting them as a couple at the height of his power in 1979. Here, in this love story (which, according to its director the studio tried to downplay), Grier is to be imagined as her 1970s film icon self, recalling characters such as Coffy, Foxy, or Sheba—the buxom bad-bitch who provided rape money-shots to people like Snoop, who claims to have grown up on her films. Indeed, *Bones* director, Ernest

Dickerson, in the documentary *Horror Noire* recalls the moment when Snoop must kiss Grier in the film:

I gotta tell you this. You haven't lived until you see Snoop blush. The first day, Snoop had to kiss Pam Grier. They were into it. They were into it. And, I said, "cut." I said, "you blushing man!" He said, "hey man, I grew up dreaming about this woman and I get to kiss her!"³⁶

Grier recalling her 1970s portrayals cannot be separated from Snoop's frequent appearance in his music videos and at award ceremonies costumed in 1970s pimp-style attire, complete with a "pimp cup" and accompanied by Don "Magic" Juan, a Chicago pimp featured in the documentary films *Pimps Up, Hos Down* (1999) and *American Pimp* (1999). Grier's inclusion, with a focus on flashbacks, then gestures toward misogynistic fantasy. Denzin asserts that it would be inappropriate to interpret such sexism as the purview of only Black youth culture. Instead, these troubling gender practices are implicated in a white supremacy that casts Black men as dope dealers and pimps, and women as hoes.³⁷ Less developed in this tale is modern-day Pearl, 20 years after Jimmy's death. She is now a seer, connecting with Jimmy in the spirit world. However, the film does not link the older Pearl with the likes of her character Lisa of *Scream*, *Blacula*, *Scream* (1973), who avoids eroticism with the vampire *Blacula*, and uses her seer/Voodoo powers like a superhero to save her Black community. On the whole, Snoop's horror tale plays nostalgic for a life before drive-bys and crack when gangsters were smooth, and their business was dealing with women.

Despite its budget and star power, including a Snoop Dogg soundtrack CD that placed 39 on the Billboard 200 in October 2001, *Bones* is a prime example of how "Black horror" still struggles to gain a foothold in Hollywood. Earning just over \$7 million gross, director Ernest Dickerson is skeptical of the industry's commitment to Black filmmaking:

So yeah, I sometimes really think that there's an element that really does not want African Americans to gain a significant foothold in making films, deciding what films are made, stretching the genre and stretching what Black films can do. . . . *Bones* got great reviews from *The New York Times*, *The L.A. Times* and *Variety*, but the studio refused to capitalize on those good reviews. The common industry practice is to put blurbs from good reviews in the ads, but they refused to do that and they spent one-third of what everybody else was spending to advertise the movie. So the movie came out and had a great soundtrack that never got to the radio stations. How are you going to turn down a Snoop Dogg album?³⁸

Disillusioned with the movie industry, Dickerson would spend most of the next two decades directing in television, including genre series like *The Walking Dead*,

Dexter, *Masters of Horror* (2006), *Fear Itself* (2009), *The Purge* (2018), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009), and *Under the Dome* (2014).

Snoop Dogg would continue to preach, appropriating *Tales from the Crypt* (1972) and Rusty Cundieff's "Black horror" film *Tales from the Hood* (1995) to offer *Snoop Dogg's Hood of Horror* (2006), in which Snoop appears as the "Crib Keeper" sending souls to Hell.³⁹ *Hood of Horror* is an anthology, presenting three vignettes about cleansing the 'hood of gang violence, slumlords, and killer rappers who forget where they have come from. Even Snoop's *Murder Was the Case: The Movie* (1994), a 20-minute horror-skewed short film in support of his album of the same name, paints a morality tale in which he—as with all three films previously mentioned—plays a man who is killed and returns from the dead. This time, Snoop plays a fictionalized version of himself and is shot to death by a jealous man (Charlie Murphy) whose girlfriend Snoop impregnated. The film, directed by Dr. Dre, is built around the music video for Snoop's single "Murder Was the Case (Remix)," in which Snoop is visited on his deathbed by Satan, who offers to bring him back to life, but with the warning, "When you start set-trippin', that ass mine." Unable to keep on the straight and narrow, Snoop ends up going to jail, where he is killed by a corrupt cop. Snoop Dogg ends the video by addressing the camera as himself with the message, "Stop the violence, drop the guns, and increase the peace." Absent is any message about the treatment of women in the film, which casts them as disposable sex objects worthy of abuse and disdainful epithets like "bitch" and "ho."

The link between horror and hip-hop continued with horrorcore, a music subgenre of rap deeply influenced by horror, featuring stories of zombies and cannibalism, with performers, at times, appearing in gory costumes. Horrorcore's roots are debated, with some pointing to the rap group the Geto Boys serving as inspiration for the form, with their 1991 album *We Can't Be Stopped* featuring two horror-inspired songs: "My Mind Is Playing Tricks on Me," about a Halloween-inspired nightmare, and "Chuckie," a song featuring a character who professes to "eat a dog's brain," inspired by the *Child's Play* horror film franchise. Others point to rap artists Prince Paul of Stetsasonic and RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan as its innovators when they formed the group Gravediggaz, releasing their 1994 debut album *6 Feet Deep*. The album has been described as a "morbid, campy and complete commercial flop."⁴⁰ Another 1994 major label horrorcore release, *USA (Under Satan's Authority)*, from pioneering group Flatliners—named after the 1990 Joel Schumacher horror movie—has been called "Def Jam's worst-selling, and most misunderstood, album ever."⁴¹

However, horrorcore's yardstick is not mainstream, commercial reception, but the underground and the fringe. Artists such as the Insane Clown Posse, D12, Esham, and Eminem—all from Detroit—have been credited with keeping horrorcore (occasionally) before the mainstream. Their work includes the Insane Clown Posse's annual Gathering the Juggalos festival, as well as D12 and Eminem's occasional dark, horror lyrics. Brotha Lynch Hung, a rapper from Sacramento

who claims to be the founder of horrorcore, was one of the first rappers to star in his own “Black horror” horrorcore film, *Now Eat: The Movie* (2000). The movie features Lynch’s grisly lyrics: “I don’t wanna brag/Fuck Jeffery Dahmer he’s a mothafuck’n fag/ I got nigga nuts and guts in a bag, draggin them to the pad.”⁴² The film’s plot focuses on Lynch and his rapper friends’ propensity to dine on their rivals, of course after sprinkling meat tenderizer on them. Horrorcore, which gets limited radio play due to its profoundly violent, sexist, homophobic, and pro-suicide content, continues to have an underground following, with the Detroit-metro area playing host to the subculture. For example, on September 12, 2009, the Strictly for the Wicked horrorcore music festival was held in Southgate, MI, hosted by Serial Killin Records. Largely promoted through the internet, the “all ages” festival featured approximately 25 acts and attracted approximately 250 people. Horrorcore received unexpected attention in the mainstream press when a horrorcore rapper, 20-year-old Richard “Syko Sam” McCroskey, bludgeoned four people to death in their homes after attending the Strictly for the Wicked festival. The link between the violence of horrorcore and the murders was made explicit by Mario “Mars” Delgado, a horrorcore rapper:

[T]he point is to constantly push the envelope and shock and offend people. . . . It’s marketing—it’s so shocking and in your face that kids want it, they need it. . . . If your kids are into stuff like this, you need to sit down and talk to them, and say, “Are you Ok?” . . . It’s a cry for help most parents don’t pick up on.⁴³

What’s Old Is New Again

The twentieth century ended on a high note for horror. The Academy Awards, which did not typically recognize the importance of such films, centered attention on the genre when movies such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999) earned six Academy Award nominations and when *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) actually swept the top awards, including the Best Picture Academy Award. All eyes were on the genre. An obvious question followed: what new heights would the genre reach? What innovations could we expect next? For example, could Academy Award winner Halle Berry bring her star power to horror with the “Blacks in horror” film *Gothika* (2003), about a woman and a ghost teaming up to expose sexual sadists murdering young girls? Or, in the tradition of *The Blair Witch Project*, could the “Blacks in horror” film *Snakes on a Plane* (2006), starring Samuel L. Jackson, drum up enough internet buzz to make it a break-out hit?⁴⁴ As it turned out, the first big movement in twenty-first-century horror was the antithesis of innovation. The genre would dig back through past horror catalogs to present old horror warmed over. For example, John Carpenter’s horror classic *Halloween* (1978) was “reimagined” into Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* (2007). Other horror films did not

even receive the reimagining treatment; they were simply remade: 1972's *The Last House on the Left* was remade in 2009, 1974's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 2003, 1976's *The Omen* in 2006, 1978's *Dawn of the Dead* in 2004, 1977's *The Hills Have Eyes* in 2006, 1979's *The Amityville Horror* in 2005, and at least 20 more.⁴⁵ Critics complained of a "horror glut" (e.g., 39 horror films were in production in 2007) as film studios rapidly churned out rehashed horror.⁴⁶

While all film genres are prone to some measure of duplication, in horror, the practice seems to be "a more pronounced and extreme feature than it is elsewhere."⁴⁷ Film studios have long asserted that there is a method behind the madness. Those who were just old enough to see the original horror films are now in their fifties through eighties and may be too mature for the new forms of fright fare. According to Fischhoff et al., audiences 25 years and younger appreciate violence and special effects-heavy, plot-light fare. Older audiences tend to remain in an "aesthetic time capsule," evidencing a preference for their earlier cinema experiences.⁴⁸ In short, the remakes were for the next generation of film-goers. Simply re-releasing original, classic horror films could not cut it, as this new generation had grown up on a healthy, modern diet of violent media in and outside of horror.⁴⁹ Horror films had to negotiate three issues: targeting a youth market, performing in a media market in which violence is already ubiquitous, and competing with the popularity of (violent) video games such as *Resident Evil* (1996) and *Bioshock* (2007). The horror film genre responded by: (1) skewing to young people with sexy, hip, youthful casts and elevated production values beyond the often low-budget original classics; (2) adopting video games' esthetic (first-person shooter vantage points, computer-generated effects, slick visuals, and a frenetic feel); and (3) mining video game products (including multiple films in the *Resident Evil*, *Doom*, *House of the Dead*, *BloodRayne*, *Silent Hill*, and *Alone in the Dark* franchises).

One consequence of the rash of remakes was the fact that the studios, lacking racial flexibility in their thought process, tended to stick with the racial makeup of the original movies, meaning that their remakes of largely white films remained largely white in cast. *Friday the 13th* was one of the few remakes to shake up the racial mix, adding both a Black and an Asian character to the primary cast. Similarly, Idris Elba and DeRay Davis had supporting roles in *Prom Night* (2008) and *The Fog* (2005), respectively, but when it came to the 2000s remakes, with no Black leads, such tokenism was the best-case scenario.

Negro-Less Nihilism

As forecasted by *I Am Legend*, the post-9/11 sense of despair, anger, and frustration extended into other reaches of horror cinema beyond remakes—at the exclusion of racial concerns. The futuristic utopia that had for decades been envisioned as what the twenty-first century had in store was now more of a wasteland of paranoia and disillusionment, most graphically reflected in a newly minted

horror sub-genre, dubbed “torture porn.” A term coined by David Edelstein in early 2006 to describe the wave of films (examples cited include *Saw* [2004], *The Devil’s Rejects* [2005], *Hostel* [2005], and *Wolf Creek* [2005]) that dwelled uncomfortably long and hard on scenes of graphic violence. Torture porn stuck a nerve with the likes of Edelstein in part because the victims were not the disposable characters of yesteryear’s slashers; they often came off as real, “decent people with recognizable human emotions.”⁵⁰ The realization that the good and the innocent sometimes suffer unfair fates was a hard lesson learned on September 11, and torture porn’s uncomfortable imagery mined that sentiment for all it was worth. It was also a natural reaction to widespread, online access to real-life scenes of violence, which “changed the context of expectations for viewers [and] raised the ante for the horror film industry.”⁵¹ But because torture porn’s victims were relatable, they also tended to be white—Hollywood’s version of relatable. This racial restrictiveness was compounded by the fact these films were often set in remote, rural locales where victims could scream ad nauseam and not be heard—settings that, as the polar opposite of “urban,” generally precluded significant Black participation. Thus, most entries in the torture porn cycle were overwhelmingly non-Black, like *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Funny Games* (2007), *The Human Centipede* (2009), *The Collector* (2009), and *The Last House on the Left* (2009), to name a very few. Absence, however, was preferable to representations like those in *Turistas* (2006), in which dark-skinned Brazilians harvest white tourists’ organs, a modern reincarnation of the menacing tribesmen from *King Kong* (1933), thereby feeding into post-9/11 xenophobia. Unsurprisingly, the torture porn movies with the most significant Black presence were those in the *Saw* franchise—which includes supporting roles by Danny Glover in *Saw*, Glenn Plummer in *Saw II* (2005), Meagan Good in *Saw V* (2008), and Tanedra Howard (who won her role through the reality VH1 TV show *Scream Queens* [2008]) in *Saw VI* (2009)—because that series maintained a decidedly urban setting throughout all the films, which would continue into the 2021 Chris Rock spinoff *Spiral*.

Black horror briefly took a stab at torture porn during this time with the DTV movie *Somebody Help Me* (2007), Black writer-director Chris Stokes’ follow-up to his surprise hit dance film *You Got Served* (2004). *Somebody* stars Marques Houston and Omarion Grandberry headlining a script that, like *Holla*, toys with conventional racial roles by pairing two Black couples with three white ones and having the Black characters survive, while the white characters are killed by the white homicidal maniac. Despite the Black leads, *Somebody Help Me* sticks to torture porn’s standard rurality, placing the story in a remote, cabin-in-the-woods setting. Still, it makes it clear that the Black characters are out of their element: when their white friends go missing, Kimmy (Alexis Fields) is reluctant to call the police, explaining, “We’re a bunch of Black folks in this white town. Now, we don’t want to scare everybody. How would we look?” This issue of perception harkens back to the scene in *Ganja & Hess* (1973) where Hess (Duane Jones) talks Meda (Bill

Gunn) out of killing himself because “I am the only colored on the block . . . and you can believe the authorities will drag me out for questioning.”

Alongside torture porn, another bleak horror sub-genre took root during the first decade of the 2000s: “found footage.” It similarly manifested the societal cynicism of the time and conceptually is arguably even darker than torture porn. Although torture porn wallows in its grisly, graphic nature, it can have a “happy” ending in which one or more protagonists survive. Found footage, on the other hand, is in its purest form, amateur footage that is found after the subjects in the film (and the camera operator) have either been killed or have gone forever missing. The raw, unpolished video is used to put together the mystery of what happened to them, and the ending is typically quite grim. Although the hit *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) set the early standard for found footage, Hollywood did not jump on the bandwagon right away. Studios perhaps felt the format was a gimmick and could not be relied upon to carry other films, which could explain why the rushed sequel, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000), was shot in a traditional third-person narrative format. (It was a critical and commercial flop.) It was not until the success of *Cloverfield* and *Quarantine* in 2008 and *Paranormal Activity* in 2009 that found footage found favor with the major studios, rejuvenating an interest in the format. *Paranormal Activity* in particular was a revelation, its \$15,000 budget helping to cement its status as “the most profitable movie of all time.”⁵² But between *Blair Witch* and *Paranormal Activity*, there was a stream of lower profile found footage horror that maintained the format’s presence and established proof of concept that this style could become a full-fledged sub-genre and not just a one-time flash in the pan. The format began to proliferate in 2006 and 2007, spurred by the launch of YouTube, which “sparked a growing taste for amateur media,” as well as the increased availability of camera phone technology, which could be used to record the “to-be-found” footage.⁵³

However, “urban” Blacks found a little place for themselves in these movies in the 2000s. Found footage relies on viewers immersing themselves in the first-person narrative and thus associating themselves with the characters, a process that can be complicated by what has been termed “the assumed masculinity of the cinematic gaze,” but which could also extend to include race: the assumed whiteness of the cinematic gaze.⁵⁴ Thus, deemed unrelatable to the presumed viewership, Blackness was little seen in found footage of this era except for supporting roles in films with urban settings, like *Cloverfield*, whose tale of New York City under attack from a giant monster overtly drew on 9/11 imagery, and *Quarantine*, a remake of Spain’s *REC* (2007) set in a Los Angeles apartment building plagued by a zombie-like virus. There were also a few slapped-together attempts at “urban” *Blair Witch* spoofery, like *Da Hip Hop Witch* (2000), comprised largely of monologues from famous rappers, and *The Black Witch Project* (2001), which boasts neither witches nor a found footage format. One little-seen but noteworthy instance of found footage with a significant Black presence is the DTV production *Hanah’s Gift* (2008). It is told through the eyes of an autistic

Latinx girl named Hanah (Alina Herrera) who has ESP. In a unique spin on the found footage format, her eyes are the “camera” through which we witness the events that unfold, but because of her supernatural “gift,” she is able to project herself into the minds of others, allowing viewers to shift to the point of view of various characters throughout the story. Also unique is the fact that the primary antagonist in the film is a Black woman, Stacy (J.T. Williams), who is leading an anger management therapy group at a remote house one evening but secretly has an ulterior motive—she plans to murder all of the participants. She and her white boyfriend cut the power and use night-vision goggles to begin their murder spree, but Hanah uses her ability to help three other survivors make it through the night. Although Stacy is the villain, she exhibits no traits of Black stereotyping. As a therapist, she has a professional, white-collar job and comes from a middle-class background; she is the daughter of a government-contracted inventor, thus her main source of childhood trauma is her father being a workaholic. She is a psychopath with no race-specific characteristics; like Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), she could have been of any race.

With its tale of inhabitants of a home fighting to survive against murderous intruders, *Hanah's Gift* crosses over into another trend from this decade that tapped into public unease—home invasion horror. Home invasion movies share elements with both torture porn and found footage, that is the gritty, realistic violence of the former and the grim pessimism of the latter. All three rely on isolation to heighten the fear and sense of desperation, translating once again into typically remote, rural settings that marginalize Black people. In torture porn, found footage, and home invasion horror, there is an intimacy to the violence; viewers are not as detached as they were with the over-the-top slashers of the 1980s and 1990s. Home invasion is arguably the most personal of the three, as it exploits middle-class fears of being victimized in the one place you should feel most secure, your home. The September 11 attacks were a home invasion on a national scale, and the damage they inflicted on Americans' sense of security could be felt throughout the 2000s' films. The second half of the decade is littered with examples: *The Strangers* (2008), *Vacancy* (2007), *The Collector* (2009), plus remakes *Black Christmas* (2006), *When a Stranger Calls* (2006), and *Funny Games* (2007) and the French films *High Tension* (2003), *Them* (2006), and *Inside* (2007). The perpetrators in these films are not supernatural in nature nor unstoppable killing machines who can absorb bullets; they're normal, everyday (white) people who can gain the (white) protagonists' trust. In many cases, they are young—teens and early 20-somethings—heightening the sense that they are unthreatening. The paranoid feeling that violence could come from anywhere fed into the disillusionment of the era and a sense of lawlessness that went global when the Great Recession hit in 2007, spawning a U.K. movement of “hoodie horror” movies about “feral kids let off the leash” (often wearing hoodies) tormenting hard-working citizens—including *Eden Lake* (2008), *Heartless* (2009), *Cherry Tree Lane* (2010), *Expelled* (2010), and *Citadel* (2012).⁵⁵ Hoodie horror took the fear of

modern violence into a more urban setting, meaning the perpetrators were more likely to be Black—as in the particularly distasteful *Cherry Tree Lane*, in which a Black teen leads a group of interracial adolescents who hold a family hostage, beating, raping, and tormenting them in a racially tinged blend of hoodie horror, home invasion, and torture porn. Unlike *Hanah's Gift*, this Black villain—an uncouth, violent, lascivious drug dealer—trafficked in stereotype upon stereotype. The class divide and conservative fear-mongering of hoodie horror did not make its way to the U.S., however; American cinema had already experienced a similar movement in the late 1970s and 1980s with the cycle of *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* vigilantism porn.

Return of the Living Dead

Perhaps the most enduring and wide-reaching trend in horror during the first decade of the twenty-first century was an old standard—zombies—prompting *Time* magazine to declare in 2009 that “Zombies are the new vampires.”⁵⁶ Unlike the new century’s torture porn, found footage, and home invasion trends, zombies had ample ties to Blackness. Although the traditional Voodoo origins behind zombies were almost completely pushed to the side by this time, the modern reinvention of zombie lore by George A. Romero established a significant Black presence as part of its DNA, and his inclusive template, consciously or subconsciously, carried over to the “re-reinvention” of zombie cinema in the 2000s.

One of the innovations of Romero’s films was the globalization of zombism. No longer were zombies restricted to Caribbean islands and limited to targeted victims of a Voodoo practitioner’s spell. Romero’s zombism could spread autonomously without human facilitation; anyone who died became a zombie, meaning it could quickly grow into an epidemic or a pandemic. By the turn of the century, this took on new resonance with the surge of high-profile outbreaks and epidemics—from Ebola and “mad cow disease” in the 1990s to SARS, avian flu, and swine flu in the first decade of the 2000s, permanently shifting the de facto source of zombism from Voodoo, radiation, or contamination to viral outbreaks. *Night of the Living Dead*’s portrait of widespread chaos (afflicting the “eastern third of the nation,” according to a television news report in the film) manifested the chaos of the late 1960s—the Civil Rights Movement, protests, the Vietnam War, riots, assassinations, mourning—while the theorized cause of the zombism, radiation from a satellite returning from Venus, reflected that era’s uncertainties about both space exploration and the Atomic Age. By the mid-1990s, zombie cinema had seemingly been wrung dry, resulting in the fewest number of zombie movies since the late 1940s.⁵⁷ In their place arose zombie video games like *Resident Evil* and *The House of the Dead*, which emphasized fast-paced hyper-violence and exaggerated next-gen zombie mutations with superhuman size, strength, speed, or other abilities. In the twenty-first century, those video game zombies spawned cinematic versions that were similarly over-the-top, and the global decimation

of zombie outbreaks also ballooned, routinely growing to apocalyptic levels that took on new resonance after 9/11. This new generation of zombies was fleet of foot, roaring and hissing like wild animals, and their bites could kill and turn you within minutes rather than the hours or days of Romero's zombies. The stakes had to be raised for audiences desensitized by both video game and real-world violence. Indeed, a frequently cited *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* article, "The effect of video game violence on physiological desensitization to real-life violence," reports that after researchers measured the heart rate and galvanic skin response of participants who played violent video games and then viewed real violence, they demonstrated a physiological desensitization to violence.⁵⁸ In short, to shock viewers after September 11, movies had to deliver nothing short of Armageddon.

The 21st zombie resurgence kicked off just six months after 9/11 with *Resident Evil* (2002), which was originally to be written and directed by Romero himself. In an interview with *Fangoria* magazine at the time of the film's release, Romero cited creative differences for being let go from the project but expressed enthusiasm for another zombie movie he hoped would get made, the fourth entry in his *Dead* series called *Land of the Dead*. Unlike *Resident Evil*, Romero's new *Dead* script featured slow, non-mutated zombies and oozed the type of social commentary that was Romero's calling card. As he explained: "The story was about ignoring the problem, about people who are not stirred up by what's going on around them. They'll put a ring around the city and pretend everything is cool even though the rest of the world is a mess."⁵⁹ Although he wrote the script before September 11, the story is remarkably prescient. Primarily a conceit for American class division, its parallels can also be extended to the state of the nation leading up to the terrorist attacks, when America felt untouchable as the preeminent world power, basking in its leadership on political, cultural, and economic fronts, seemingly oblivious to the target on its back.

Ironically, the comparatively shallow *Resident Evil* movie helped make *Land of the Dead* a reality with the video game-based film's success doing its part to convince trend-happy Hollywood that zombies were the next big thing. When *Land of the Dead* finally hit theaters in 2005, the story's racial implications, on top of its class commentary, became clearer, as the plot about "ignoring the problem" could well have applied to the plight of Black Americans at the time. The fact that the head zombie leading the undead rebellion, "Big Daddy" (Eugene Clark), is Black carries the weight of Black uprisings of the past. More, it should not go unnoticed that the butler (Gene Mack) working for elitist villain Paul Kaufman (Dennis Hopper) is the lone Black face in the luxury apartment building in which the privileged class lives. Cholo (John Leguizamo), meanwhile, is a Latinx flunkie for Kaufman who believes he has earned enough money and clout to be allowed to move into the building, only to be dismissed by Kaufman, whose use of the slur "spic" strongly implies that race is a driving factor in his denial. When Cholo resorts to extortion to get revenge for his denial, Kaufman labels him a

terrorist, uttering a line that echoes George W. Bush's war on terror hard line: "We don't negotiate with terrorists." This citing of the younger Bush's political mindset harkens back to Wes Craven's referencing of the Gulf War and parodying Reagan family values in *The People Under the Stairs*. The nods to conservative Republican regimes in these two stories revolving around elitist classicism and racism are telling indictments of the political party's modern legacy of enabling racial discrimination, disenfranchisement, and divisiveness in the pursuit of commercial and political gains.

A prominent theme behind all of Romero's *Dead* films is his unflinching portrayal of how the living react in the face of a zombie crisis: how they treat one another, how they treat the zombies, and how they without fail lose some of their humanity. *Dawn*, *Day*, and *Land* all feature overt racists hurling racial epithets (while *Night's* scenes of "good ol' boy" lynch mobs only hint at racist imagery) who subsequently suffer violent deaths, as if the apocalypse were a correction, purging the world of miscreants and evildoers. As the primary architect of the dead activity in the *Land* film, Big Daddy is an intelligent, borderline Marxist revolutionary who uses his "brains" to lead the oppressed, lower-class zombies' upheaval of society, leaving everyone, living and dead, on equal social footing.

The U.K.'s *28 Days Later* (2002) accompanied *Resident Evil* in the first wave of turn-of-the-century zombie movies that paved the way for *Land of the Dead*. *28 Days Later* differs from Romero's zombie template in several very conspicuous ways—the "infected" are not technically zombies because they are not dead, they kill but do not eat people, and they are fast and nimble, unlike the rigor mortis-plagued Romero dead. Still, it shares key traits with Romero's films. First, it is socially minded. The premise of a psychological virus—contagious rage—that harvests human emotions hits home the message that we are our own worst enemy. In a Romero-esque fashion, the script focuses largely on how survivors react to the crisis, becoming in many ways a bigger threat than the infected—resorting to kidnapping, rape, and murder in the name of maintaining society. As Henry (Christopher Eccleston), the leader of the soldiers who take in protagonists Jim (Cillian Murphy), Selena (Naomie Harris), and Hannah (Megan Burns), comments, the plague has not changed the world very much: "This is what I've seen in the four weeks since infection: people killing people, which is much what I saw in the four weeks before infection and the four weeks before that and before that." To drive home the point, the virus itself is man-made—by scientists experimenting on chimpanzees, feeding them video images of human rage—and is unleashed by the actions of other humans and animal rights activists.

The second kinship that *28 Days Later* shares with Romero's *Dead* series is its prominent Black presence. Selena is a Black warrior using her intelligence (having studied to be a pharmacist) and resourcefulness to survive. Jaded by the epidemic, she is also pragmatic and unsentimental, willing to kill a companion at the first sign of infection. Her cold-blooded nature could be seen as trending close to the callous, villainous soldiers who, in their minds, are also making the tough

decisions to do what needs to be done in this apocalyptic scenario, but through her interactions with her companions, Selena softens her stance that “staying alive is as good as it gets.”

The other memorable Black role in *28 Days Later* is that of Private Mailer (Marvin Campbell), a recently infected soldier-turned-unruly “slave.” He is held captive, in a nod to Bub in *Day of the Dead*, “to learn something about the infection.” While Bub is studied to discern traces of humanity, Mailer is kept merely to learn how long it takes the infected to starve to death. He is restrained by the mostly white soldiers with a chain around his neck, an image uncomfortably close to those from the transatlantic slave trade. Ultimately, when Jim frees Mailer from his bondage, the infected soldier unleashes his rage on his former masters.

After *28 Days Later*, the film that cemented zombies as the next big thing in horror was the 2004 remake of Romero’s own *Dawn of the Dead*. Unlike *28 Days Later* and Romero’s films, it lacks a sense of social commentary, playing more like the action-oriented, video game-based *Resident Evil* and *House of the Dead* (2003). Although the characters in Zack Snyder’s *Dawn* are completely different from those in Romero’s original, the story still revolves around a group of survivors during a zombie outbreak who take shelter in a shopping mall, and one of the primary members of the group is still a Black policeman. Ving Rhames plays Kenneth Hall, a burly, no-nonsense sergeant who is the muscle of the group. Unlike Peter (Ken Foree) in the original movie, Kenneth shies away from leadership. A man of few words, he is content with letting Michael (Jake Weber) act as the de facto leader because Kenneth’s focus is on leaving the mall to reunite with his brother.

Because the group grows to more than a dozen people, unlike the first film’s trio, there is room for a second Black character: Andre (Mekhi Phifer), a gun-toting criminal and loving husband seeking to protect his pregnant Russian wife. Andre and Kenneth embody typical “urban” archetypes—cop and hoodlum—and accordingly, their first interaction involves Andre shooting at Kenneth. Kenneth immediately sizes up Andre as a thug and eyes him suspiciously, but Andre has a sensitive side that he reveals to Kenneth, confessing that while he has done some bad things in his life, he has found purpose in providing a good life for his unborn child. The cop, however, offers no warm and fuzzy support for the criminal, accusing him of feeling contrite only because he is scared to die and go to Hell. This rare moment of introspection between two Black male characters in a major studio movie is novel but does not lead to any plot development or character growth. Kenneth’s big accomplishment is that he does not abandon the group when he has the chance, while Andre dies in a fit of rage and a hail of bullets, just as he might have done with no zombie apocalypse.

According to Snyder and producer Eric Newman, Rhames pursued the part of Kenneth, simply, “because the Black guy lives,” a testament to the low expectations for Black characters in horror.⁶⁰ Rhames himself expounded on the project’s appeal as a salve for the times:

What I liked about it was, I thought it's bringing people from different ethnicities, different cultures together who need each other. So when I look at the world, I really say unfortunately, sometimes it's an atrocity—let's say 9/11—that forces us to come together.⁶¹

Despite Rhames' cultural take, *Dawn* would come to embody modern zombie cinema's superficiality. Compared to Romero's works, which stressed that "zombies are people, removed from the living by accident," zombie fare of the 2000s treated the undead in a cold, detached manner that "revels in the notion of human beings as targets in a shooting gallery."⁶² But as shallow as modern zombie fare might have become in comparison to Romero's films, one thread of Romero's legacy remained throughout this decade of resurgence: Blackness. Taking their cues from Romero's template, zombie films consistently featured Black characters in starring and supporting roles throughout the decade.

In *House of the Dead*, Karma (Euka Okuma), despite functioning as little more than a third wheel to the two white stars, outlives most of the cast until she decides to sacrifice herself to save the heroic duo. *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) introduces L.J. (Mike Epps), a streetwise petty criminal who serves as comic relief and manages to survive until the next sequel. In *Death Valley: The Revenge of Bloody Bill* (2004), Earl (Gregory Bastien) is a drug dealer who carjacks a group of teens, including prissy Black girl Mandy (Denise Boutte), but redeems himself in the end by sacrificing himself to save the others from the zombie of a Confederate soldier. (Nonetheless, Mandy is still killed). In *Automaton Transfusion* (2008), Scott (William Howard Bowman), like Karma in *House of the Dead*, manages to survive most of the film until he realizes he is the third wheel to the white couple and offers himself up to the zombies for sacrifice. The DTV remake *Day of the Dead* (2008) is a ridiculously exaggerated video game of a movie in which Nick Cannon plays a wisecracking, casually sexist soldier who kills scores of wall-climbing zombies before succumbing near the climax, while Ving Rhames has a small featured role as an Army captain who turns into a zombie early in the film. There were also several "Black horror" and "Blacks in horror" zombie offerings during this time that were targeted to the Black market, as their "urban" titles so obviously indicate: *Zombiez*, *Hood of the Living Dead* (2005), *Gangs of the Dead* (2006), and *Mutant Vampire Zombies from the Hood!* (2008).

Romero's fifth zombie movie, the "found footage" *Diary of the Dead* (2007), was the first in his *Dead* series not to feature a Black character in its primary cast, but there is a noteworthy 12-minute sequence in which the central group of white college students is taken in by a band of Black survivalists who have stockpiled food, gas, weapons, and goods from surrounding areas. In what can be read as a statement about the circumstances surrounding Hurricane Katrina and the phenomenon of "white flight," the leader of the Black faction (Martin Roach) gives voice to perhaps the most overtly racial moment in Romero's films, declaring, "For the first time in our lives, we got the power, 'cause everybody else

left—all the folks without suntans.” That said, the film’s main protagonist, Debra (Michelle Morgan), undercuts that power via nothing more than white privilege and a firm voice, demanding that the nameless leader (referred to in the credits only as “Stranger”) give her group gas, food, and weapons just because they need it, stating that, even in this broken world, the Blacks are looters and thus not deserving of the goods any more than she is. “It’s easier just to give us what we need, isn’t it?” she reasons. “‘Cause otherwise, guess what? You’re gonna have to kill us.” Despite being dressed down in front of his people, Stranger complies, a move that Romero presumably meant as a showcase of the Black group’s humanity but which comes across as the entrenchment of white entitlement carrying over into the zombie apocalypse.

Ladies First

By the turn of the century, horror cinema had for decades been a haven for heroic roles played by women, as embodied in the Final Girl archetype identified by Carol Clover. However, outside of the Blaxploitation-fueled 1970s and its Enduring Women, it took until the 2000s for those roles to truly begin to include Black women *en masse*. The 1990s had occasional instances of Black female leads, like *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995), *Demon Knight* (1995), and *Beloved* (1998), but they were few and far between and were typically in “Black horror” movies from Black creatives catering to Black audiences.

At the onset of the twenty-first century, Angela Bassett co-starred in the sci-fi horror hybrid *Supernova* (2000) as Dr. Kaela Evers, the chief medical officer on a spaceship that rescues a man (Peter Facinelli) who has been genetically altered by an alien artifact. She teams with the ship’s captain, Nick Vanzant (James Spader), to defeat the villainous newcomer using a combination of brawn and brains. Like Selena in *28 Days Later*, Kaela is tough and emotionally closed off, the implication being that she was previously in an abusive relationship. *Supernova* was a box office bomb—burning through multiple directors and scripts before earning less than \$15 million on a budget approaching \$90 million—but it was also a landmark as a rare big-budget, mainstream, major-studio horror production with a Black female lead, years before Halle Berry in *Gothika* (2003).⁶³ Bassett plays the love interest of the white male lead in *Supernova*, a not insignificant feat at a time when interracial relationships were still controversial enough to propel entire movies, like *Save the Last Dance* (2001), *Guess Who* (2005), and *Something New* (2006). The movie includes a love scene between Kaela and Nick and even ends with the double reveal that he has impregnated her and that the two astronauts have had their DNA fused during a dimensional jump, a twenty-second-century racial reconciliation on a genetic level.

While Bassett shares top billing with Spader in *Supernova*, Halle Berry is the sole star of *Gothika* (despite appearances by Robert Downey Jr. and Penelope Cruz). She plays Miranda Grey, a psychiatrist who finds herself imprisoned in

the penitentiary where she used to work, accused of the murder of her husband (Charles S. Dutton). She blacked out on the night in question and initially does not recall anything that happened other than encountering a ghostly woman, a figure that continues to haunt her during her prison stay and who holds the key to the mystery behind the killing. The movie was critically derided, but with famed producers Joel Silver and Robert Zemeckis, it sported a hefty budget for a horror movie, \$40 million and earned a substantial profit, grossing around \$60 million in the U.S. and another \$80 million overseas, bolstering the perceived potential for films headlined by a Black woman.⁶⁴

Gothika touches upon issues like the sexual assault of women, mental health, and the abuse of power in the penal system, but it does so in a pulpy fashion that undercuts their impact. It similarly downplays race, despite scenes of a Black man preying on white women. (This race-neutral approach is the antithesis of the movie for which Berry won her historic Academy Award as the first-ever Black Best Actress the year prior: *Monster's Ball* [2001].) *Gothika*, as a horror movie, was a safer haven from serious-minded topics than a drama like *Monster's Ball*, about a Black woman (Berry) in a relationship with her son's executioner, a white corrections officer (Billy Bob Thornton). Almost as if reflexively springboarding away from the controversial racial and sexual politics of that film, Berry appeared in *Gothika* and a string of other lighter genre and action fare: the James Bond movie *Die Another Day* (2002), two X-Men films, *Catwoman* (2004), and the murder mystery *Perfect Stranger* (2007). Berry enjoyed the luxury of being one of the few Black actresses consistently afforded the leeway to star in such mainstream, major-studio movies; most others weren't so lucky.

Sanaa Lathan did not have the mainstream notoriety of Halle Berry, but her work in Black romances like *The Best Man* (1999), *The Wood* (1999), *Love & Basketball* (2000), and *Brown Sugar* (2002) provided an entry point into the highly anticipated horror franchise crossover *Alien vs. Predator* (2004). *AVP* presents a dramatic departure from previous *Predator* films, which located violence in the South African jungle or the L.A. inner city, with men serving as saviors. In *AVP*, the battle is moved to the Antarctic Ocean, providing an opportunity for Alexa Woods (Lathan), an intellectually sophisticated, expertly trained archeologist/scientist, to save the world from the Alien menace. Notably, Alexa pairs up with a Predator ("the enemy of my enemy is my friend") by being savvy enough to give up her weapon, thus showing herself as non-threatening, while also proving herself in the battle against an Aliens. The two function as a striking team, with Alexa even agreeing to allow the Predator to brand her face with its tribal insignia after she succeeds in killing a foe.⁶⁵ The ultimate survivor, Alexa manages to outlive even her Predator partner, who dies during their final showdown with the Alien queen. As with *Predator 2*, the movie ends with other Predators arriving on Earth to retrieve the body of their fallen comrade, bestowing upon Alexa the gift of a Predator spear, further signaling her initiation into their tribe.⁶⁶



FIGURE 9.1 Alexa Woods and the alien monster in *AVP*
20th Century-Fox/Photofest

Most other horror films with Black female leads during this time occupied nowhere near the same budgetary realm as *Alien vs Predator*, *Gothika*, or *Supernova*. In the DTV “Blacks in horror” movie *Arachnia* (2003), Chandra (Irene Joseph) fights alongside white leading man Sean (Rob Monkiewicz) in the battle against giant, carnivorous spiders. Like Selena in *28 Days Later* and Kaela in *Supernova*, Chandra is hard-nosed, intimidating, and ready to jump into the action, toting a rifle and butcher knife in the trenches. Between the dichotomous cinematic portrayals of Black women as either sexually available (as in *Monster’s Ball*) or frigid, Chandra is the latter. While the two white female characters in the film are highly sexualized, including a nude bath scene and a lesbian sex scene, Chandra is desexualized, wearing a turtleneck, bulky jacket, jeans, and hiking boots throughout the film. During a bedtime scene, the white women are dressed in thin lacy undergarments, while Chandra wears thermal underwear covering her completely from the neck down as she takes on a maternal role, scolding the immature, vapid white women for being too loud and ordering them to go to sleep. Coincidentally, four years later, another giant spider movie, *Ice Spiders* (2007), would also feature a Black leading lady: Vanessa Williams of *Candyman* fame. She plays April Sommers, a scientist whose work for the military accidentally unleashes the mutant arachnids. She is intelligent, tenacious, and aligned morally against the villainous military who seek to protect their monstrous specimens. In contrast to *Arachnia*’s Chandra, April is warm and engaging and is portrayed as attractive enough to inspire flirtation from the white male lead (Patrick Muldoon) but is not an overt sexual object, rebuffing his advances until the end, when she agrees to go out for dinner.

In *Shadow: Dead Riot* (2006), Carla Greene plays another no-nonsense, rough-and-tumble type named Solitaire, a recently imprisoned inmate who must battle jail yard bullies, zombies, and resurrected Satanic serial killer Shadow (Tony Todd). Unlike the somber *Gothika*, this treatment of incarcerated women is a campy spectacle that channels 1970s grindhouse fare from the Blaxploitation, kung-fu, zombie, and women-in-prison genres. Again in a seeming coincidence, another combination of horror and martial arts from around the same time, *Devon’s Ghost: Legend of the Bloody Boy* (2005), also starred a Black woman: Karan Ashley. Aware of the limitations inherent in most Black female roles, Ashley, who portrayed the Yellow Ranger in the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* TV series for two years, wrote and produced *Devon’s Ghost* with herself as the star. The film is a blend of slasher and martial arts that puts Ashley’s physical talents to good use playing a high school cheerleader who has to fight for her life against a bat-wielding maniac from her past.

A decade before her Best Actress Oscar nomination for *Loving* (2016), Ruth Negga was the last woman standing in the Irish creature feature *Isolation* (2005). In the same year as another Black female-led horror film from Ireland, “zom com” *Boy Eats Girl*, Negga co-starred as Mary, a young runaway who ends up squatting on a farm where bovine genetic testing has produced a lethal mutant

parasite. Mary is mild-mannered but courageous enough to put herself in the thick of the action. In a reversal of typical racial roles, the white male lead (John Lynch) sacrifices himself at the end to save her, before she puts her fortitude to good use in dispatching the monster.

Female-led “Black horror,” meanwhile, frequently brings with it sociopolitical messages for Black communities. *Street Tales of Terror* (2004) is an award-winning horror anthology in the same vein as *Tales from the Hood* (1995) or *Snoop Dogg’s Hood of Horror* (2006) sans the humor.⁶⁷ It presents a trilogy of women-centered cautionary morality tales such as “The Clinic,” in which Jalissa (Nicole Ford) is contemplating her second abortion. “The Clinic” is a “pregnancy horror” film, the kind of which that gained traction in the late 1960s as women’s liberationists shifted their activism away from others’ justice to their own.⁶⁸ She is terrorized by a bloody creature in her dreams which, of course, turns out to be her first aborted fetus (at the age it would be had it lived). Barbara Creed in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) notes horror films’ great interest in the “abject womb,” that is, seeing the woman’s womb—both inside and outside—as horrifying because of “its essential functions—it houses an alien life form, it causes alterations in the body” and then “a new life form will pass from inside to outside bring with it traces of contamination—blood, afterbirth, feces.”⁶⁹ Here, the film ends with Jalissa accepting prenatal information from her medical practitioner, hence, leaving her fetus intact. A surface reading of “The Clinic” is one of a pro-life, fundamentalist message. Scratching a bit deeper beneath that surface, but along the same trajectory, it is also a message movie about the future of the Black community harkening to the lyrics, “I believe the children are our future . . . show them all the beauty they possess inside,” as sung by George Benson in 1977’s *Greatest Love of All*. Indeed, its other message is about the larger sociocultural duty of motherhood—to deliver beautiful Black children, and the purity, hope, and promise that they bring. As Sobchack elaborates, “the baby has been culturally produced as a figure of poignant sweetness—helpless, vulnerable, and dependent,” not yet corrupted, while assuring the inscription of new social experiences and enacting new, promising histories.⁷⁰ What is clear is that “The Clinic,” like much of “Black horror,” resists the *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) impulse in which “the womb [is] the new graveyard,” as childbearing itself is not typically associated with the monstrous or demonic.⁷¹ Rather, it is the cessation of childbearing that generates the monstrosity in “The Clinic,” a concept that also propels the “Black horror” feature *Unborn Sins* (2007), in which the “damned” spirit of an aborted fetus, in the form of a white-faced ghoul, stalks his mother (Michele Harris) and the abortion clinic workers responsible for his death.

In the second story in *Street Tales of Terror*, “The Reckoning,” a well-behaved little girl, Jessica (Tenia Yarbrough), is teased and bullied before being drowned in a swimming pool by three of her classmates. On her twentieth birthday, Jessica’s ghost returns and she and her mother, Mama (Shirley Whitmore), get their revenge on the now young woman who killed her. Here, the poisonous Black

mother is depicted (a trope brought into stark relief by Mo’Nique’s Academy Award–winning portrayal of Mary in the film *Precious* [2009]), but the audience is asked to understand her madness turned to evil as she is consumed by unbearable grief. It is explained that Jessica was killed on the same day Mama was burying her young nephew. Hence, Mama grieves lost innocence and promise, the kind of which is protected in “The Clinic.” Finally, in “Graduation Night,” Bernice (Mykei Gray), a strait-laced college student, is raped by a star athlete at a party as her fellow co-eds fail to intervene. In the aftermath of the rape, upon discovering she is pregnant and expelled from the school because of code-of-conduct (hence, blaming the victim) violations, Bernice hangs herself, and as a ghost exacts her bloody revenge. Here, put on display is the difficulty rape victims face when attempting to report the crime, as well as when a “lesser” victim fighting back against a “star” perpetrator.

Such victimization of Black women by men is a recurring theme in “Black horror” fare. The inevitable vengeance may be supernatural, like “Graduation Night,” but more often it remains grounded in reality—“keeping it real,” as it were. Rape-revenge tales like *Gold Digger Killer* (2007) and *Chop Shop* (2007), for instance, present women who are sexually assaulted and then seek violent retribution on the perpetrators. The former explores the pervasive Black female stereotype of the “gold digger,” a woman who uses her sexuality to enter into a relationship with a man for financial gain. Popularized by the hip-hop industry with songs like Kanye West’s “Gold Digger,” the gold digger is rooted in historically racist archetypes of Black women, specifically “the hypersexual Jezebel and the financially dependent Welfare Mother.”⁷² The movie takes pains to point out that the protagonist, Imani (Shatara Curry), is actually not a gold digger by positioning her alongside her gold digger friends, who casually frequent abortion clinics because “you can’t party with no fuckin’ kids.” When one of their friends dies from a self-performed abortion because her boyfriend would not pay for the procedure, Imani’s friends reason, “Look at the way they treat women. That’s why you have to get them for whatever you can.” By contrast, Imani is an industrious woman who goes to school and works full time. She agrees to go to a club with her gold digger friends only because she loses her job after her car breaks down and is desperate to find a way to pay her bills. She is assaulted by the type of men that her friends typically target. While the men are villains and receive their comeuppance, there is little sympathy for the “real” gold diggers. Imani is portrayed as an innocent caught in the crossfire in the war between the equally at fault sexes.⁷³ Ultimately, at the heart of the demonization of so-called gold diggers is the concept that, according to Dionne P. Stephens and Layli D. Phillips, “Money and sex are hot commodities, and women are not supposed to have both.”⁷⁴ In *Chop Shop*, the Black protagonist, Lisa (Shannon Michaels), is an outsider whose car breaks down in a small rural town, where she falls prey to the lecherous white mechanics hired to fix it. Despite the racial difference between rapists and the victim, race is not overtly addressed, and the movie ends up as an

otherwise conventional rape-revenge exercise made all the more distasteful by an illogical “twist” ending that reveals that Lisa was in a relationship with the brother of the perpetrators and plotted with him to kill them all along, implying that she was somehow complicit in the rape-revenge cycle.

In “Black horror” films, women are not merely victims, however. Rather, they continue to thrive as conquering heroes, capably battling zombies or, rather, “zombiez,” as Josephine (Jenicia Garcia) does in *Zombiez*, taking on cannibal monsters and sexist co-workers. Josephine recalls the toughness of Sugar from *Sugar Hill* (1974) and the resourcefulness of Lisa in *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973), as well as Grandma in *Def by Temptation* (1990), as she fights off evil. In *Bleeding Rose* (2007), Ebony (Sakeena Nicole) finds the inner strength to defeat the spirit of her Satanic white ex-boyfriend, who is able to possess and kill those close to her.

Men are not always the villains in these female-led films, of course. In *The Sorority* (2006), college student Isabel (April Cook) infiltrates a sorority of satanic witches in order to find out the truth behind her sister’s death. In *Sorority Sister Slaughter* (2007), Tessa (Terry Bookhart) and her housemates strive to placate the murderous ghost of a Black 1950s sorority sister who is haunting their sorority house. *Single Black Female* (2009) presents a clever take on the standard stalker movie scenario by making the audience think that the person responsible for the series of deaths surrounding leading lady Karma (Farrah Franklin) is her white, lesbian roommate who has a crush on her—much like the film’s namesake *Single White Female* (1992)—when in fact it is Karma herself who is the murderer. After completing her killing spree and framing her dead brother for the crimes, Karma shoots her male accomplice and lover, asserting her independence with the line, “I’m a single Black female. I don’t believe in relationships.”

By contrast, the nearly identical “Black horror” films *Cryptz* and *Vampz*, which even share co-star Rick Irvin as a vampire victim, lean into unfortunate misogynoir abuses. Certainly, horror is not the genre to carry the flag of so-called political correctness; however, these films do quite a bit of damage to understandings of Black womanhood. Both films invite a primarily male gaze upon, in the case of *Cryptz*, female stripper vampires working a stripper pole, topless, for a *very* long time before getting on with the business of sucking the blood of their victims. The vampires are denied the sexy seduction of the Gothic Dracula as their male victims belittle the women, hurling crude, sexist comments at them even as the vampire women send them to their (un)death. Of course, the women are eventually vanquished, with their stripper outfits permitting a better view of stakes, driven into them by a group of men, impaling their breasts (shown by a lingering money-shot of their bosoms) before reaching their hearts. *Vampz* builds on this woman-as-sex-object vision by providing scenes of the vampire women kissing and having sex with each other. However, this is not inscribed as a feminist moment; rather, it is a sort of lesbian chic spicing up the film for male eyes. In both films, the men unfailingly boast of their sexual prowess, more so in

the face of the lesbian “make-out” scenes in which the women gaze at the men teasingly while in an embrace. There is no question that these women will die as their interest in each other functions to usurp men’s power; that is men’s ability to abuse and engage in sexual conquests with women.⁷⁵

Zombies for Obama: Black Horror Forever

I Could Never Be Barackula.

—*Barackula: The Musical*⁶

A man, out of an “exotic” land, is one part charming and one part mysteriously powerful. He is a mesmerizer turning people into automatons—duping even the smartest and strongest into doing his bidding. In 1932’s *White Zombie*, the threat was Murder Legendre, who, tainted by Haiti, exploited its Voodoo power to create a legion of mindless, inexhaustible laborers working on his behalf. In the late 2000s, conservatives said that it was Barack Obama, hailing from exotic Hawaii, or Indonesia or, generically, “Africa,” who, according to Klein and Elliott in *The Manchurian President: Barack Obama’s Ties to Communists, Socialists and Other Anti-American Extremists*, was “eloquent, winsome and charismatic,” “the most powerful man in the world,” and importantly, “HE ISN’T WHAT HE SEEMS.”⁷⁷ Purportedly, Obama was wielding his seductive power over the U.S.’ most precious commodity, the iPod generation. Jason Mattera, in his book *Obama Zombies: How the Liberal Machine Brainwashed My Generation*, cast young adults under 30 years of age as monstrous disappointments—zombies—for the cause of freedom in America, as they toiled to propagate Obama’s message of hope and change as if “iPods would drop from heaven.”⁷⁸ Obama and his campaign managers, particularly his digital technologies coordinating team (e.g., those providing material for Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube), were, in essence, the twenty-first-century equivalent of Murder Legendre as they continued to dupe masses of young people, getting them to focus on the whole shininess of it all as if Obama was a hypnotist.

Klein and Elliott and Mattera were far from the first people to link Obama to horror. There was the rather scary Obama vampire Halloween mask.⁷⁹ Add to that Firas Alkhateeb’s digitally altered, widely distributed image of Obama as the Joker from *The Dark Knight* (2008). The *New York Post* cartoonist Sean Delonas even linked Obama to a rampaging chimpanzee that was shot down, King Kong-style, in Connecticut, by police. In the cartoon, the police loom over the body of a blood-soaked monkey with two bullet holes in its chest, concluding, “They’ll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill.”⁸⁰ Horror’s next theme, which was already upon audiences thanks to the sci-fi and action genres, was one of a Black President at the helm as the U.S. (and, hence, the free world) faced annihilation, as depicted in works like *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Deep*

Impact (1998), TV's *24* (Fox, 2001–2010), the Kirk Cameron Rapture thriller *Left Behind: World at War* (2005), and *2012* (2009). In these fictions, there is always a white savior (with Bruce Willis saving the world twice for his President) coming to the rescue. Only *Bubba Hotep's* (2002) John F. Kennedy, who actually survived his assassination and is hiding out in the body of a Black man (Ossie Davis), was the exception to white savior-dom.

But even from Obama's supporters, there emerged horror imagery: that of a stereotyped Black role that had become increasingly common in genre films. Obama had become "a Magical Negro to the entire nation; he would rectify the nation's many problems, assuage white guilt over racism, and simultaneously recast black men as reasoned leaders in place of stereotypes of hypersexuality and criminality."⁸¹ The panacea that Obama represented could never have come to fruition, and as America was busy patting itself on the back for electing him, it was woefully unprepared to discover in the coming decade that racism was still alive and well and that the plight of Blacks would become fodder for not only real-life horrors but also horrors on the big screen.

Notes

- 1 Public Enemy. "Louder Than a Bomb." *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Def Jam, 1988. CD.
- 2 Durant, Thomas J., Jr. and Dawood Sultan. "The Impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Race and Class Divide in America." *Seeking Higher Ground: The Hurricane Katrina Crisis, Race, and Public Policy Reader*. Eds. Manning Marable and Kristen Clarke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). 197–98. Print.
- 3 Crump, Jeff, Kathe Newman, Eric S. Belsky, Phil Ashton, David H. Kaplan, Daniel J. Hammel, and Elvin Wylly. "Cities Destroyed (Again) for Cash: Forum on the US Foreclosure Crisis." *Urban Geography* 29.8 (2008): 745. Web. January 6, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.29.8.745>.
- 4 McAlister, Elizabeth. "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85.2 (2012): 482. Print.
- 5 Alexander, George. "Fade to Black." *Black Enterprise*. December 1, 2000. Web. Retrieved Jan 6, 2022 from www.thefreelibrary.com/Fade+to+Black.-a067493014.
- 6 Boyd, Todd. "A Black Man in a Dress: No Laughing Matter." *NPR*. August 8, 2006. Web. January 7, 2022. www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5626512.
- 7 Chen, Gina Masullo, Sherri Williams, Nicole Hendrickson, and Li Chen. "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective on How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves." *Mass Communication and Society* 15.1 (2022): 115–135. Web. January 7, 2022. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2011.569682>.
- 8 Alexander.
- 9 Kirsner, Scott. "How DVDs became a success." *Variety*, April 23, 2007. Web. January 7, 2022. <https://variety.com/2007/digital/features/how-dvds-became-a-success-1117963617/>.
- 10 Arnold, Thomas K. "Coming Back for Seconds, Thirds . . ." *USA Today*. usatoday.com. September 26, 2005. Web. July 26, 2010. Apart from full theatrical releases, there are also film festivals and on-demand rentals.
- 11 Bick, Julie. "Attack of the Sequel King!" *Fast Company* 77 (2003): 33. Print.
- 12 Goldstein, Gregg. "Filmmakers Take Direct Flight to DVD." *Hollywood Reporter* 393 (2006): 1, 10. Web. July 26, 2010.

- 13 Arnold, Thomas K. "Mining the minority audience." *USA Today*. January 2, 2006. Web. January 7, 2022. www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2006-01-02-minority-dvds_x.htm.
- 14 Hoag, Christina. "Maverick Entertainment Reaches Direct-to-Video Urban Movie Market." *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, September 25, 2005.1. Print. For a full list of Maverick releases, refer to www.maverickentertainment.cc/movies/.
- 15 Associated Press. "Straight-to-video gives new life to black films." *Today.com*. January 8, 2004. Web. January 7, 2022. www.today.com/popculture/straight-video-gives-new-life-black-films-wbna3888594.
- 16 Coakley, H.M. "Commentary" *Holla*. DVD. Directed by H.M. Coakley. Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2006.
- 17 "Holla' for Halloween: Urban Horror Film Weaves in Comedy for a Scary Time." *Eurweb.com*. Eurweb.com. October 29, 2007. Web. October 29, 2007.
- 18 At the very end of the film, the "White boy" is shown with the killer's mask in his backpack, alluding to the fact he may have been a killer alongside "Carlton."
- 19 Fulmer, J. "'Men Ain't All'—A Reworking of Masculinity in Tales from the Hood, or, Grandma Meets the Zombie." *Journal of American Folklore* 115(457/458): 433. Print.
- 20 Fulmer (433).
- 21 New York International Independent Film and Video Festival Winner 2006.
- 22 For an extraordinarily comprehensive accounting of Black horror films and films featuring Blacks, see: Mark H. Harris. Web. April 2, 2022. blackhorrorrmovies.com. 2005–2022.
- 23 Jeff Carroll, writer and producer of *Holla If I Kill You* (2003), keeps the z+hip hop trend alive through his books such as the incontrovertibly titled *Horror Streets: The Book of Hip Hop Horror Stories*. Pembroke Pines, FL: HipnHop Comix n Flix, 2018
- 24 "Are You Ready for Freddy?" by the rap group the Fat Boys, played during the end credits. "A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master." *IMDb.com*, *IMDb.com* Inc. Web. August 12, 2010.
- 25 Notably, horror is now rife with all manner of Black (often male) monster slayers, especially in straight-to-DVD films. For example, *The Breed* (2001) co-starred Bokeem Woodbine as a cop/vampire hunter in an alternate universe with, ironically, a vampire as his partner on the force. *Vegas Vampires* (2004) brings back 1970s Blaxploitation-era icons Fred Williamson, Richard Roundtree, and Bernie Casey, teaming them up with known "urban" Black film stars Tiny Lister and Glenn Plummer as well as rapper Kurupt to attract a range of audiences. The movie *Vampire Assassin* (2005) was a fairly low-budget affair, but drummed up attention with a cameo by 1970s Blaxploitation/horror icon Rudy Ray Moore and through DVD cover art that presented a Blade lookalike who did not appear in the film.
- 26 Jones, Eileen. "Will Smith's Hancock Fiasco." *Alternet.com*. *Alternet*. July 5, 2008. Web. July 25, 2010. www.alternet.org/story/90473/will_smith/27s_%27hancock%27_fiasco.
- 27 There are also *Soy Leyenda* (1967) and SyFy's *I Am Omega* (2007).
- 28 McAlister, Elizabeth. "Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85.2: 482. Print.
- 29 Warner, Kristen. *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*. 2015. Xiii. Print.
- 30 Harvey, Ben. *Night of the Living Dead*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.10. Print.
- 31 Smith (139).
- 32 *Urban Gothic*. Dir. Michelle Palmer. Perf. Ernest Dickerson, Adam Simon. Automat Pictures, 2002. Film.
- 33 "Bones." *Box Office Mojo.com*. *IMDb.com* Inc., n.d. Web. July 26, 2010; "Bones." *IMDb.com*, *IMDb.com* Inc., 1990–2010. Web. July 26, 1020.
- 34 Delaval, Craig. "Cocaine, Conspiracy Theories and the CIA in Central America." *Frontline*. October 19, 2000. Web. www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/special/cia.html. January 11, 2022.

- 35 Reid, Mark A. *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*. Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.74. Print.
- 36 Burgin, Horror Noire.
- 37 Denzin, Norman K. *Reading Race*. London: Sage, 2002.113. Print.
- 38 Alexander, George. *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk about the Magic of Cinema*. New York: Harlem Moon, 2003.114. Print.
- 39 Hopes for the film were high, with all involved in the project hoping to turn the film into a franchise of the likes of *Crypt* or the more recent *Scary Movie* series. The additional goal, according to co-producer Christopher Tuffin, was to “push the envelope combining humor and gore.” “Snoop Scraps: Rapper to Produce/Star in Horror Pic.” Eurweb.com. Eurweb.com. April 20, 2006. Web. July 25, 2010.
- 40 Richards, Chris. “Va. Slayings Spur Harder Look at Horrorcore.” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2009. Washington Post Company. Web. July 25, 2010.
- 41 Kangas, Chaz. “The Story Behind Def Jam’s Worst-Selling, and Most Misunderstood, Album Ever.” *Village Voice*. October 31, 2014. Web. January 11, 2022. www.villagevoice.com/2014/10/31/the-story-behind-def-jams-worst-selling-and-most-misunderstood-album-ever/.
- 42 Actually, the quality of *Now Eat* is rather low, and Lynch delivers his raps in his bedroom in a low-quality, plug-in microphone. Hence, I had to get the lyrics from the *Now Eat*. soundtrack CD. See: Brotha Lynch Hung. *Now Eat*. Siccmade Records, 2000. CD.
- 43 Bulwa, Demian. “Bay Area Suspect Allegedly Bludgeoned Victims.” San Francisco Chronicle. Hearst Communications Inc. September 23, 2009. Web. July 25, 2010.
- 44 According to Box Office Mojo.com, *The Blair Witch Project’s* (1999) total domestic gross is \$140,539,009, while *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) has a total domestic gross of \$34,020,184. “The Blair Witch Project.” “Snakes on a Plane.” Box Office Mojo.com. IMDb.com Inc., n.d. Web. August 10, 2010.
- 45 These remakes were joined by increased serialization. For example, eight *Halloween* movies were made before director Rob Zombie started over with his *Halloween and Halloween II* (2009). The narrative effect of serialization was that the audience came to expect that, no matter what happened, the monster was never really dead, a narrative tool that could be viewed as either clichéd “cheating” to market more films or postmodern innovation disrupting death and even (anti)heroism.
- 46 Bowles, Scott. “Horror Glut Killing off Part of the Pack.” *USA Today*, April 30, 2007: D1. Print.
- 47 Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*. Essex: Pearson, 2004. vii. Print.
- 48 Fischhoff, Stuart, Joe Antonio, and Diane Lewis. “Favorite Films and Film Genres as a Function of Race, Age, and Gender.” *Journal of Media Psychology* 3.22 (1998). Web. August 10, 2010.
- 49 Carvajal, Doreen. “How the Studios Used Children to Test-Market Violent Films.” *New York Times*, September 27, 2000: A1, A21. Print.
- 50 Edelstein, David. “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn.” *New York Magazine*, January 26, 2006. Web. January 13, 2022. <https://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/>.
- 51 Pinedo, Isabel C. “Torture Porn,” *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff. Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014, 358. Print.
- 52 Frankel, Daniel. “‘Paranormal’ Now the Most Profitable Film Ever.” *The Wrap*, October 28, 2009.
- 53 Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. *Found Footage Horror Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014.4. Print.
- 54 Heller-Nicholas (22).
- 55 Graham, Jane. “Hoodies Strike Fear in British Cinema.” *The Guardian*, November 5, 2009. Web. January 16, 2022. www.theguardian.com/film/2009/nov/05/british-hoodie-films.

- 56 Grossman, Lev. “Zombies Are the New Vampires.” *Time*, April 9, 2009. Web. January 31, 2022. <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1890384,00.html>.
- 57 Kay, Glenn. *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 2008.183. Print.
- 58 Nicholas L. Carnagey, Craig A. Anderson, Brad J. Bushman. The Effect of Video Game Violence on Physiological Desensitization to Real-life Violence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43.3 (2007): 489–496, ISSN 0022–1031, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.05.003>. (www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103106000825)
- 59 Mes, Tom. “Romero’s Unseen Evil.” Fangoria 211. April 2002.19. Print.
- 60 Snyder, Zack and Eric Newman. “Commentary.” *Dawn of the Dead, Collector’s Edition. Blu-ray. Directed by Zack Snyder*. Los Angeles, CA: Shout! Factory, 2017.
- 61 Gilchrist, Todd. “Interview: The Cast of Dawn of the Dead.” IGN, March 18, 2004. Web. www.ign.com/articles/2004/03/18/interview-the-cast-of-dawn-of-the-dead. January 22, 2022.
- 62 Sharrett, Christopher. “The Horror Film as Social Allegory (And How It Comes Undone).” *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Ed. Harry M. Benshoff. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2014.63. Print.
- 63 “Supernova.” Box Office Mojo. www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl4134700545/weekend/. The number 1 movie in Supernova’s opening weekend was the comedy sequel *Next Friday*, which, as a Black-oriented film, opened in half the number of theaters as Supernova but earned more than twice Supernova’s tally for the weekend. www.boxofficemojo.com/weekend/2000W02/. Web. January 23, 2022.
- 64 “Gothika.” Box Office Mojo. www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0348836/. Web. January 24, 2022.
- 65 Alexa is marked by the Predator as being “his”—on his team, part of his clan—on her face, using the acid blood from the Alien she killed.
- 66 In *Predator 2*, the male hero (Danny Glover) received a valuable antique gun, presumably taken by a Predator as a trophy after defeating a human opponent a century or more prior.
- 67 Horror Dance Film Festival Director’s Choice; Denver International World Cinema Film Festival Best Feature and Best Actor; Chicago Horror Film Festival 2nd Place Best Director, all 2006.
- 68 Chambers, Amy. The (Re)birth of Pregnancy Horror in Alice Lowe’s *Prevenge*. *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre*. Ed. Alison Peirse. New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2020.212. Print.
- 69 Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.49. Print
- 70 Sobchack, V. “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange.” *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.148. Print.
- 71 Skal, David J. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. Revised ed. New York, NY: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2001.294. Print.
- 72 Stephens, Dionne P., and Layli D. Phillips. “Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas and Dykes: The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African American Women’s Sexual Scripts.” *Sexuality and Culture* 7 (2003): 18. Web. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03159848>.
- 73 It should be noted that in both *Gold Digger Killer* and *Chop Shop*, there is one “token” female who participates in the assault with the men, perhaps an homage to female assailant Sadie (Jeramie Rain) in Wes Craven’s seminal rape-revenge film *The Last House on the Left* (1972), which established a template that many similar movies would follow.
- 74 Stephens and Phillips (19–20).

- 75 Zimmerman, B. "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. B.K. Grant. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.385. Print.
- 76 *Barackula: The Musical*. Dir. Mike Lawson. Barackula.com, 2008. Web. July 25, 2010.
- 77 Klein, Aaron with Brenda J. Elliott. *The Manchurian President: Barack Obama's Ties to Communists, Socialists and Other Anti-American Extremists*. Washington, DC: WorldNet-Daily Books, 2010. Print.
- 78 *Jason Mattered on Obama Zombies*. Simon and Schuster Videos. YouTube.com. YouTube LLC, 2010. Web. July 27, 2010.
- 79 "Barakula Full Latex Mask." Halloween Express.com. Halloween Express, 1999–2010. Web. July 27, 2010.
- 80 Delonas, Sean. Cartoon. *New York Post*. February 18, 2009: 12. Print.
- 81 McAlister (482).

10

REPRESENTATION, RECOGNITION, AND RENAISSANCE

2010s to Present

There's a perpetualness to the story of racial horror in this country. It doesn't go away; it changes shape and it changes form, and it's elusive, and it's sneaky.

—Jordan Peele, “Say My Name”¹

As the 2010s dawned, there was little doubt that the status of Blacks in horror had come a long way over the previous decades, with the number of “Black horror” and “Blacks in horror” movies climbing to all-time highs. However, the Black presence in horror (and for that matter, in Hollywood as a whole) still largely remained on the fringes (a sentiment that has been repeated decade after decade across this book). To the average American in 2010, the concept of Blacks in horror conjured one of only a few images: Tony Todd’s Candyman, Duane Jones’ Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*, and, perhaps, William Marshall’s Blacula. More likely, the image conjured was that of death: the well-worn cliché that the Black character is the first person to be killed in a horror movie. The prevalence of this perception is indicative of the fact that, despite increased visibility, Blacks in “Blacks in horror” films were still predominantly relegated to supporting (disposable) roles. “Black horror” films, meanwhile, struggled to rise above the direct-to-video threshold to gain a foothold in the national consciousness. As such, Black contributions to the genre were, by and large, downplayed or dismissed. Of the 200 most critically acclaimed horror movies identified by review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes, only four (2%) before 2010 featured Black leads or co-leads.² Of the 200 highest-grossing horror movies identified by box office tracker The Numbers, only 10 (5%) before 2010 featured Black leads or co-leads.³ For most of America, Black horror was a virtual nonentity, something that popped up fleetingly during Black cinematic movements, from the

Blaxploitation 1970s to the New Jack 1990s. But by the end of the tumultuous 2010s, all of that would change.

In many ways, the plight of the Black presence in horror resembled the plight of Black Americans as a whole. By the 2010s, the nation was forced to come to terms with its pattern of racial abuse, inequality, and underrepresentation, issues that likewise plagued horror. A string of flagrant, racially tinged abuses of white privilege and miscarriages of justice made it virtually impossible for the American public to deny or undercut the injury inflicted on the Black community. Aside from the sheer number of high-profile incidents, the enormity of their impact on mainstream attitudes owed greatly to the fact that so many of them were caught on camera. The increasing ubiquity of cell phone video technology, along with police body cams and video surveillance cameras, significantly increased the likelihood that the abuses that Black Americans had complained about for decades would be captured on video as a repudiation of denials of their pain. In a very real sense, these amateur “horror movies” fueled a movement, and the movement in turn fueled professional movies on the big screen—most obviously in films like *Fruitvale Station* (2013), the fact-based drama that portrays the last day in the life of Oscar Grant before he is killed by a police officer in Oakland, California. In cases like this, while “the fact that the event was captured on cameras meant that the claim of a broken policing system was irrefutable,” the cinematic dramatization afforded victims like Grant a sense of humanity that the amateur videos lacked.⁴ The push for social justice became so strong across the nation that horror could not avoid the topic that was on everyone’s lips: race.

From the time Barack Obama was elected President of the United States in November 2008, race was pushed to the front and center of American sociopolitical discourse. During an NBC News telecast of the election results, when it became clear that Obama would win, commentator and former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani opined the wishful thinking of many white Americans: “We’ve achieved history tonight and we’ve moved beyond . . . the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness.”⁵ Indeed, this was the “hope” for many white Obama voters, who sought to prove that America was not racist—arguably not so much to end racism as to end the discussion about racism. Ironically, Obama was elected in part because he consciously adhered to “a raceless political stance” so as not to alienate white voters.⁶ Tim Wise saw his election as, at best, the defeat of old-fashioned racism, “Racism 1.0,” by another, “Racism 2.0,” which endorsed his victory “because of his ability to ease white fears and transcend his still-problematic blackness.”⁷ Obama was one of the good ones, an Exceptional Negro who “needed to convince his White supporters that he was not going to be a Jesse Jackson or an Al Sharpton.”⁸ While it worked, America’s self-congratulatory celebration over his election was short-lived, as the nation’s attempt to sweep race under the rug neglected the fact that the rug was already resting on a mountain of dirt.

Racist resentment against Obama bubbled up in reactions ranging from localized events like a hanging in effigy at the University of Kentucky and the head of Wolfeboro, New Hampshire's police commission calling him a "nigger" because "he meets and exceeds my criteria for such," to national events like federal judge Richard Cebull emailing a joke implying that Obama's white mother was drunkenly impregnated at a party in which she had sex with Black men and dogs, and 2012 Republican Presidential candidate Newt Gingrich calling him the "food stamp President."⁹

Many criticisms of Obama attempted to skirt the race issue by attacking his Americanness: the fact that his father was born in Kenya, that his full name, Barack Hussein Obama, was similar to notorious Muslim figures Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, and the unspoken opinion that he did not "look American" i.e., white). The xenophobia-drenched racism culminated in the "birther" conspiracy theory that Obama was not born in the United States and thus was unqualified to be President. The leading proponent of the theory was billionaire businessman and reality show star Donald Trump, who would later rise to become the (twice impeached) Republican President after Obama's second term. Ironically, Trump's Scottish mother herself was not born in the U.S., but no one challenged his identity because he looked "American."

It was thus clear that America had not magically transformed into a "post-racial" society with the election of Barack Obama as President. He inherited a nation in the midst of the Great Recession, and the frustrations of Americans—many unemployed with foreclosed housing—made them all the more impatient and susceptible to the blame game of partisan politics. Economic hardships shortened fuses, exposing fissures within American society, long-festering wounds and divisions that came to the surface in acts of violent racial profiling throughout the 2010s and 2020s. The 2013 acquittal of Trayvon Martin killer George Zimmerman on murder charges spurred the formation of the influential grassroots organization Black Lives Matter, whose stated purpose is "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes."¹⁰

Even after the end of Obama's second term, race remained in the spotlight because of the reactionary choice of the next President: Donald Trump. In horror terms, Trump was a Frankenstein monster created by the prejudicial policies of the modern Republican Party,¹¹ the partisan deceitfulness and alarmism of Fox News, and the spectacle of reality TV. Trump's rhetoric, beliefs, and actions teemed with racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, sexism, and ableism, trafficking in half-truths and flat-out lies,¹² providing the green light for citizens to similarly espouse their long-held prejudices and unsubstantiated suspicions, and fueling hate groups and conspiracy theorists like QAnon. The seeds of hatred and paranoia came to a head-on January 6, 2021, when a lame-duck Trump, having lost his bid for reelection the prior November, whipped a throng of his supporters at the Ellipse in Washington DC into a frenzy and unleashed them on the Capitol.

The group had gathered in response to Trump's spurious claims of election fraud. Predictably, the riled-up mob attacked the Capitol, assaulting police, vandalizing the building, and actively seeking members of Congress with the intention to capture, assault, or possibly even kill.

Against this volatile backdrop, Black horror found its voice. It channeled real-life horrors into fictional ones, expressing not only the frustration, rage, and fear that comes along with being Black but also the sense of resilience and community. Black-centric "Blacks in horror" movies in particular recognized the importance of the era and angled its content with a sociopolitical slant. Like all Black movie genres, Black horror had to grapple with the question of how to process the events that so deeply impacted its core audience. Horror is uniquely positioned as a genre that trafficks in the dark side of humanity, but how does it respond when the reality is more horrific than the images in a typical fright film? Ava DuVernay's dramatization of the 1989 "Central Park Five" case *When They See Us* (2019) was a horror movie in its own right—an American nightmare of racial profiling, abuse of authority, and presumed guilt not only by authorities but also by the general public, including none other than Donald Trump, who took out a full-page ad in New York City newspapers calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty. So, what more could horror do to scare Black viewers?

Horror movies of the 2000s had to adapt to a world whose frame of reference for violence was hardened by video games and online videos of torture and executions; horror movies of the 2010s had to adapt to a deluge of images of racialized violence. Ultimately, just as (white) America needed a glaring, undeniable instance of police abuse like that of George Floyd in order to accept, at least nominally, that Black Lives Matter was not a movement of extremism or "reverse racism," so too did the nation need a glaring, undeniable instance of the potential of Black horror in order to remove it from the fringes of cinema and make it more than a novelty act. That film was *Get Out* (2017).

Get Out: The Post-Racial Lie Exposed

After Obama's 2008 election, there was a notion floated by some observers of America suddenly emerging as a racial utopia, "a place where the primacy of racial identity—and this includes the old, Jesse Jackson version of black racial identity—has been replaced by the celebration of pluralism, of cross-racial synergy."¹³ By 2015, more Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center believed race relations to be "generally bad" than "generally good" for the first time since the turn of the century.¹⁴ It was evident that the nation had not moved past race into a "post-racial" society and would become even more apparent upon the election of Donald Trump, whose intolerant rhetoric provided a de facto green light for bigotry, from the backlash against Black Lives Matter and other social justice endeavors to the Islamophobia of his 2017 Muslim travel ban to Latinx hatred spawned by his portrayal of Mexican immigrants as drug dealers and rapists to the

anti-Asian sentiment exacerbated by his labeling of COVID-19 as the “China virus.”

Ironically, while many liberal Democrats were all too eager to buy into the concept of a post-racial America during Obama’s term, that same concept has long been a tenet held by modern conservative Republicans like Ronald Reagan who harbored

the myopic view that with the passage of the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s, which he, of course, had opposed, America was now “a color-blind” society whose doors were open to African Americans as long as they took “the initiative to walk on through.”¹⁵

Such problematic common ground on the topic of race from both sides of the political aisle gives some indication of the rationale behind writer-director Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, a film that stresses to Black people that even supposed allies might not have your best interest in mind.

Get Out begins in a “white” suburb whose veneer of pristine houses and immaculately manicured lawns masks a layer of malevolence, subverting the image of upper middle-class perfection in much the same way that vintage teen slashers like *Halloween* (1978) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) did decades earlier. While consciously evoking *Halloween* in its opening shot,¹⁶ *Get Out* adds a layer of race that went unspoken in suburban slashers of yesteryear, starting with the image of a young Black man, Andre (LaKeith Stanfield), strolling down a tree-lined sidewalk at night, complaining to his girlfriend on the phone about getting lost in “this creepy, confusing-ass suburb.” He over-enunciates the word “suburb” in a comical exaggeration of a “white” voice¹⁷ to acknowledge his awareness of his status as an outsider in this white space, this willfully homogenous “Whitopia.”¹⁸ The navigation of white spaces—defined by Elijah Anderson as “settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present”—is a running theme throughout *Get Out*.¹⁹ While a suburban sidewalk might not seem like a setting for a horror movie, the sense of isolation in a white space can fuel anxiety in Blacks. Indeed, per Coleman and Lawrence, “Andre senses potential danger in what is commonly understood as a safe space.”²⁰

The deserted street takes on a new sense of terror when a car drives past Andre, circles, and pulls up next to him. We cannot see inside the (appropriately) white vehicle, giving it an ominous, ghostly presence, not unlike the killer car in the film *Christine* (1983). It does not have to be supernatural in nature for the car to strike fear in the mind of a Black man in a white space, however. As Anderson observes, “In white neighborhoods, Blacks may anticipate such profiling or hassling by the neighborhood watch group, whose mission is to monitor the ‘suspicious-looking,’” a situation that can escalate into murderous tragedy, as the Ahmaud Arbery case attests.²¹ More, because “whites and others often stigmatize anonymous Black persons by associating them with the putative danger,

crime, and poverty of the iconic ghetto . . . many can be mobilized in complicity to ‘protect’ the white space,” which again happened with Arbery, as a third local resident joined in the chase, blocking Arbery with his vehicle before he is cutdown by a shotgun blast.²² As such, “Almost any white person present in the white space can possess and wield this enormous power.”²³ Andre voices that dangerous power of whiteness: “Ok. I just keep walking and don’t do anything stupid. Fuck this, I’m going the other way. . . . You know how they like to do motherfuckers out here.” Andre thus has every reason to be unnerved by the looming car, which represents the very real threat of racial violence.

Andre’s fears turn out to be valid, as he is indeed subject to racial violence, but not in the typical sense. As we find out through the plight of main protagonist Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), the perpetrators are not interested in physically harming any of their Black victims; in fact, they need them to be in pristine physical condition. In the story, Chris accompanies his white girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams), on a trip to visit her parents at their country estate in upstate New York. Before they embark, Chris asks her if her folks know that he is Black. Rose, seemingly embodying the post-racial mantra “I don’t see color,” questions why they would need to know and assures him that they are not racist. To her, it is not a big deal, but Chris, a Black man well versed in the ways of the world, knows better. He is coded as “woke” to Black issues and in touch with the Black community. Indeed, when Chris is first introduced, the R&B song “Redbone” by Childish Gambino plays in the background, its refrain echoing, “Stay woke.” His photos are of urban landscapes and slices of local Black life in Brooklyn: a man with balloons, a pregnant woman, and a dog on a leash. Peele’s use of music comes into play again when the song “Sikiliza Kwa Wahenga” is played. A Swahili song that, when translated to English, speaks to the looming danger: “Brother, Listen to the ancestors, Run! You need to run far! (Listen to the truth)” Hence, Peele “further illustrates the danger posed by Whito-pias”²⁴ while, too, introducing an “oppositional” rhetoric that perhaps may be enough to “prevail against persistent white treachery.”²⁵

During the trip, when they call the police to report hitting a deer, Chris makes sure not to antagonize the responding officer and readily attempts to show him his identification because he is aware of the danger inherent in being a Black man detained by the police. Rose, however, takes offense, questioning why Chris needs to show ID if she was the one driving. In doing so, she steps out of her post-racial mindset to acknowledge the potential racism in the cop’s request but is seemingly oblivious to the trouble that could be created for Chris by disobeying the police. Her white privilege has shielded her from that reality. (Later, of course, her insistence that Chris does not offer his identification can be understood as an attempt to keep anyone from knowing Chris’ location or her connection to him.)

When they arrive at the estate, Rose’s father, Dean (Bradley Whitford), greets Chris in an overzealous manner, hugging him and clumsily acknowledging his approval of the interracial relationship with Black slang exclamations like “my

man” and “thang.” Polite microaggressions aside, Dean does not come off as overtly racist. He is a world traveler who is fascinated by foreign lands, explaining to Chris, “It’s such a privilege to experience another person’s culture,” a foreshadowing of the events to come. Rose’s brother, Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones), on the other hand, conveys a sense of racially informed menace in his bullying banter with Chris, unable to contain his eagerness to spar with him in a mixed martial arts bout. “You ever get into street fights as a kid?” he asks, implying that Chris was a ghetto child running wild. He sizes up Chris as a yardstick by which he can judge his own physical aptitude, having inherited his grandfather’s belief in the inherent athleticism of Blacks. Jeremy’s grandfather was a sprinter who lost to Jesse Owens in the qualifying round for the 1936 Olympics and thus, in a nod to eugenics, he reasoned that Blacks must have an innate (and implicitly unfair) physical advantage. “With your frame and your genetic makeup,” Jeremy tells Chris, with a mix of admiration and contempt, “you’d be a fucking beast.” Thus, the onus is put on Blacks for any failures, while any successes can be downplayed as expected.

In the end, of course, the family’s plot hinges on this concept of possessing naturally superior Black bodies, which simply need implicitly superior white minds to propel them in the right direction. When Rose’s family hosts a gathering for their wealthy friends, it is in fact a surreptitious slave auction, with Chris paraded around as the unsuspecting chattel. The party guests ask him blunt questions not only about his athletic prowess but also about another Black stereotype—his



FIGURE 10.1 Chris isn’t sure what to make of Rose’s friends in *Get Out*
Universal Pictures/Photofest

sexual prowess—as well as the general advantages of being Black. What he does not realize is that they are secretly kicking his metaphorical tires, trying to determine if his Black body would be the ideal home for their transplanted brains.

Feeling trapped in this white space fishbowl in which the only other Black people are housekeeper Georgina (Betty Gabriel) and groundskeeper Walter (Marcus Henderson), Chris is relieved to spot another Black guest: Andre. His posture and countenance relaxed, Chris approaches Andre as a friend, a Brother, even though he does not know him. There is a kinship in their shared Blackness, which implies a shared experience, shared values, and priorities. When Chris makes a lighthearted comment about them being the only two Black guests at the party, he expects a moment of levity between the two but is met by a stone-faced coldness. When Chris extends his closed hand for a fist bump—a decades-old “symbol among African American men that expresses unity, strength, defiance, or resistance”—Andre improperly grasps the fist like a normal handshake, denying the perplexed Chris the anticipated connection.²⁶

Chris similarly seeks out Georgina and Walter to gain a sense of normalcy, underscoring the value of the Black home, where, per Coleman and Lawrence, “Black families are generally safe, shielded from the dangers associated with simply existing while Black.”²⁷ However, they too fail to provide a sense of community, as, like Andre’s, their hijacked minds are not familiar with the conventions of Black life. In one of the most memorable scenes in the film, Chris confides in Georgina his discomfort in this Whitoia: “All I know is sometimes, if there’s too many white people, I get nervous, you know?” Georgina immediately experiences inner turmoil, as this sentiment triggers her suppressed Black self. Deep down, her Black consciousness, trapped in the dark void known as the “Sunken Place,” co-signs to this feeling and almost emerges, causing tears to stream from her eyes. Her white mind, however, suppresses her inner Blackness, repeating “No” about a dozen times, as if to tell her hijacked Black mind no, she is not going to regain control of her body. Georgina brushes off Chris’s feelings of discomfort, offering no sense of commonality between the two. “That’s not my experience,” she responds. “Not at all.” Indeed, this is true; her white mind has never shared that Black experience. Andre, Georgina, and Walter embody a “racialisation of the ‘uncanny valley,’” the phenomenon where a humanlike robot, doll, or animation ceases to be relatable and pleasing to the eye and becomes grotesque and off-putting because of its inability to truly replicate humankind.²⁸ Rather than being not quite human, Andre, Georgina, and Walter are not quite Black.

Chris briefly finds solace in Jim Hudson (Stephen Root), a white art dealer who bonds with Chris by acknowledging the “ignorance” of the party guests who “have no idea what real people go through.” He presents himself as an ally—one who, because he is blind, literally does not see color. This mirrors the claims of those who claim post-racial status within themselves, confident that treating everyone as if they have no race is the utopian ideal. This approach, of course, neglects the fact that America is no utopia; racism is not singularly tied

to phenotype but is woven into the fabric of the nation. Ignoring race ignores that fact, not to mention the richness that the cultures of other races bring to the table. Jim's allyship, however, turns out to be a facade, like that of Rose and her family. They are all like the party guests, who hold a silent auction of the rights to Chris's body, with echoes of the slave auctions of the transatlantic slave trade. In an intriguing twist on the typically negative treatment of Blacks in white spaces, the attention Chris receives here is overwhelmingly positive—to the point of fetishism. "Black is in fashion," one guest comments.

In this supposedly post-racial America, *Get Out* aims to show that racism can come in different shapes and sizes, even from supposed allies. Peele wanted to "poke fun at the liberal elite and not the more stereotypically racist red state crowd."²⁹ However, cognizant of the more typically publicized brand of racism, the film toys with the audience's awareness of the incidents of racial profiling, abuse, and murder committed by police against Blacks. In the final scene, as Chris is hovering over a wounded, bloody Rose, with the dead bodies of her family strewn inside their mansion, red and blue flashing lights appear in the driveway, signaling the arrival of the police. In most horror movies, this is an eagerly anticipated sight; even as the cops typically arrive too late, after the Final Girl has dispatched the villain. In this instance, however, the audience becomes tense and concerned for Chris's safety, as the news had at that time been saturated with police shootings of Black citizens for years prior to *Get Out*'s release. Just a decade earlier, this ending would not have resonated as much—at least, not with white viewers (Bill Gunn through *Ganja & Hess* showed he understood all too well the dangers of the police), who needed the much-publicized videos from cell phones, security cameras, and police body cams capturing incidents of violence on Blacks to truly appreciate the danger that an officer might pose to a Black man found alone at night with an injured white woman. When the "police" car door opens, though, it is Chris's friend Rod (Lil Rel Howery), in his TSA vehicle, who has tracked Chris down. Rod is a far more successful version of Dick Hallorann from *The Shining* (1980), who travels thousands of miles to save little Danny, only to be axed to death within minutes of arriving at the Overlook Hotel. Rod's arrival at the end of *Get Out* offsets that sense of frustration while also alleviating audience fears that the flashing lights on his car signal the arrival of the (potentially villainous) police.

The threat of the police goes deeper than the threat of violence, however. Simply being arrested and put in "the system" is a threat in and of itself. Peele sees the Sunken Place as akin to "the prison industrial complex and the disproportionate amount of Black people, mostly men, who are literally abducted, thrown into a hole, and tossed to the back of our minds."³⁰ It is America's modern-day slavery, just as the Black bodies in *Get Out* are enslaved by white masters and put to work, with whites profiting off of Black physical labor. While the movie never states that Chris's father is in prison, the fact that he "wasn't really in the picture," according to Chris, furthers the theme of the disappearance of Black

men, whether it be from real-world arrests or from fantastical kidnappings. Peele, whose own father was not in his life while he was growing up, notes in his DVD commentary that “Fathers not being around is an epidemic in the Black community.”³¹ Sans that adult guidance, Chris suffers childhood trauma when his mother fails to return home one night, having been injured in a hit and run. Chris is paralyzed with fear, unable to call the police to help her, an act that another adult would certainly have done, and ultimately, she ends up dying on the side of the road, an indirect victim of the disappearing Black male.

Get Out thus raises the issue of how Blackness is defined beyond the color of one’s skin. In the movie, the body-snatched Black people raise Chris’s suspicion because they do not come off as authentically Black. They fail to deliver or react to Black social cues, like handshakes, speech patterns, style of dress, and a sense of familial bonding from an understood shared experience. Even Chris himself, according to Peele, could be seen as not channeling his full Blackness until the climax when he fights back against his captors and escapes their house: “I wanted the audience to sort of connect with the fact that almost his inner king is coming out,” Peele has stated. “His inner Blackness is coming out, his survival instincts.”³²

But Blackness is subjective. Genealogically speaking, America is notorious for its longtime “one-drop rule,” which dictated that anyone with a Black ancestor is legally Black. Lacking that, could one achieve Blackness by an upbringing within the Black community, by knowledge of Black social cues, or by sheer will, as with Rachel Dolezal, who sparked headlines in 2015 by claiming that she simply “identifies” as Black? The case of Dolezal carried extra heft because she occupied a position of power and influence within the Black community, as the head of the Spokane, Washington branch of the NAACP, and because of accusations that she falsified instances of racism targeting her supposed Blackness. The fact that so much of her identity revolved around Blackness—her position at the NAACP, her job teaching Black studies, her role as head of the Spokane police oversight commission, her enrollment at the historically Black Howard University, her claims of being a target of discrimination and racism, and her Africanized name change to Nkechi Amare Diallo—made her all the more susceptible to accusations of fetishizing Blackness, of being obsessed with victimization and oppression. The message seemed to be evident: Blackness could not be self-appointed.

Even within the population of people who claim a genetic DNA and historical roots to continents and countries inhabited by people now described (constructed) as Black, there remains a question of Blackness. Black people can feel a need to prove their Blackness to other Blacks they do not know through identifiers like speech, wardrobe, physical features, social cues, cultural knowledge, political viewpoints, upbringing, musical taste, and even their level of educational and economic achievement. In the book *Acting Black: College, Identity, and the Performance of Race*, author Sarah Susannah Willie interviews 55 college-educated Black people about their perception of racial identity during their school years and finds stories like Robert’s:

He remembers the confidence he gained when he realized that his identification with the Black community was clear enough to himself and others in that it conformed to what most people expected of Black people. As he says, he grew up in a working-class home, lived in a racially segregated neighborhood, and attended an all-Black high school. He had an arsenal of associations to respond to any accusation of not being authentically Black. Robert figured that his background—as someone who grew up in a working-class Black neighborhood—fit with others’ expectations enough to allow him to participate in unexpected activities without being threatening to either Blacks or nonblacks. By conforming to racial expectations in some arenas, he gained a greater ability to challenge them in others.³³

In this sense, Blackness involves conforming to the expectations of the race and is thus shaped by the perception of others who are deemed Black enough to have a valid opinion.

However, those racial expectations can be undermined by cultural differences. Would a Black person from Africa or the U.K. qualify as Black to Americans in the same way that American Blacks do? As a Brit, Kaluuya himself has been the subject of scrutiny regarding his ability to comprehend the American Black experience. Actor Samuel L. Jackson speculated as much during an interview shortly after *Get Out*’s release:

I tend to wonder what would that movie have been with an American Brother who really understands that, in a way, ‘cause Daniel grew up in a country where they’ve been interracial dating for, like, a hundred years . . . What would a Brother from America have made of that role? I’m sure the director helped, and some things are universal, but everything ain’t.³⁴

Jackson and other Americans have cast doubt on the ability of British Blacks to portray American Blacks largely by insinuating that their plight is not as fraught with oppression as theirs—and by implication, they are not as authentically Black. Objections have been particularly loud when a Black Brit has played an American historical figure, such as Kaluuya playing Fred Hampton in *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), David Oyelowo playing Martin Luther King Jr. in *Selma* (2014), and Cynthia Erivo playing Harriet Tubman in *Harriet* (2019). What is neglected in these protests is that many of these Black British performers are also the children of African immigrants—who deal with systemic discrimination just to get into the country.³⁵ And it should be noted that Black American actors have long played real-life African figures, garnering Academy Award nominations for Denzel Washington as Steve Biko in *Cry Freedom* (1987), Don Cheadle as Paul Rusesabagina in *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), Forest Whitaker as Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), and Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela in *Invictus* (2009).

In *Get Out*, Chris is undoubtedly American, undoubtedly Black, and undoubtedly politically conscious not only in terms of everyday Blackness but also in terms of horror movie Blackness. He is ingrained with an unspoken awareness of his status as an endangered species: a Black man in a horror movie. According to Peele, “I wanted Chris to be, you know, the guy in a horror movie that makes the right decisions.”³⁶ Chris does not venture off to investigate strange noises like doomed characters in other horror movies, and on more than one occasion, he attempts to extricate himself from the house when things get weird. Peele, recognizing the movie’s value in terms of representation, offers up the Sunken Place as

a metaphor for the marginalization of the Black horror movie audience. We are a loyal horror movie fanbase, and we’re relegated to the theater, not on the screen. We don’t have representation of our skin in horror films, nor do we have representation of our sensibilities and our ability to observe trouble before it happens.³⁷

That said, Chris does fall for one trap: Rose. She is the honeypot, the so-called Black man’s kryptonite: the white woman. Even the woke Chris cannot resist. Rose has lured many Black men and women over the years, as Chris discovers when he finds photos of her conquests stored in her closet. As evidenced in *The Birth of a Nation*, America has long put white womanhood on a pedestal as the paragon of beauty, virtue, and purity, to be protected at all costs from anything that would tarnish that image—particularly Black men, whose supposedly lascivious nature toward white women meant that any pairing of the two balanced precariously on the precipice of rape. *Get Out* plays with this concept by reversing the narrative, portraying the white woman as the predator and the Black man as the prey.

When Rod figures out that Chris is in danger and goes to the police for help, the detectives ridicule his (nearly correct) theory that Rose has lured Chris in order to hypnotize him into becoming a sex slave. “Oh, white girls!” the Black female detective (Erika Alexander) laughs. “Oh, they get you every time!” But, Rod does not suffer, the “amnesia” of “post-racial narratives that claim that racism no longer exists.”³⁸ Chris should have listened to his friend Rod, who advised him not to go on the trip. Rod embodies the safety and security of the Black home, arriving at the end of the film to extract Chris from this toxic Whitopia.

Although it does so in a fantastic, hyperbolic fashion, *Get Out* establishes that race was indeed still a major factor in Obama’s “post-racial” America. It was written and shot before Trump’s election victory but displays prescience in its awareness that seemingly normal, rational people might do irrational things with the right motivation. Trump did not get elected by the votes of hardline conservatives and unabashed hatemongers; he won from the votes of the middle ground, including Democrats who either voted against Hillary Clinton out of spite or voted for Trump for train-wreck spectatorship (akin to ‘vote for the

worst' foolery around TV gameshows such as *American Idol*), secure enough in their position in society that they were willing to play games with the well-being of the nation for a laugh.

Densely packed with social commentary, symbolism (Chris "picks cotton," as slaves used to do, from the stuffing of his chair to help him escape), and genre references, *Get Out* was a critical sweetheart, the best-reviewed horror movie of the twenty-first century and the second-best-reviewed Black movie (*Black Panther* [2018] being the first and *Us* being the third [2019]), regardless of genre, of the twenty-first century.³⁹ *Get Out* showed that Black horror could not only achieve great heights of creativity and artistry, but it could also be recognized for its achievement, earning Peele the first-ever Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay given to a Black writer and earning other nominations for Best Actor (Kaluuya), Best Director (Peele), and Best Picture.

Just as important, it was a commercial smash, earning \$176,040,665 in the U.S. and another \$79,548,492 overseas on a modest \$4.5 million budget.⁴⁰ Its success opened doors for Black horror that had never been opened before, with studios greenlighting projects they hoped would replicate its success. It has become a cultural touchstone, with scenes like the teacup hypnosis becoming recognizable even to those who have not seen the film. The concept of the Sunken Place has become part of the Black vernacular, a twenty-first-century version of Uncle Tom's cabin, as defined in the Urban Dictionary: "When one is in a perpetual place of slumber, regarding systematic and idiosyncratic injustice and oppression in regards to race, that is, the antithesis of being woke. Especially when a person of color can't or refuses to see it."⁴¹ In every way, a landmark film, *Get Out* has become the benchmark for Black horror against which all other films are measured.

Social Justice Horror: *Us*, *Candyman*, and *The First Purge*

Jordan Peele would continue his heady, socially incisive approach with his eagerly anticipated follow-up, *Us* (2019). While *Get Out* approached its subject matter (racism) directly, *Us* was more allegorical with its topic: classism. The issue rose to national prominence in 2011 with the Occupy Wall Street Movement, whose slogan "We are the 99%" reflected the concept that the wealthiest 1% of the American population control an inordinate share of power and influence in the country. As of the year 2020, the U.S. had the highest level of income inequality of the G7 nations, a disparity that has been growing steadily since the late 1970s.⁴² From 1975 to 2012, 47% of the growth in pre-tax income went to the top 1%.⁴³ While the share of aggregate income in America held by those with lower-tier incomes had held steady from the 1970s to the 2010s (around 9%), the middle-class share dropped by 19% (from 62% to 43%), and the upper-tier income level increased by that same 19% (from 29% to 48%).⁴⁴ Similarly, the wealth gap between rich and poor in the U.S. ballooned, more than doubling between 1989

and 2016.⁴⁵ In the decade following the 2007 start of the Great Recession, only the richest 20% of Americans gained wealth, with even more pronounced growth by the top 5%.⁴⁶

It is this swelling of upper-class wealth and what Peele terms “the ramifications of privilege” that propel *Us*.⁴⁷ A running theme of duality runs throughout the film, representing the haves and the have-nots. The central family in the story, the Wilsons, are the haves: an upper-middle-class Black family with a Mercedes Benz, a vacation home, and even a small boat. One summer evening, while at their vacation house, they are confronted by the have-nots: red jumpsuit-clad home invaders who look just like them. Their doppelgangers are just the tip of the iceberg, though. Doubles pop up all over town—and, in fact all, over the country—with the intention of murdering their counterparts. Red (Lupita Nyong’o), the doppelganger of the matriarch of the Wilson family, Adelaide (also Nyong’o), explains that they are the products of an abandoned government experiment to control the populace. Dubbed “the Tethered,” the clones have lived underground for years and are psychically (or rather, soulfully) connected to their twins. They were designed to affect the above-ground population’s actions, but something went awry, and instead of controlling the people above, the Tethered were being controlled, mimicking their twin’s actions like marionettes. The government abandoned them years, if not decades earlier, to fend for themselves underground, subsisting on ever-reproducing lab rabbits. Red, the only one of the invaders who can speak, details the plight of the Tethered, the have-nots, in comparison to the haves above:

Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected, tethered together. When the girl ate, her food was given to her warm and tasty, but when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbit, raw and bloody. On Christmas, the girl received wonderful toys, soft and cushy, but the shadow’s toys were so sharp and cold they sliced through her fingers when she tried to play with them. The girl met a handsome prince and fell in love, but the shadow, at that same time, met Abraham. It didn’t matter if she loved him or not. He was tethered to the girl’s prince, after all. Then, the girl had her first child, a beautiful baby girl, but the shadow, she gave birth to a little monster. . . . The girl had a second child, a boy this time. They had to cut her open and take him from her belly. The shadow had to do it all herself.

The Tethered are the underclass, victims of greed, political manipulation, and capitalist extremism who are standing up for their human rights and mounting a revolution that asserts their independence: the “Untethering.” When Adelaide’s husband, Gabe (Winston Duke), asks the doppelgangers who they are, Red replies, “We’re Americans,” asserting their rights as citizens but also drumming

home the point that they are the face of American inequity. Indeed, the title *Us* can be read as “U.S.”

According to Peele, “The biggest disservice we can do as a faction with a collective privilege, like the United States, is to presume that we deserve it and that it isn’t luck that has us born where we’re born. For us to have our privilege, someone suffers.”⁴⁸ Adelaide and Red embody this concept in a very real sense. In a plot twist, it turns out that “Adelaide” is in fact the clone; a chance encounter between the two as children gave her the opportunity to switch places, leaving “Red” to fend for herself below. This revelation establishes the similarity between the haves and the have-nots; each could easily be in the other’s place. “We’re humans too, you know,” Red tells Adelaide during their climactic showdown. “Eyes, teeth, hands, blood. Exactly like you.” The Tethered are just like the above-ground dwellers but are separated simply by circumstances beyond their control. Even though the final twist reveals that Adelaide has been the clone all along, she is not to be understood as returning to villainy, nor that she will be an (immediate, if ever) threat to her son, Jason (Evan Alex), who appears to have figured out her true identity. They end the film by sharing a silent understanding.

In a typical Peele fashion, he reinforces his message of sympathy for the less fortunate with symbolism and cinephilic Easter eggs,⁴⁹ such as the opening shot of the film, which prominently features a VHS copy of the horror movie *C.H.U.D.* (1984), in which the government illegally stores radioactive material under the streets of New York City, transforming underground-dwelling homeless people into cannibalistic mutants who feed on other homeless. Only when the creatures begin to attack surface dwellers do the police take notice.



FIGURE 10.2 A Tethered family portrait in *Us*

Universal Pictures/Photofest

While class is the overriding theme in *Us*, you cannot address class in America without talking about race, given a racial wealth gap in which, according to a 2021 Federal Reserve report,

White households hold 86.8 percent of overall wealth in the country . . . though they account for only 68.1 percent of the households . . . By comparison, Black and Hispanic households hold only 2.9 and 2.8 percent of wealth, respectively, while accounting for 15.6 percent and 10.9 percent of the US population respectively, reflecting the fact that wealth is disproportionately skewed towards white households.⁵⁰

Given that American upper classes are tied to whiteness, the working class Tethered uprising in *Us* has been interpreted as a repudiation of “idoltrous whiteness.”⁵¹ The primary white characters in the movie are members of the Tyler family, friends of the Wilsons whose flashy lifestyle paints them as a step above the Wilsons in social standing. While the Wilsons’ summer home is a modest one-level rambler, the Tylers’ is a modern and stylish two-story glass structure. The Wilsons drive a station wagon, while the Tylers have a new Land Rover SUV. Gabe, whom Peele describes as the “fool” character, envies the Tylers’ material possessions and strives to keep up with them, seeking the approval of patriarch Josh (Tim Heidecker) in particular.⁵² When Gabe tells Josh that he bought a small boat, Josh jokes that it must be a dinghy and admonishes Gabe for not buying a flare gun to go with it. Even when the lights go out in the Wilsons’ house, Gabe relates it to the Tylers: “See, this is why Josh has a backup generator.” Gabe sees Josh’s display of wealth as a competition, commenting to Adelaide, “You saw their new car, right? . . . He just had to get that thing to fuck with me, too.” Adelaide, on the other hand, as the film’s antihero, seems to have an innate dislike for the couple; when Kitty (Elisabeth Moss) tries to make small talk, Adelaide is distant and curt with her responses.

Despite Gabe’s aspirations to be like Josh, the Tylers are patently unhappy. They epitomize the mantra that money cannot buy happiness. Josh and Kitty constantly snipe at each another, with Kitty even stating that she fantasizes about murdering him. The couple masks their misery with alcohol, conspicuous consumption, and, in Kitty’s case, plastic surgery. Their twin daughters, Becca and Lindsey (Cali and Noelle Sheldon), are cold and condescending; when they accidentally destroy Jason’s sandcastle, they simply say, “Oops,” and add insult to injury with the comment “Beach toys are such baby shit.” The family embodies the superficiality, disdain, and excess of the (overwhelmingly white) upper class. It comes as no surprise, then, when the film’s moral code designates them for violent death at the hands of their own clones, while the Wilsons, having escaped their doppelgangers, arrive at the Tylers’ house and eliminate the Tylers’ doubles.

If the Tylers represent white, upper-class idolatry, what about the Wilsons? While not as rich and elitist as the Tylers, the Wilsons are still quite well off,

several rungs above the average Black American family. They are members of the bourgeoisie and speak with minimal use of hip slang or profanity which was a hallmark of 1990s ‘hood movies. They are an intact Black nuclear family, a rare sight in entertainment films across genres. Gabe, although large and burly, is neither intimidating nor “cool”; he delivers “dad jokes” and “dabs” that embarrass his children. When the doppelgangers approach the house, he lowers his voice and uncorks a less grammatically correct, “Blacker” delivery of his warning for them to vacate the property, but it ends up serving only as a comedic effect.

Since the Tethered are the underprivileged in this scenario, it could be argued that they are more reflective of the Black experience than the Wilsons. Red’s tale of woe is particularly rife with destitution, subjugation, and helplessness, with echoes of slavery in her lack of freedom, including having her mate chosen for her and breeding against her will. Red, in essence, leads a slave rebellion against their unwitting masters, one that, by the end of the film, appears to be largely successful. That said, with minds warped by their above-ground masters, the Tethered aim to announce their arrival via an event that Red remembers from her childhood: Hands Across America. The absurdity of the image of thousands of Tethered lined up, holding hands side by side is matched only by the absurdity of the real event, which Peele details:

Here you have this event, on the one hand, it’s a beautiful thing, right? We’re all going to get together, we’re going to hold hands, and somehow that’s going to cure hunger—the illusion that we’re contributing to something that actually is making change as opposed to something that kind of makes us feel better and absolves us of our responsibility to enact actual change.⁵³

A dubious attempt to help the underclass, Hands Across America was in some ways a precursor to the nominal support from the corporate world for Black Lives Matter in response to the protests of 2020, resulting in little more than Twitter posts and “END RACISM” patches on sports uniforms.

Still, despite their bourgeois nature, the Wilsons are not meant to be looked upon as poorly as the Tylers, and Peele includes Black cultural identifiers so that they do not come off as residents of the Sunken Place. Gabe wears a Howard University sweatshirt through much of the film, implying that he attended the historically Black school. When their doppelgangers invade and instinctively know that Adelaide keeps a spare key in a fake rock, Gabe humorously racializes the situation, exclaiming, “Hide-a-key? What kind of white shit . . . ?” In an early scene of the family riding in their car, Adelaide and Gabe enjoy listening to the hip-hop song “I Got 5 on It” by Luniz, Gabe calling it “a classic.” Notably, during this exchange, Adelaide snaps off beat, a subtle indication of her true identity as a clone and a cardinal sin against Blackness that enhances the Wilsons’ racial authenticity while, too, highlighting the Tethered’s inability to replicate certain

elements of Blackness. The Wilsons are indeed Black, but they are not coded as emphatically Black as Chris in *Get Out* because *Us*'s focus shifts from race to class and thus does not rely on direct references to race to tell its story.

Peele produced a sequel to *Candyman* (1992), as a reflection of his sentiment that “We have to fight for the less fortunate.”⁵⁴ Co-writing it with director Nia DaCosta, who would become the first Black female director to have a movie open at number one at the American box office, *Candyman* (2021) was not like most horror reboots.; it was not merely a glossy retreat. Ignoring the two previous, inferior sequels (*Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* [1995] and *Candyman: Day of the Dead* [1999]), it reinvents the Candyman mythos with modern resonance tied to 2010s pushes for social justice for Blacks, led by the Black Lives Matter movement. It shifts the narrative from white interloper Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen) exploiting the misery of Black inner-city residents for personal gain to the lives of the Black residents themselves, repurposing the urban legend of Candyman into a beacon for awareness of past and current racial injustice.

Whereas in the first film, there is an ever-present threat from within the community—gangs and drugs—in the sequel, the threat comes from outside: the police and gentrification. Whereas in the first film, the spread of the Candyman legend was a cause for concern, here it becomes a crusade for justice—or at least a crusade to shine a spotlight on race-based violence, police abuses, and discriminatory practices aimed at Blacks. It does so by portraying Candyman as a legacy, a mantle passed down from one victim to another, the anguish and tragedy of their deaths too deep to disappear with their corporeal bodies. They live as blood-lusting spirits perpetuating a cycle of violence. “A pain like that lasts forever,” comments William Burke (Colman Domingo), a longtime resident of the Cabrini-Green housing project who is now a keeper of the oral history of Candyman and the tragic history of the area.

William is miffed that the true story of Candyman has largely been forgotten. In its place is that of Helen, whose ordeal in the first film has ironically become an urban legend. The details of Helen's story have been warped over the past three decades to portray her as a lunatic who went on a murder spree, kidnapped a Black infant from Cabrini-Green, and was preparing to kill the child before being stopped by residents, at which point she committed suicide by walking into a bonfire. Her legend is a whitewashing of Candyman, the real perpetrator of the violence, mirroring the whitewashing of the now-gentrified Cabrini-Green. “Ask the white people around here about Girl X, Dantrell Davis: blank stares,” William opines. “One white woman dies in this hood, and the story lives on forever.” Girl X and Dantrell Davis were actual, real-life child victims of Cabrini-Green violence whose inclusion here reflects DaCosta's commitment to grounding the film in real-world events. Thus, Helen's emergence as the face of Cabrini-Green violence also whitewashes the more prevalent incidence of Black victimization. Surprisingly, this whitewashing effort was furthered by the Black locals involved in the Helen incident, including the mother of the baby,



FIGURE 10.3 Anthony in *Candyman*

Universal Pictures/Photofest

Anne-Marie McCoy (Vanessa Williams), who intentionally tried to bury the Candyman legend, aware that he feeds on belief, in the dissemination of his story. As Candyman (Tony Todd) explains in the original movie, “I am the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom. Without these things, I am nothing.” The Black residents in essence participated in a perverse reversal of the “conspiracy of silence” historically implemented by white communities to avoid prosecution for the lynchings of Blacks.

In the present-day setting of the film, the Cabrini-Green site is a newly renovated, mixed-income neighborhood whose newest resident is Anthony (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II), a struggling artist who turns out to be the kidnapped baby from 30 years earlier. He is unaware of his past but is seemingly drawn back to the area and is targeted by the Candyman energy that still inhabits the area. A bee stings him, leaving a wound that festers and grows, slowly taking over his body; Candyman is reclaiming the baby that escaped him years earlier, intent on completing the sacrifice to bolster his legend. But the face of the Candyman that haunts Anthony is not that of Daniel Robitaille (Todd) from the first movie. As William explains to the quizzitive Anthony, “Candyman ain’t a he. Candyman’s the whole damn hive.” He goes through different iterations with different incidents of racial violence that reinvigorate his legend and give the figure new life. The Candyman that William knew was Sherman Fields (Michael Hargrove), a Cabrini-Green local who was beaten to death in 1977 by police who wrongfully

accused him of putting razor blades in Halloween candy given to a little white girl. After William, who inadvertently caused this iteration of Candyman by screaming after being startled by Sherman and thus drawing the cops' attention to him, relates Sherman's story, Anthony begins to be haunted by his reflection. Candyman is memory, and by sharing that tale from his childhood, William keeps that memory alive, imbuing Anthony with Sherman's essence. Anthony, in turn, gives Sherman new life by using a photo of his corpse as the basis for a new painting.

Anthony has turned to Cabrini-Green for inspiration to conquer a case of artist's block. At the urging of white art dealer Clive (Brian King) to "dig into that history of yours" (i.e., racist trauma), Anthony appeals to his liberal white guilt by offering up an idea of "something about the projects" and "how white supremacy . . . creates these spaces of rampant neglect for communities of color." Clive, treating the plight of the underclass as an art trend, comments that the mostly Black South Side "is kind of played," which turns Anthony's sights toward Cabrini-Green. Anthony thus begins a downward spiral into the exploitation and commodification of Black pain, much like Helen did in the original film. This descent parallels his physical decline, as the bee sting begins to rot his body. DaCosta's use of "body horror" imagery here represents not only Anthony's inner turmoil as he comprises his values but also the corrosive racial trauma inherited from Sherman. Pinedo's description of body horror is particularly apt in reflecting the latter:

The postmodern horror film draws a universe out of control where extreme violence is endemic and virtually unstoppable. The presentation of violence as a constituent of everyday life produces an unstable and paranoid universe in which familiar categories collapse. The body figures as the site of this collapse.⁵⁵

Anthony peddles artwork about Black oppression to whites, a dynamic that William sums up with the observation, "They love what we make, but not us." Initially, Anthony does not take the Candyman legend seriously (again, like Helen), playfully saying "Candyman" five times into a reflection. Once summoned, Candyman does not kill Anthony, who has a special purpose. Not only is Anthony the one that got away, but also his Candyman-themed artwork, entitled *Say My Name*, is spreading the legend beyond Cabrini-Green, expanding Candyman's reach. When Clive is killed in front of *Say My Name* after conjuring Candyman, Anthony's work begins to garner a morbid following, which goes to his head. Initially concerned with raising awareness of Sherman's story, Anthony becomes giddy when he hears a news reporter mention his own name, not Sherman's, on television, thus becoming complicit in the marginalization of Black pain.

Although Black, Anthony has benefited from the gentrification of Cabrini-Green. He is one of the artist types who white art critic Finley Stephens (Rebecca Spence) snidely states "descend upon disenfranchised neighborhoods divining

cheap rent so that they can dick around in their studios without the crushing burden of a day job.” This slight hits close to home, as Anthony has not produced much artwork of late and has relied on girlfriend Brianna “Bri” Cartwright (Teyonah Parris) for financial support. However, despite getting caught up in the shallowness of the art world, he is woke enough to counter Finley’s criticism by tracing the root of gentrification back further than the purchasers of the properties:

Who do you think makes the ’hood? The city cuts off a community and waits for it to die. Then, they invite developers in and say, “Hey, you artists, you young people, you white—preferably or only—please come to the ’hood. It’s cheap, and if you stick it out for a couple of years, we’ll bring you a Whole Foods.”

The process of gentrification covers up the sins of the past. It is an urban spin on the “Indian burial ground” horror trope of films like *The Shining*, *The Amityville Horror* (1979), and *Pet Sematary* (1989), in which modern developments are built on land imbued with a curse born of a tragic past. According to William, the Cabrini-Green land is similarly tainted by repeated incidents of violence against Blacks: “This neighborhood got caught in a loop. The shit got stained in the exact same spot over and over until it finally rotted from the inside out.” DaCosta set out to make gentrification part of the message of social injustice, seeing it as “a force that definitely is a form of violence,” and yet she recognizes its complexity, as personified in Anthony, who shows that anyone can find themselves contributing to it or profiting from it, “swept up in the wave, unwillingly or willingly.”⁵⁶ Just like physical violence, gentrification can be a source of generational trauma. William in particular is scarred enough to formulate a plot to facilitate Anthony’s transformation into the next Candyman, whom he plans to use in retaliation against the gentrifying newcomers. “They tore down our homes so they could move back in,” William bemoans. “We need Candyman ‘cause this time, he’ll be killing their fathers, their babies, their sisters.” The violence he has witnessed and the tragedy he has experienced (Candyman having killed his sister) have radicalized William into a terrorist seeking to weaponize Candyman. Both William and Candyman are products of hate, and ultimately Bri—portrayed as the most sensible character in the film (avoiding the Candyman recitation, refusing to descend into dark unknown spaces, and thoroughly pummeling villains to ensure they are dead)—has to decide whether that hate should be channeled to continue the cycle of violence. Initially, she rebuffs William’s plan, since it relies on Anthony dying, but when Anthony is unjustly shot to death by police and Bri is faced with the realization that the cops will once again succeed in covering up their crimes, she gives in to William’s Candyman comeuppance, conjuring the vengeful spirit (with the face that she knows: Anthony) to unleash not only her frustrations but also those of generations past. There are no easy answers to the issue of the legacy of race-based violence; no one is left clean.

We Out Here

Gentrification of Black and Brown urban communities would become central to several other horror movies during this era. “Blacks (and Brown people) in horror” *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (2020) portrays gentrifiers as literal vampires sucking the community dry by buying up properties throughout the Bronx in order to stage a low-key vampire invasion. “Black horror” *Black as Night* (2021), from Black writers Sherman Payne and Jay Walker, also uses vampires to tackle gentrification but reverses the scenario, positioning Black New Orleans activists who are protesting against gentrification as the vampires, seeking to keep as many Black residents as possible so they can turn them into a Black vampire army—dark skin being coveted among vampires for protection against the sun. “Blacks in horror” *The Transfiguration* (2017) likewise channels vampirism but in a much less fantastic way, as a mentally disturbed but sympathetic Black teen with budding serial killing tendencies is convinced that he is a vampire and uses the white, gentrified portions of New York City as his hunting ground.

In this era of social justice horror cinema, perhaps the most extreme example was *The First Purge* (2018). The fourth entry in the *Purge* franchise, this “Black horror” film was the first in the series to have a Black director (Gerard McMurray) and to feature Black characters as the primary protagonists. As such, a Black sensibility reigns, channeling the collective frustrations of Black Americans expressed in *Get Out*, *Us*, *Candyman*, and beyond, from racism to classism to police brutality, governmental malfeasance, political alarmism, racial violence, crime, drugs, and poverty—all placed in a virtual shooting gallery to be gunned down by the Black heroes.

As the title implies, *The First Purge* is a prequel to *The Purge* (2013) and is the story of the first experimental test of the Purge concept: an annual 12-hour period, sundown to sunrise, in which all crime is legal. The event is put forth as having a psychological basis, a catharsis of suppressed frustrations that “contains societal violence to a single evening,” providing a set time for people to release their aggressions while obeying the law during the other 364 days of the year. However, it becomes clear throughout the course of the franchise that the Purge is in fact governmental genocide aimed at the poor. Not only are the rich inherently safer because they can afford home security systems and weapons for protection, but also the poor are specifically targeted by the government, which surreptitiously deploys hired mercenaries to poor areas in an effort to thin out the lower classes and bolster claims that the Purge reduces poverty and unemployment.

The masterminds behind the Purge are a new American political party, the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA). The NFFA is an exaggerated version of the Republican party: far right-wing, NRA-supported, fearmongering, and patriotic to the point of extremism. As *The First Purge* was the first in the series to be released after the election of Donald Trump, it is peppered with conspicuous



FIGURE 10.4 Dmitri and Nya are backed into a corner in *The First Purge*

Universal Pictures/Photofest

allusions to his rise to power. In a nationally broadcast speech, newly elected NFFA President Bracken (Ian Blackman) echoes Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan: “The American dream is dead. We will do whatever it takes to let you dream again.” Later in the movie, when female lead Nya (Lex Scott Davis) is assaulted by a would-be rapist, she calls him a “pussy-grabbing motherfucker,” a reference to Trump being caught on tape boasting about groping women’s genitalia. Even an early teaser poster for the film consisted simply of a red MAGA-style cap with “The First Purge” written on it.

Unlike *Candyman*, whose Black protagonists are outsiders who move into a gentrified Cabrini-Green, the central characters in *The First Purge* are the residents of a low-income housing project, this time in Staten Island, New York. Nya is a politically astute community leader who organizes anti-Purge protests that echo Black Lives Matter rallies. Her younger brother, Isaiah (Joivan Wade), is more concerned with earning money to improve their shoddy living conditions, ambitions that lead him to participate in the Purge. The government offers to pay Staten Island residents \$5,000 to remain in the borough during the experiment and additional money if they commit acts of violence. The incentives are meant to spur enough engagement in the experiment to serve as proof of concept for a nationwide rollout. On the night of the Purge, however, the majority of the residents who stay end up either sheltering in place or attending spontaneous

community-building block parties. The 'hood is portrayed as tight-knit, buoyed by support systems like the Black church.

Undeterred, the NFFA hires mercenaries to instigate violence to make it look like the residents are purging. While the secret goal is to thin out the poorer classes, regardless of race, the presence of white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klansmen among the hired guns adds a distinctly racial spin. At one point, the gunmen even slaughter the congregation of a church, mirroring the racially charged 2015 massacre of nine Black attendees of the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Further echoes of real-life racial atrocities arise from the concept of Black Americans being used as guinea pigs, which smacks of the infamous Tuskegee Experiment, in which 400 poor Black Southern men infected with syphilis were denied treatment by the U.S. Public Health Service so that the Service could see the natural (often deadly) progression of the disease.⁵⁷ More than 100 of the subjects died, others went blind or lost their mental faculties, and dozens passed the disease on to their wives and children.

In the film, the government does not take into account the extent of the anger built up inside of Black Americans, or their commitment to using that anger in protecting their community. Nya's ex-boyfriend Dmitri (Y'lan Noel) has managed to escape poverty by becoming a drug kingpin, but he has retained close ties to the projects. When he discovers the NFFA's plot, he orders his crew to use their ample supply of weapons to join the fray in an effort to make up for poisoning the community with his drugs. They are not purging, however; they are defending their home and protecting their neighbors. Ironically, while the Purge is a fraudulent catharsis, the movie itself is positioned as a real catharsis for Black viewers, who can vicariously experience warfare waged on prominent symbols of racism—epitomized by a scene of Dmitri choking the life out of a white man clad in a blackfaced minstrel mask. In each *Purge* film, the Purgers' masks and costumes are selling points that play up the scare factor to audiences, but in *The First Purge*, they take on a less fantastic and more grounded, historical, and political tone: KKK robes, blackface masks, police uniforms, and Nazi regalia.

In the end, while the Black rebels win this battle, repelling the attackers from the apartment building, the government is able to make the experiment look successful enough to put the Purge into effect nationwide. Still, the final line of the film indicates that nationalization will not go down easily: when asked what they do now, Dmitri answers, "Now, we fight." The Kendrick Lamar song "Alright" then plays over the closing credits, with its reassuring refrain, "We gon' be alright." Although we know from the other films that the NFFA continues to manipulate the annual event to target the lower classes, we also know that an underground resistance movement forms, led by Black revolutionaries like Carmelo Jones (Michael K. Williams) in *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014) and Dante Bishop (Edwin Hodge) in *The Purge: Election Year* (2016). Presumably, the survivors of *The First Purge* are active members of this organized rebellion.

A number of other examples of social justice horror emerged during this time, touching upon issues of Black oppression and injustice. *Body Cam* (2020) is a legitimate fright-fest that takes its message about the effects of police murder very seriously. Starring Mary J. Blige as Renee Lomito-Smith, *Body Cam* sees an entity killing off police in Louisiana, a mystery that Renee works to solve. Inching closer to the truth, Renee must cross the thin blue line to confront her colleagues while the entity, the murdered teen DeMarco (Mason Mackie), gets his gruesome revenge. *Ma* (2019), starring Octavia Spencer is more perplexing, if not disappointing. Spencer portrays Sue Ann, a disturbed woman who endured vaguely racial (or, perhaps, sexual) humiliation from her white high school classmates and gets revenge by targeting their children, but not before (inexplicably) routinely drugging her own daughter, Genie (Tanyell Waivers), keeping her sick and wheelchair-bound. *Ma's* director, Tate Taylor, and Spencer previously teamed up on *The Help* (2011), landing Spencer an Academy Award. A still earlier collaboration on the comedy film *Chicken Party: A Mini Movie* (2003) was billed as a “comedic look at crime, love, tolerance, and fried chicken.”

Blackstock Boneyard (2021) puts a supernatural spin on the real-life story of brothers Thomas and Meeks Griffin, who were wrongfully put to death in 1915 for killing a white man, by having the brothers rise from the grave a century later to exact retribution on the descendants of those responsible for their deaths (an obvious revenge strategy not taken by the 1992 Candyman monster). In *Fatima's Revenge* (2018), a Liberian home healthcare worker is taken hostage by her latest client, a racist, MAGA hat-wearing serial killer. *Killer Among Us* (2021) features a Black female cop tracking a racist killer who preys on Black sex workers. *Death Ranch* (2021) pits a trio of Black siblings against KKK cannibals. Even in the campy killer doll movie *Ooga Booga* (2013), it is the spirit of a Black man wrongfully gunned down by a racist cop (named Officer White) who possesses the titular African doll in an effort to avenge his death. Even when delivered in an unobvious, comedic manner like this, it was clear in the 2010s that anti-racism and social justice for Black Americans had become a pressing concern in the country. The cinematic reflections of this, however, would come under fire with charges that overzealous representations of Black oppression were causing more harm than good, as a new term was coined: “trauma porn.”

Trauma Porn: *Master, Antebellum, Karen, and Them*

For all of its inspiration in real-life racial horrors, *The First Purge's* exaggerated content and stylized Hollywood action kept it in the pulpy territory, presumably not realistic enough to traumatize Black viewers who have been inundated throughout their lives with imagery of Black people being harassed, beaten, and killed. In the film, the most potentially provocative violence against Blacks is not shown on screen. The same, however, cannot be said for all Black-led horror

movies from this era of heightened representation. Some have been accused of being “trauma porn,” a term that has been around since the turn of the 2010s, when Allen Meek described it as “a fascination or voyeuristic pleasure in . . . traumatic images” in his book *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images*.⁵⁸ It has subsequently been used to describe everything from social media videos of police brutality⁵⁹ to historical epics like *12 Years a Slave* (2013)⁶⁰ to music videos like Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” (2018)⁶¹ to TV shows like *Orange Is the New Black*⁶² to “abuse documentaries” like *Surviving R. Kelly* (2019)⁶³ to 2021 Oscar winner for Best Live Action Short Film *Two Distant Strangers* (2020)⁶⁴ to horror movies like *It Chapter Two* (2019).⁶⁵

Trauma porn has a multitude of definitions, depending on whom you ask and in what context they envision it. Broad definitions like “perverse fascination with other people’s misfortune”⁶⁶ and “an artistic product that allows for viewer[s] to take twisted pleasure in watching something violent unfold”⁶⁷ raise the prospect of virtually every horror movie being technically “trauma porn.” The nature of horror cinema, after all, is “to frighten and panic, cause dread and alarm, and to invoke our hidden worst fears, often in a terrifying, shocking finale, while captivating and entertaining us at the same time in a cathartic experience.”⁶⁸ It is “scary for the purpose of entertainment . . . leaving [viewers] with a sense of dread and a rush of adrenaline.”⁶⁹ Horror’s currency is fear and discomfort. It is a transgressive genre that has never consistently attained upper-echelon recognition, critical acclaim, or popular success because its content and sensibility are unconventional, divisive, and thus frequently marginalized.

Certainly, fictional horror should be viewed separately from nonfiction formats like news reports, documentaries, and social media posts. Horror movies are meant to entertain, first and foremost. News sources are meant to inform and report factual details, which inherently lean toward the traumatic, given their basis in reality. The traumatic imagery of news reporting has historically served a purpose, however. It is widely acknowledged that

the modern civil rights movement would have been impossible without the presence of network television and its ability to bring the images of Southern racial brutality almost instantly and with its vivid pictures to a nationwide—and almost as important—a worldwide audience.⁷⁰

Similarly, the excruciating nature of the video of George Floyd’s death in 2020 sparked massive protests across both the U.S. and the world and led to the arrests of the offending police officers. The topic of Black suffering in scripted movies and television can likewise serve a purpose. Though difficult to stomach, there is certainly societal value to telling stories like that of the “Central Park Five” in Ava DuVernay’s miniseries *When They See Us* (2019). Some scholars, like bell hooks, have expressed understandable concerns about the lasting psychological impact of such entertainment:

If consumers want to be entertained, and the images shown us as entertaining are images of violent dehumanization, it makes sense that these acts become more acceptable in our daily lives and that we become less likely to respond to them with moral outrage or concern.⁷¹

The horror genre in particular has the unique capacity to convey the sense of terror of racialized violence while simultaneously conveying a sense of distance from reality through fantastic story elements. Horror can tread the fine line between trauma and entertainment, but there is no absolute delineation of where that line is.

Candyman (2021) exemplifies the fine line between entertainment and education, between commodified terror and trauma. In *Candyman*, Nia DaCosta goes out of her way to largely avoid onscreen depictions of violence against Blacks—moving attacks off-camera or portraying them via shadow puppetry—but in the end, it does deal with the issue of police murdering Black men in a direct manner that can be triggering.

The “Black horror” movie *Master* (2022) likewise necessarily straddles the boundary between pain and pleasure, illustrating the utility of trauma in storytelling. The feature debut of Black writer-director Mariama Diallo dramatizes the sense of racial alienation felt by Blacks in white spaces, particularly closed ones like institutions of higher education. It takes a more subtle approach than *Get Out*, however, with a slow-burn story that aims at the small, everyday slights—from the oblivious misunderstandings to the malicious microaggressions—that color the Black experience. Diallo does so by setting the film in the highly white environment of an elite, private Northeastern school, the fictitious Ancaster College, tracking the experiences of two Black women trying to navigate its choppy, unwelcome waters. There is Jasmine (Zoe Renee), a wide-eyed incoming freshman who is assigned to the room where the first Black undergraduate hanged herself in 1965, the supposed victim of the ghost of a Salem-era woman executed for witchcraft. Starting in a new position is Gail (Regina Hall), the only Black tenured professor on campus, who has just been named the housemaster, or “master,” of Belleville House, where Jasmine lives.

Both women have trouble fitting into their respective roles. Socially, Jasmine is marginalized from the start. Some of her housemates knew each other previously and already share a bond. She is awkward and bookish, while they like to drink, smoke weed, and party. They take advantage of her passive nature, telling her to clean up a mess she did not make and making her pay for a group pizza, suggesting that she is being petty when she asks them to chip in. While her roommate, Amelia (Talia Ryder), is let into a frat party, Jasmine is denied entrance until Amelia vouches for her. Things become uncomfortably racial when Amelia introduces her to her friends, who guess her identity with a series of Black female celebrity names: Beyonce, Serena and Venus Williams, Nicki Minaj, and Lizzo. Then, while dancing at the frat party, a group of fraternity members surround



FIGURE 10.5 Gail Bishop (played by Regina Hall) in *Master*
 Amazon/Photofest

her, shouting lyrics to the hip-hop song blasting through the speakers, including the words “ho,” “bitch,” and “nigga.” Gail is concurrently dealing with racialized discomfort, hers coming at the hands of liberal white faculty members who see her as a chance to pat themselves on the back for their inclusiveness, comparing her to Obama for becoming the school’s first master, and who micromanage her acceptance speech to emphasize her race, a signifier for their commitment to diversity. When it comes time to decide if they should offer tenure to another Black female professor, Liv (Amber Gray), however, they question Gail’s ability to be impartial in the decision, pressuring her to be increasingly critical of her colleague.

This palpable discomfort—or “trauma,” if you will—is the driving force of *Master*. It seeks to instill a suffocating sense of otherness: the loneliness, the paranoia, the self-doubt, the helplessness, the frustration, the rage. While tonally the opposite of Diallo’s satirical horror-comedy short *Hair Wolf* (2018), about monstrous whites adopting Black hair styles, *Master* similarly paints a picture of pervasive whiteness overtaking Black identity. Jasmine tries to conform to her surroundings by straightening her hair, kissing a white boy at the frat party, and ignoring her discomfort while excusing the actions of others. “She really doesn’t want to acknowledge what’s going on around her,” explains Diallo, “because it’s just too difficult.”⁷² Even when a Black student offers Jasmine the support of the Black Student Union, she allows her white housemates to convince her that to do so would be uncool and “embarrassing.” Gail, on the other hand, sees the racial issues but thinks she can overcome them. According to Diallo, “She’s got this Obama-era hopefulness of coming in and shaking up the system,” only to find

herself disillusioned.⁷³ The nature of the racism played out on this college campus is ghost-like, hovering, haunting, elusive, uncertain, difficult to prove, and nearly impossible to defeat. When an actual ghostly spirit targets Jasmine, she finds that she cannot escape its reach, and the entity becomes increasingly dangerous to her as own her sense of racial oppression simultaneously grows increasingly tangible.

The movie leaves it up to the viewer to determine whether the ghost is real or in Jasmine's mind, but the insinuation that Liv orchestrated both hauntings and hate crimes to boost her career points to her as villainous—though not the ultimate villain in the film. According to Diallo, “What I really see and perceive as the puppet master pulling the strings and forcing all of the characters into situations that distort their behavior is the institution of Ancaster itself.”⁷⁴ The centuries-old academic setting is steeped in tradition, including the racialized term “master,” which Diallo drew from her personal experience at Yale University:

You're inculcated into this system where you're given a master and before you know it, you're calling somebody “master” and heading over to the Master's House to ask them for advice. And that does trickle into your consciousness in one way or another, no matter how the school might try to explain away the origins of the term.⁷⁵

The traditional role of Blacks in a setting like this is that of subservience. Gail finds reminders of this in her appointed house, including an antique mammy figurine, vintage pseudo-scientific drawings comparing a Black person's brain to that of an ape (presumably what was once taught in the school), and a black-and-white photo of the family of a former master (or similar academic elite) with the figure of a Black maid hovering in the background like a specter. None of the previous white masters seemingly found the materials objectionable enough to remove them. The school's rotten history and its ongoing corrupting nature manifest in the recurring theme of decay, including an infestation of maggots in Gail's house and Jasmine's visions of skeletal figures in the historical portraits that loom in every building. The rumored ghost that haunts the grounds is reflective of the figurative ghosts of the college: the practice of racial exploitation and exclusion and the lack of support afforded Blacks in this oppressive white space. When Gail tries to lend a helping hand to Jasmine, buying into her own overreaching belief that she can simply push through the trauma, she advises the young freshman, “It's not ghosts, it's not supernatural, it's . . . America, and it's everywhere”—a tragic misstep that leaves Jasmine with no hope to escape a nation that is, in essence, one large white space. A despondent Jasmine thus succumbs to the so-called ghost—a heartwrenching scene where she is found hanging in her room—and ends up another victim of pernicious racism.

Despite the fact that the trauma in *Master* is more psychological than physical, it has still been burdened with the moniker of trauma porn by some critics who commented that “The African-American characters in the movie are all victims,

completely devoid of anything but trauma and fear.”⁷⁶ This observation from Black reviewer Odie Henderson highlights the thorny nature of Black horror; that is, trauma and fear are driving forces behind horror, so racializing the horror tends to racialize the trauma. However, it should be noted that *Master* does not portray trauma merely for trauma’s sake. Notwithstanding Henderson’s criticism that “the real-life microaggressions it throws at its characters are so familiar to viewers of color that they’re nowhere near as shocking nor surprising as the film thinks they are,” such themes and contexts are not commonly explored in films, particularly in genre fare, so the trauma here serves as a change of pace (and of place) from slavery epics, ’hood movies, and other typical cinematic displays of Black trauma.⁷⁷

More, the trauma furthers the film’s unique character study of its three main Black characters. *Master* eschews the tendency to, in the most egregious examples of racialized trauma porn, overcompensate for Hollywood’s historically racist portrayals of Black women and Blackness by presenting Blacks as faultless paragons of virtue, idealized caricatures of the “noble savage” variety. Rather, the movie plays as a tragedy full of flawed figures. Gail, Jasmine, and Liv all commit missteps in their attempts to fit into this white space, some calculated and some unintentional. Gail is too willing to undermine her Blackness, Jasmine is unwilling to accept her Blackness, and Liv is too unbridled in her Blackness, which becomes all the more problematic when that Blackness is called into question late in the film. That said, complaints about their actions being atypical of Black people raise the question of how Blackness is defined; as Sarah Susannah Willie attests, “African Americans are not always in agreement about what blackness means.”⁷⁸ When it comes to academia specifically, Willie finds, “Their descriptions of college and postcollege life sometimes reflect . . . contradictory experiences.”⁷⁹ Indeed, in times of stress like those portrayed in *Master*, not every Black person can be expected to seek out another in order to either gain or provide support. Black people can be introverted, insecure, or prejudicial, like everyone else. Whatever the reason for its characters’ noncompliance with racial identity, *Master* is unflinching in showing that Blackness is not monolithic.

What truly opens *Master* up for accusations of trauma porn is its grounding in real-life horrors. The supernatural elements are merely window dressing for the most unnerving material: the actions of the living, breathing humans. Thus, lacking a significant buffer of fantasy, its scenes of racial slights become deeply personal to viewers (particularly a Black woman scholar like myself). Henderson comments that “I cannot help but bring my own experiences into a movie like this, especially when the characters are going through something I have been through as well.”⁸⁰ This reaction highlights the individual nature of trauma. While some reviewers find the characters either unrelatable, unrealistic, or clichéd to the point of ineffectual, others, like Lawrence Ware, find that “I saw something so traumatizing and so familiar that it almost made me have a panic attack.”⁸¹ Rather than treating this infliction of trauma with disdain, however, Ware expresses

admiration that *Master* is able to recreate the subtleties of “moments that only a person who has lived through them could have written and captured so well on film.”⁸²

More problematic is the movie *Antebellum* (2020), from the interracial creative team of Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz. It opens dynamically with a scene of an escaping Black female slave in the Deep South being corralled and killed by her owners. The action not only plays out in slow motion to heighten the drama, but it also prolongs the pain of seeing a lasso thrown around the neck of the tearful, fleeing woman and watching her fall to the ground and then continue to crawl in a futile effort to escape. Her ordeal is ended by a fatal bullet fired by the villainous Confederate soldier Captain Jasper (Jack Huston). To add insult to injury, the scene concludes with another soldier on horseback dragging her prone body through the dirt by the rope tied around her neck. The film then immediately jumps to protagonist Veronica (Janelle Monáe) being beaten by her master (Eric Lange) in order to “tame your savage ways.” He brands her with a hot iron and further demeans her by demanding, “Say your name, girl,” in an effort to get her to repeat the slave name given to her: Eden. Veronica, like all of the enslaved women in this movie, is later subjected to rape on multiple occasions. Further indignities, abuses, and traumatic imagery abound: the pregnant Julia (Kiersey Clemons) miscarries after being assaulted and then hangs herself in grief; Eli (Tongayi Chirisa), the husband of the murdered woman from the opening scene, is forced to tearfully clean up the ashes of her cremated body; new slaves are inspected and manhandled like livestock; the women are offered to Confederate soldiers as sex objects; and there is a nighttime march of Southern soldiers carrying torches, a clear reference to the 2017 white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that turned deadly.

Midway through *Antebellum*, the story switches to a modern-day setting in which Veronica is a renowned sociologist and author. Eventually, we come to realize that these modern scenes are in fact in the very recent past, occurring just *prior* to the slavery scenes. The entire film is actually set in present-day America. The Confederates are overzealous Civil War reenactors and rabid racists who have kidnapped Black people and enslaved them in what is essentially a racialized version of *The Village* (2004). In addition to the host of abuses heaped upon the “slaves,” the story’s uncommon structure feeds into its functioning as potential trauma porn. Because the film’s element of surprise is predicated upon the third-act reveal that everything takes place in the present, the slaves are given limited speaking parts—since their modern speech patterns would give away the twist. However, this approach also limits their character development and reduces their screen time to primarily scenes of extraordinary physical and emotional abuse. Thus, these thinly drawn victims serve little purpose other than to reflect the horrors of slavery. They are walking trauma. By the end, the viewer is left with the question of whether the harrowing journey is worth the destination, whose ultimate message is simply and obviously that racism still exists.

While *Antebellum* feels well intentioned, the thriller *Karen* (2021), from Black writer-director Coke Daniels, feels more knee-jerk exploitive, cashing in on the trendy slang for busybody white women: “Karen.” Not surprisingly, it has been accused of “tackl[ing] racism with the depth of a meme.”⁸³ It rides on the wave of viral videos of “do-gooder” white people harassing and calling the police on Black people they deem suspicious. In 2018 alone, CNN tallied more than 20 stories of police being called on people for “living while Black” while performing such activities as opening a lemonade store, waiting for a friend at Starbucks, barbecuing at a park, working out at a gym, campaigning door to door, moving into an apartment, swimming in a pool, delivering newspapers, asking for directions, redeeming a coupon, selling bottled water on a sidewalk, and cashing a paycheck.⁸⁴ These stories, often driven home by viral videos captured on cell phones, highlight the racism aimed at Blacks by “Karens” and other entitled whites.

In *Karen*, the young Black couple Imani (Jasmine Burke) and Malik (Cory Hardict) move from the city into a white suburban Atlanta neighborhood, incurring the wrath of their nosy next-door neighbor, Karen (Taryn Manning), who immediately begins a campaign to make them leave. She starts with minor “Karen” tasks: installing security cameras pointed at their house, complaining that they did not bring in their trash can from the curb on time, asking Malik to not smoke weed in his car. Separate from the couple, we see Karen harassing other Black people: convincing a restaurant manager to eject two Black men from an establishment for having a loud conversation and calling the police on three Black teens in her neighborhood who refuse to show her proof of residence. She is emboldened by the fact that her brother is a police officer, and she is embittered by the fact that her husband, also a cop, was killed by a Black man. Karen’s steady persecution of Imani and Malik ramps up in intensity when the couple refuses to move and culminates in her brother framing Malik for drug and gun possession. With Malik in jail, Karen and her brother break into Imani’s house and attempt to murder her, concocting a story in which she was the aggressor who had to be shot in self-defense. Merging Karen entitlement with the weaponization of corrupt police, *Karen* combines the nastiness of headline-making racial crimes with the lack of subtlety of a screaming Twitter feud, lending validity to those who label it trauma porn.

Perhaps the masterclass in the perils of trauma porn, however, comes not from the big screen, but the small screen: Amazon Prime Video’s anthology series *Them*. The first season, entitled *Covenant* (2021), revolves around the Black Emory family—Lucky (Deborah Ayorinde), Henry (Ashley Thomas), older daughter Ruby (Shahadi Wright Joseph), and younger daughter Gracie (Melody Hurd)—who move from rural North Carolina to mostly white Compton, California in 1953. Echoing the structure of *The Amityville Horror* (1979), the show chronicles the family’s harrowing experience in their new home over a short 10-day span. Upon moving in, they are immediately besieged by hostile white neighbors who glare at them, camp in front of their house, play loud music, kill their dog, urinate on

their laundry, burn the words “NIGGER HEAVEN” on their front lawn, hang mammy and pickaninny dolls around their house, and eventually conspire to kill them.

There is nothing, absolutely nothing, to the Emorys outside of pain. The characters are defined by compounding trauma. Their impetus for moving to Compton is racial violence: a group of racist whites break into their house, rape Lucky, and murder their infant son—the whole affair, shown in bright light is as shocking as it is nauseating. Additionally, each member of the family has their own individual plight, on top of the harassment from their new Compton neighbors. Henry is shell-shocked from his stint in World War II, where he and other Black soldiers were subjected to mustard gas experimentation. On top of that, he has to fit in as the only Black engineer at his new job, where he suffers an identity crisis—embodied by a demonic minstrel figure (Jeremiah Birkett)—in which he fears turning into an “Uncle Tom.” Lucky is portrayed as having been driven insane by the death of her child; after only two days of harassment in Compton, she ends up standing in front of her house waving a gun and screaming at the neighbors. Ruby—an homage to Ruby Bridges—appears to be the only Black student in her high school and suffers indignities like classmates making ape sounds when she talks. She then develops a color complex and yearns to become white, to the point where she paints her skin. Gracie is similarly mistreated at her school, though to a lesser degree, and is haunted by a ghostly schoolteacher in what is ostensibly the only non-racialized trauma the Emorys experience. It turns out that the family’s struggles with sanity are being manipulated by supernatural forces tied to a ghostly “Black Hat Man” (Christopher Heyerdahl), a nineteenth-century Dutch settler who was twisted by Satan to hate the Black race and who committed himself to its destruction even after his death.

The brainchild of the films is Black creative Little Marvin. Through *Them*, Little Marvin conveys a sense of the pain, frustration, and anguish of being Black, doing so while transferring that same pain, frustration, and anguish onto viewers, and that is, quite precisely, the definition of the horror genre. Horror in particular feeds on torment and harrowing ordeals in which mere survival is a triumph.

As a 10-episode season, it has time to heap trauma upon trauma over a running time of over seven hours. Ambitious to a fault, it tries to encompass the entirety of anti-Black American racism, from lynching and harassment to housing discrimination, school segregation, military discrimination, medical experimentation, redlining, religious racism, employment discrimination, and beauty standards. In doing so, it opens itself up for criticism, especially from Black viewers. While its sentiment is sincere, “the prevailing message that emerges . . . is: racism is bad. And of course, it is—and it’s important that we understand how it has manifested throughout much of recent history. The problem for me, as a Black person, is that I already know about it.”⁸⁵ Indeed, this sort of reaction has led to accusations that *Them* and other would-be works of trauma porn were tailored for a non-Black target audience, prompting questions like “Who are today’s ‘Black’

films and TV shows really for?”⁸⁶ While it can be argued that the trauma inflicted upon viewers is designed to be reflective of the trauma of racism, Black viewers in particular may deem it a price not worth paying.

Despite the protests, most decriers of trauma porn likely do not endorse eradicating all suffering from Black stories. Doing so would remove a significant element of the Black experience, past and present. In *Get Out*, Chris’s childhood trauma of losing his mother was not tied to race. Black leads in films like *His House* (2020), *Black Box* (2020), and *Pooka!* (2018) likewise experience trauma without racialization. When race is involved in portrayals of trauma, the differentiator is the spirit in which the trauma is delivered. Movies can be sexy, for instance, without being pornographic. Similarly, horror movies can use trauma as a side dish in telling a story, but accusations of trauma porn come into play when the film treats trauma as the entrée.

When a high percentage of the portraits of Black life shown in movies and on television is about trauma, pain, and strife, then a sense of fatigue takes root in viewers—like the desensitization and ambivalence that bell hooks describes—followed by a sense of outrage, like that which spawned allegations of trauma porn. A common refrain has arisen from dissatisfied Black audiences that “We are more than stories about pain and suffering. We deserve stories surrounding adventure, happiness and every intersection they have not allowed us to have.”⁸⁷ The solution could be as simple as a commitment to a broad, balanced range of Black representation on screen, which would not only reduce the number of stories of racial oppression but could also increase the impact of the stories of racial oppression that do remain, as they will seem fresher and more unique. In addressing the tension between the creatives making trauma porn-inclined Black horror movies and the viewers watching them, Tananarive Due points to a middle ground where the two sides can meet: “Artists have to be aware that lynching is not horror, and audiences have to be aware: give us some space and time to form this sub-genre and to allow the artist to rise.”⁸⁸

Heroes and Villains: Blacks in the Spotlight

The bright side to the trauma porn debate is that there have been enough Black-focused movies to even spur such a debate. Black representation on the big screen has increased steadily since the turn of the 2010s. The percentage of top films released in the U.S. with a racial minority lead has risen from 10.5% in 2011 to 39.7% in 2020, a number that, for the first time, approached the actual percentage of racial minorities in the American population (40.3%).⁸⁹ Black performers made up approximately half of that 39.7% figure, accounting for 19% of lead roles, significantly higher than the 13.4% share of the American population that Blacks boasted in 2020. It should be noted, however, that these numbers likely were skewed by the COVID-19 shutdown of 2020, which reduced the sample size of films significantly, as the number of movies released in the U.S. plummeted

by 66% compared to 2019.⁹⁰ Presumably more representative is the 2019 statistics, in which 27.6% of the top films featured minority leads.⁹¹ While that number is decidedly lower than 2020's 39.7%, it is still the highest percentage of the previous decade and more than two-and-a-half times 2011's 10.5%. The percentage of Black leads rose after 2011 but dipped during the middle of the decade, a reflection of the dearth of representation that prompted the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag in 2015. From 2017, the year of *Get Out*'s release, to 2020, the percentage of Black leads hit a new high every year.

The increase in Black representation in movies has carried over into horror. Black actors in horror have received an unprecedented share of the spotlight, playing heroes in major mainstream theatrical releases like *Candyman*, *The First Purge*, *The Call* (2013), *Overlord* (2018), *Escape Room* (2019), *Escape Room: Tournament of Champions* (2021), *Spiral: From the Book of Saw* (2021),⁹² and *Get Out*, *Us*, and (at the time of this writing, the coming) *Nope* (2022). Many of these films, most recently with Peele's entries leading the way, use the genre to dismantle efforts to erase the Black past. Likewise, smaller, independent productions—long a reliable source for more diverse fare—feature Black leads in limited theatrical releases like *Repentance* (2013), Spike Lee's *Ganja & Hess* remake *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus* (2015), *The Alchemist Cookbook* (2016), *Don't Look Back* (2020), *Blood Conscious* (2021), *Werewolves Within* (2021), and *Ghosts of the Ozarks* (2022).

Vital to the growth of Black-led horror during this era, especially after COVID-19 diminished theatrical options, was the development of video streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, and the horror-focused Shudder. Netflix's decision to develop original programming in 2013 triggered a domino effect that pushed other streaming services to build their own inventory of exclusive films and series and spurred the formation of new streaming services striving to replicate Netflix's success. The need for original streaming content exploded. By 2016, the size of the digital market had matched that of the theatrical market, and it has surpassed it every year since then.⁹³ Black representation in horror has benefited from the growth in the number of opportunities in the subscription streaming avenue as well as the ongoing on-demand video options. Netflix famously paid Paramount over \$50 million for the exclusive right to stream the sci-fi horror film *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018), which the studio had planned to release in theaters.⁹⁴ Starring Gugu Mbatha-Raw and David Oyelowo and directed by Nigerian-American filmmaker Julius Onah, the "Black horror" movie received mixed reviews but enjoyed a high-profile Super Bowl Sunday release and helped to establish an elevated production value standard for Netflix and other streamers, declaring emphatically that online digital releases could rival wide theatrical releases. Other major Black-led horror from streaming services included *Little Monsters* (2019), *Day Shift* (2022), *Rattlesnake* (2019), *Sweetheart* (2019), *Thriller* (2018), *Black Box* (2020), *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (2020), *Bad Hair* (2020), *Random Acts of Violence* (2020), the *Fear Street* trilogy (2021), *Black As Night* (2021), *There's Someone Inside Your House* (2021), and *Master* (2022). Hulu's

Into the Dark series of feature films generated a multitude of Black-led horror on its own: *Pooka!* (2018), *Pure* (2019), *Pilgrim* (2019), *Delivered* (2020), *Crawlers* (2020), *Pooka Lives!* (2020), and *Blood Moon* (2021). The Black presence in horror became such a hot commodity that Shudder produced the documentary *Horror Noire* (2019) to detail a century of Blackness in the genre, which in turn spawned the *Horror Noire* podcast and Black horror anthology *Horror Noire* (2021).

The increased representation of this era manifested itself in a series of remakes, reimaginings, and sequels that paint a Black face (so to speak) on otherwise white established horror properties. *Jacob's Ladder* (2019) reinvisions the 1990 film with Michael Ealy replacing Tim Robbins in the title role. The Roald Dahl adaptation *The Witches* (2020) moves the setting from England to the American Deep South in the 1960s and lends a racial undercurrent by making the main characters Black. The 2014 miniseries *Rosemary's Baby* cast Zoe Saldana as the iconic lead. Another literary adaptation, Stephen King's *Doctor Sleep* (2019), was not a remake, but the film changed the novel's young heroine Abra from blonde and blue-eyed to Black. The same book-to-film switch was made with the young titular zombie in *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), although interestingly, the other primary character in the story, the zombie girl's teacher, was changed from Black to white. *Slumber Party Massacre* (2021) reinvents 1982's *The Slumber Party Massacre* with a Black "Final Girl" but maintains its status as one of the few slashers both written and directed by women. Unlike the very white 1974 original, *Black Christmas* (2019) features a Black sorority sister among the primary cast. The TV movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show: Let's Do the Time Warp Again* (2016) cast Laverne Cox as mad scientist Frank-N-Furter, switching the character from a white male crossdresser, played by Tim Curry in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), to a Black transgender woman.

With an expanded Black presence in starring roles came an increase in portrayals of interracial romantic relationships among (Black and white) horror protagonists. Historically, horror had presented an early, still taboo example of an interracial love scene between Rosalind Cash and Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man* (1971). This came just four years after the Supreme Court declared "anti-miscegenation" laws unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) and two years after the first cinematic interracial sex scene between Jim Brown and Raquel Welch in the Western *100 Rifles* (1969), which was "somewhat less controversial because she was cast as Mexican."⁹⁵ That said, the scene in *100 Rifles* was still controversial enough to prompt local censorship in Charlotte, North Carolina,⁹⁶ and was, like *Omega Man*, used for the purpose of racialized titillation—or, as *Omega Man* screenwriter Joyce H. Corrington called it, "racial pizzazz."⁹⁷ More than 40 years later, in the 2010s, media portrayals of interracial relationships were still rare enough that a seemingly harmless 2013 Cheerios TV commercial featuring a mixed-race family sparked a torrent of online hate for "shoving multi-culturism [sic] down our throats."⁹⁸ Since then, advertisements have made a concerted effort to showcase interracial couples and families, although it has been noted that a

disproportionate share of the ads (70%) feature a Black woman with a white man, since “ads showing a white man with a Black woman are soothing to white people because it makes them more comfortable than seeing a Black man with a white woman.”⁹⁹

As a transgressive genre that is not as adherent to the prevailing mores of society, horror has enjoyed some leeway in featuring interracial relationships, although it had not done so to an extensive degree until the 2010s. Prior to that, movies like *Angel Heart* (1987) and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) played into the long-standing “Jezebel” stereotype of “black women as lascivious by nature,” while *Candyman* (1992) projected connotations of the sexually aggressive “Brute” or “Buck” Black male stereotype.¹⁰⁰ Since the turn of the century, although the plots of horror films like *Candyman*, *Lakeview Terrace* (2008), and *Get Out* have revolved around the interracial nature of the leads’ relationship, many more introduce mixed-race coupling without reference to race. Early examples include *28 Days Later* (2002), *Supernova* (2000), *Boy Eats Girl* (2005), *Arachnia* (2003), and *Ice Spiders* (2007), although the latter two seemingly go out of their way to downplay the main couple’s mutual attraction. In the 2010s and beyond, the number of horror protagonists in interracial relationships has exploded, the great majority of which exist in plots that are not race reliant: *Bird Box* (2018), *The Perfection* (2018), *It Comes At Night* (2017), *The Watcher* (2016), *Haunting of Cellblock 11* (2014), *Head Count* (2018), *Kindred* (2020), *Thelma* (2017), *Boo!* (2018), *The Clearing* (2020), *Delivered* (2020), *Spiral* (2021), *Blood Born* (2021), *Mother/Android* (2021), *The Voyeurs* (2022), *Incarnation* (2022), and the *Fear Street* trilogy (2021), to name a few.

The growth in Black starring roles in horror over the past decade has extended even beyond Hollywood to international horror fare. The United Kingdom has provided a wealth of Black-led genre films since the 2010s, including the internationally acclaimed *Attack the Block* (2011) starring John Boyega, *Storage 24* (2012), *Wasteland* (2015), *Dark Beacon* (2018), *Writers Retreat* (2018), *In Fabric* (2019), *Kindred* (2020), the celebrated *His House* (2020) which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, and *In the Earth* (2021). Despite its distinguished track record in horror, France’s genre films have been largely white affairs, but the past few years have produced notable Black vehicles *Get In* (2019) and *Zombi Child* (2020). Brazil, a nation with a history of transatlantic slavery and racial oppression similar to that of the U.S., has recently contributed notable films featuring Black talent, like *The Innocents* (2015), *The Devil Lives Here* (2016), *Saudó, Laberinto de Almas* (2016), *The Devil’s Knot* (2018), and *Good Manners* (2018). Although African cinema is not known for horror, several fright films from the continent have found their way to American audiences over the past decade, including *Ojuju* (2015), *Last Ones Out* (2015), *The Tokoloshe* (2019), *The Soul Collector* (2019), *The Hex* (2020), and *Good Madam* (2022), along with the acclaimed supernatural drama *Atlantics* (2019).

The surge in Black portrayals of horror heroes has made it more feasible for Blacks to play horror villains as well. Thirty years ago, when there was less of a

track record for positive, heroic Black depictions, the decision to rewrite the *Candyman* title character as Black necessitated a series of meetings with the NAACP to ensure that the film would not be seen as racist.¹⁰¹ In horror, however, the prospect of villainy has its perks. Horror villains hold an exalted position unlike villains in any other genre, with classic movie monsters like Dracula, Frankenstein's creature, and the Wolf Man and modern killers like Michael Myers, Jason Vorhees, and Freddy Krueger holding iconic status. While *Candyman* is still the only Black horror villain to approach that level of idolatry, the increased number of Black heels in recent years has produced some memorable examples. Around the turn of the century, Danny Glover and Morgan Freeman both played against type as a serial killer in the thriller *Switchback* (1997) and a sadistic military colonel in Stephen King's *Dreamcatcher* (2003), respectively. Meanwhile, musicians Snoop Dogg and Aaliyah made bids for horror superstardom as ghostly gangster Jimmy Bones in *Bones* (2001) and vampire queen Akasha in Anne Rice's *Queen of the Damned* (2002). Samuel L. Jackson has made a habit of playing the heavy in genre fare like *Unbreakable* (2000), *Lakeview Terrace* (2008), *Meeting Evil* (2012), *Reasonable Doubt* (2014), and *Kong: Skull Island* (2017). Other famous stars have opted recently for horror villainy, like Oscar winners Lupita Nyong'o in *Us*, Octavia Spencer in *Ma*, and Forest Whitaker in *Repentance* (2013). Smaller productions that produced unforgettable Black antagonists include the rabbit-masked murderer (Charlotte Marie) in *Easter Bunny, Kill! Kill!* (2010), *The Transfiguration's* diminutive wannabe vampire (Eric Ruffin), and the sound-addicted sociopath (Jasmin Savoy Brown) in *Sound of Violence* (2021). Some Black characters who would traditionally be labeled as villains even became antiheroes, like clout-chasing high school serial killer McKayla (Alexandra Shipp) in *Tragedy Girls* (2017) and mesmerizing, intelligent girl zombie Melanie (Sennia Nanua) in *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

Conclusion

The Black presence in horror cinema has achieved unprecedented heights since the start of the 2010s. The breadth of Black roles has expanded beyond supporting parts to include regular stints as leads, whether they be heroes, villains, or antiheroes. The depth of those roles has likewise grown, with multifaceted characters dealing with complex problems. Black horror movies have struck gold by addressing social issues pertinent to Black America, just as other contemporary so-called "elevated horror" films have dealt with issues of women's rights, mental health, religion, disease, xenophobia, and sexuality. In an era of social upheaval and social awareness, Black horror found an identity that spoke to a general public that had been shocked out of its racial obliviousness by a barrage of violent imagery and stories of injustice. Jordan Peele's success in particular has fueled a sense that Black horror has something important to say, and for once, people are willing to listen.

Notes

- 1 Peele, Jordan. "Say My Name." *Candyman*. Blu-ray. Directed by Nia DaCosta. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2021.
- 2 *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Candyman* (1992), *28 Days Later* (2002); "The 200 Best Horror Movies of All Time." *Rotten Tomatoes*. Web. February 3, 2022. <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-horror-movies-of-all-time/>.
- 3 *Seven* (1995), *Kiss the Girls* (1997), *The Bone Collector* (1999), *House on Haunted Hill* (1999), *Pitch Black* (2000), *28 Days Later* (2002), *Gothika* (2003), *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Obsessed* (2009); "All Time Domestic Box Office for Horror Movies" and "All Time Domestic Box Office for Thriller/Suspense Movies." *The Numbers*. Web. February 3, 2022. www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/domestic/all-movies/genres/horror, www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/domestic/all-movies/genres/thriller-or-suspense.
- 4 Keller, Alexandra. "2013: Movies and Personhood." *American Cinema of the 2010s: Themes and Variations*, Ed. Dennis Bingham. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022.115–16. Print.
- 5 Giuliani, Rudy. Quoted by Tim Wise in *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2009.18. Print.
- 6 Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, 'Post-Racial' America." *American Behavioral Scientist*. May 28, 2015.10. Web. February 4, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215586826>.
- 7 Wise (9).
- 8 Bonilla-Silva (10).
- 9 Samuel, Terrence. "The Racist Backlash Obama Has Faced During His Presidency." *The Washington Post*. April 22, 2016. Web. February 4, 2022. www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/racial-backlash-against-the-president.html; Katch, Danny. *Why Bad Governments Happen to Good People*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2017.36–37. Print.
- 10 "About." *BlackLivesMatter.com*. Web. February 5, 2022. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.
- 11 Tellingly, Trump evoked Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign slogan "Let's Make America Great Again" with his nearly identical 2016 slogan "Make America Great Again," an indication of his intention to return to Reagan-era policies that disproportionately impacted Blacks, including defunding social services, launching a "War on Drugs," and implementing trickle-down "Reaganomics" strategies that benefited the rich. After Reagan's 1980 election victory, notorious Republican segregationist South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond stated that Reagan "ran on practically the same platform I ran on in 1948." Quoted by Daniel S. Lucks in *Reconsidering Reagan: Racism, Republicans, and the Road to Trump*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2020.7. Print.
- 12 *The Washington Post's* running tally of Trump's "false or misleading claims" during his four-year tenure totaled over 30,000. Glen Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly. "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 Over 4 Years." January 24, 2021. Web. February 5, 2022. www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/.
- 13 Klein, Joe. "Obama's Victory Ushers in a New America." *Time*, November 5, 2008. Web. February 6, 2022. <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1856985-1,00.html>.
- 14 Dimock, Michael. "How America Changed During Barack Obama's Presidency." *Pew Research Center*, January 10, 2017. Web. February 13, 2022. www.pewresearch.org/2017/01/10/how-america-changed-during-barack-obamas-presidency/.
- 15 Lucks (159).

- 16 Peele, Jordan. "Commentary." *Get Out*. Blu-ray. Directed by Jordan Peele. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2017.
- 17 Stanfield would later star in Boots Riley's satirical *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) as a telemarketer who rockets to success in his job when he learns to perfect his "white voice."
- 18 See also Coleman, Robin R. Means and Novotny Lawrence. "A Peaceful Place Denied: Horror Film's 'Whitopias'." *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*. Ed. by Dawn Keeley. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2020.
- 19 Anderson, Elijah. "The White Space." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1.1 (2015).10. Web. February 8, 2022. https://sociology.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pages_from_sre-11_rev5_printer_files.pdf.
- 20 Coleman and Lawrence (56).
- 21 Ibid (14). In the Arbery case, father and son Gregory and Travis McMichael attempted to make a citizen's arrest of Arbery, who was deemed suspicious because he was running through their neighborhood.
- 22 Ibid (13, 15). William "Roddie" Bryan portrayed himself as a "concerned citizen" recording the incident on his phone, but it was revealed that he attempted to "confine and detain" Arbery, leading to his death at the hands of Travis McMichael. Rojas, Rick. "Investigators Say Man Who Filmed Arbery's Killing Was More Than a Witness." *The New York Times*, May 22, 2020. Web. February 8, 2022. www.nytimes.com/2020/05/22/us/ahmaud-arbery-william-roddie-bryan.html.
- 23 Ibid (15).
- 24 Coleman, Robin R. Means and Novotny Lawrence. "A Peaceful Place Denied: Horror Film's 'Whitopias'." *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*. Ed. Dawn Keeley. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2020.56.
- 25 Ryan-Bryant, Jennifer. The Cinematic Rhetorics of Lynching in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 53.1. Print. 100.2020. Ryan-Bryant introduces the argument in this way, discussing how the songs in the film are both oppositional and contradictory with the film's message potentially liberatory but settling on ambivalence. The author asks, "will these resources be enough, in the end, to prevail against persistent white treachery?"
- 26 Hamilton, LaMont. "Five on the Black Hand Side: Origins and Evolutions of the Dap." *Smithsonian Center for Folklore & Cultural Heritage*, September 22, 2014. Web. February 11, 2022. <https://folklife.si.edu/talkstory/2014/five-on-the-black-hand-sideorigins-and-evolutions-of-the-dap>.
- 27 Coleman and Lawrence (59).
- 28 Jarvis, Michael. "Anger Translator: Jordan Peele's *Get Out*." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 11.1 (2018): 105. Web. February 13, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3828/sftv.2018.9>.
- 29 Peele, "Commentary."
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Willie, Sarah Susannah. *Acting Black: College, Identity, and the Performance of Race*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.122. Print.
- 34 Hot 97. "Samuel L. Jackson Talks 'Kong', Racism and Trump + The Influx of British Black Actors." *YouTibe video*, 35.59. March 6, 2017. Web. February 12, 2022. www.youtube.com/watch?v=6r3NDSUZkhM&t=1530s&ab_channel=HOT97. Jackson's comments ignore the fact that just a few months earlier, Prince Harry's Communications Secretary had to issue a statement denouncing "the racial undertones of comment pieces; and the outright sexism and racism of social media trolls and web article comments" regarding their recently revealed relationship. "A Statement by the Communications Secretary to Prince Harry." November 8, 2016. Web. February 12, 2022. www.royal.uk/statement-communications-secretary-prince-harry.

- 35 Grant, Harriet. "MPs say 'embarrassing and insulting' UK visa system damages Africa relations." *The Guardian*, July 17, 2019. Web. February 12, 2022. www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/17/mps-say-embarrassing-and-insulting-uk-visa-system-damages-africa-relations.
- 36 Peele, "Commentary."
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Patton, Elizabeth. Get Out and the Legacy of Sundown Suburbs in Post-Racial America. *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17.3: 349–363.
- 39 "The 200 Best Horror Movies of All Time" and "The 123 Best Black Movies of the 21st Century." *Rotten Tomatoes*. Web. February 13, 2022. <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-black-movies-21st-century/>.
- 40 "Get Out." Box Office Mojo. Web. February 13, 2022. www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt5052448/.
- 41 "Sunken Place." Urban Dictionary. Web. February 13, 2022. www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=sunken%20place.
- 42 Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, and Ruth Igielnik, Rakesh Kochhar. "Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality." *Pew Research Center*, January 9, 2020. Web. February 15, 2022. www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/.
- 43 Keeley, Brian. "Income Inequality: The Gap Between Rich and Poor." *OECD Insights* (2015): 33. Web. February 15, 2022. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264246010-en>.
- 44 Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar.
- 45 Schaeffer, Katherine. "6 Facts About Economic Inequality in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*. February 7, 2020. Web. February 15, 2022. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s/.
- 46 Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar.
- 47 Peele, Jordan. "The Duality of *Us*." *Us. Blu-ray*. Directed by Jordan Peele. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2019.
- 48 Peele. "The Duality of *Us*."
- 49 Horror movie fans and writers dug into *Us*'s allegories almost obsessively: C.H.U.D., the meaning of 11–11, Adelaide's name, Hands Across America, etc. M. Keith Booker and Isra Daraiseh in their *Horror Studies* journal article (Vol. 12, No.3, 119–131), "Lost in the funhouse: Allegorical horror and cognitive mapping in Jordan Peele's *Us*" is one of the smarter investigations.
- 50 Aladangady, Aditya and Akila Forde. "Wealth Inequality and the Racial Wealth Gap." October 22, 2021. Web. February 16, 2022. www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/wealth-inequality-and-the-racial-wealth-gap-20211022.htm.
- 51 Boscaljon, Daniel. "Beyond Idolatrous Whiteness I: Resisting Racism." *Religious Studies Review* 46.2 (2020): 273–276. Web. February 16, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.14541>.
- 52 Peele. "The Duality of *Us*."
- 53 Peele. "The Duality of *Us*."
- 54 Peele. "The Duality of *Us*."
- 55 Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). 65. Print.
- 56 DaCosta, "Say His Name."
- 57 Center for Disease Control and Prevention. "The U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee." www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm [Accessed April 3, 2022].
- 58 Meek, Allen. *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.31. Print.
- 59 Charisma, Tina. "Trauma Porn and the Commercialization of Black Pain." *tmrw Magazine*, June 18, 2021. Web. February 25, 2022. www.tmrwmagazine.com/features/opinion/trauma-porn-and-the-commercialisation-of-black-pain.

- 60 Child, Ben. "Steve McQueen Defends 12 Years a Slave over 'Torture Porn' Criticisms." *The Guardian*, January 10, 2014. Web. February 25, 2022. www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/10/steve-mcqueen-defends-12-years-slave-torture-porn.
- 61 Zaynab. "Childish Gambino's 'This Is America' Criticized As 'House Slave' Trauma Porn." *Hot New Hip Hop*, February 12, 2019. Web. February 25, 2022. www.hotnewhiphop.com/childish-gambinos-this-is-america-criticized-as-house-slave-trauma-porn-news.71790.html.
- 62 Ibrahim, Shamira. "Yeah, I'm Finished With The Black Suffering Trauma Porn Of Orange Is The New Black." *The Root*, June 23, 2016. Web. February 25, 2022. www.theroot.com/yeah-im-finished-with-the-black-suffering-trauma-porn-1822523097.
- 63 Gurantz, Maya. "Negative Space: Close Reading Trauma Porn." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 15, 2021. Web. February 25, 2022. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/negative-space-close-reading-trauma-porn/>.
- 64 Bero, Tayo. "Who Are Today's 'Black' Films and TV Shows Really For?" *The Guardian*, April 16, 2021. Web. February 25, 2022. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/16/them-two-distant-strangers-black-tv-film.
- 65 Bloomer, Jeffrey. "It: Chapter Two's Gay-Bashing Scene Exploits a Real-Life Killing for a Cheap Shock." *Slate*, September 5, 2019. Web. February 25, 2022. <https://slate.com/culture/2019/09/it-chapter-two-homophobic-killing-charlie-howard-opening-scene.html>. Complaints of trauma from *It Chapter Two*, for instance, were related to the death of a gay character modeled after the real-life murder of a man named Charlie Howard in 1984. Likewise, documentaries on Jeffrey Epstein and Larry Nassar rekindled the trauma of sexual abuse. On a daily basis, television news reports channeling the "If it bleeds, it leads" approach to journalism traffic in the trauma of tragedies, from wars and natural disasters to car crashes and assaults.
- 66 Feng, Phyllis. "Does 'Trauma Porn' Really Exist?" *Affinity Magazine*, April 24, 2020. Web. February 25, 2022. <http://culture.affinitymagazine.us/does-trauma-porn-really-exist/>.
- 67 Rios, Katie. "This Is America": *Race, Gender, and Politics in America's Musical Landscape*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021.10. Print.
- 68 "Horror Films." Filmsite. Web. February 26, 2022. www.filmsite.org/horrorfilms.html.
- 69 "Horror Movie Guide: 8 Horror Subgenres." *MasterClass*. June 16, 2021. Web. February 26, 2022. www.masterclass.com/articles/horror-movie-guide.
- 70 Bodroghkozy, Aniko. *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012.6. Print.
- 71 hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.96. Print.
- 72 Kelly, Sonaiya. "Why Racism Is the Real Horror in Regina Hall's College-Set thriller 'Master'." *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2022. Web. March 26, 2022. www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2022-03-18/master-explained-amazon-regina-hall. Web/.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Washington Post Live. "Mariama Diallo & Zoe Renee discuss the new horror film, 'Master' (Stream 3/23)." YouTube video, 32:16. March 23, 2022. Web. March 26, 2022. <https://youtu.be/gw2aKS0tUUM>.
- 75 Kelly. "Why Racism."
- 76 Henderson, Odie. "Master." *RogerEbert.com*. March 18, 2022. Web. March 27, 2022. www.rogerebert.com/reviews/master-movie-review-2022.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Willie. *Acting Black*. 119.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Henderson. "Master."
- 81 Ware, Lawrence. "Why a Horror Movie About Being Black at a White College Almost Gave Me a Panic Attack." *Slate*, March 26, 2022. Web. March 27, 2022.

- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Weitzman, Elizabeth. "‘Karen’ Film Review: Ridiculous Thriller Tackles Racism With the Depth of a Meme." *The Wrap*, September 1, 2021. Web. www.thewrap.com/karen-film-review-taryn-manning-2021/. February 27, 2022.
- 84 Griggs, Brandon. "Living While Black." CNN, December 28, 2018. Web. February 27, 2022. www.cnn.com/2018/12/20/us/living-while-black-police-calls-trnd/index.html.
- 85 Frazer-Carroll, Micha. "Them and Us: Why Amazon’s New ‘Race Horror’ Show Is Worse Than Copycat Programming." *The Independent*, April 9, 2021. Web. February 28, 2022.
- 86 Bero, Tayo. "Who are today’s ‘Black’ films and TV shows really for?" *The Guardian*, April 16, 2021. Web. February 28, 2022.
- 87 Johnson, Brittany. "What Trauma Porn Is, and Why It Hurts Black People." *The Mighty*, October 12, 2020. Web. February 28, 2022.
- 88 Due, Tananarive. "The History & Evolution of Black Horror Movies." *The Daily Show: Beyond the Scenes*, February 15, 2022.44:31 to 44:43. Web. March 1, 2022. <https://youtu.be/RWhSvjOIkZE>.
- 89 Hunt, Darnell and Ana-Christina Ramón. *2021 Hollywood Diversity Report*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Division of Social Sciences, 2021.11. Web. March 2, 2022. <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2021-Film-4-22-2021.pdf>.
- 90 *2020 Theatrical and Home Entertainment Market Environment (THEME) Report*. Washington, DC: Motion Picture Association, 2021.42. Web. March 2, 2022. www.motionpictures.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MPA-2020-THEME-Report.pdf.
- 91 Hunt and Ramón. 11.
- 92 This film has an interesting backstory. In 2014, the movie *Top Five* starring Chris Rock is released. Rock’s character, Allen, is an actor whose claim to fame is portraying a detective called Hammy the Bear—bear suit and all. Allen wants to be taken seriously and no longer wants to be typecast as Hammy the Bear. Allen releases a serious movie called "Uprize" about the Haitian Revolution. On opening night of "Uprize," Andre sees his film bomb, while another film, "Boo"—a Madea (Tyler Perry) vehicle, about Madea trapped in a haunted house, is attracting a crowd. In real life, Tyler Perry (who was aware of Chris Rock’s joke in *Top Five*) is approached by Lionsgate who, reflecting on Rock’s gag, asks Perry to do a real Madea/"Boo" movie. The real movie, *Top Five*, does poorly at the box office (just like "Uprize"), while Perry’s *Boo! A Madea Halloween* does well and merits a sequel. Rock later approaches a Lionsgate executive at a party joking that he did not get royalties from *Boo!* which was, technically, his brainchild. Lionsgate responds by casting Rock as the star *Spiral*, a *Saw* spin-off. *Spiral* earns \$23M domestic compared to *Boo 2!* which earns over \$47M.
- 93 2020 THEME Report. 9.
- 94 Kit, Borys and Pamela McClintock. "Sources: Netflix Paid Paramount More Than \$50 Million for ‘Cloverfield Paradox.’" *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 6, 2018. Web. March 3, 2022. www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/netflix-paid-paramount-more-50-million-cloverfield-paradox-1082305/.
- 95 Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993.79. Print.
- 96 Gleich, Joshua. "Jim Brown: From Integration to Resegregation in *The Dirty Dozen* and *100 Rifles*." *Cinema Journal* 51.1 (2011): 17. Web. March 5, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2011.0072>.
- 97 "Introduction by Joyce H. Corrington (Screenwriter), Paul Koslo ('Dutch'), and Eric Laneuville ('Richie')," *The Omega Man*, DVD, directed by Boris Sagal. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2007.

- 98 Jefferson, Cord. "Cheerios Ad Starring Interracial Family Predictably Summons Bigot Wave." *Gawker*, May 30, 2013. Web. March 5, 2022. www.gawker.com/cheerios-ad-starring-interracial-family-predictably-sum-510591871.
- 99 Block, Deborah. "Americans See More Interracial Relationships in Advertising." *Voice of America*, March 7, 2021. Web. March 5, 2022. www.voanews.com/a/usa_race-america_americans-see-more-interracial-relationships-advertising/6202928.html.
- 100 Pilgrim, David. "The Jezebel Stereotype" and "The Brute Caricature." *The Jim Crow Museum, Ferris State University*, November 2000 and July 2002. Web. March 5, 2022. www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/index.htm, www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/brute/homepage.htm.
- 101 Jackson, Kevin. "The Sweet Smell of Excess: Bernard Rose Has an Oral Fixation: Kevin Jackson Talked to Him About the Appetites Behind His New Horror Film, *Candyman*." *The Independent*, March 13, 1993. Web. March 5, 2022. www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interview-the-sweet-smell-of-excess-bernard-rose-has-an-oral-fixation-kevin-jackson-talked-to-him-about-the-appetites-behind-his-new-horror-film-candyman-1497390.html.

11

CONCLUSION

Black Horror Today and Tomorrow

I don't know what the future may hold, but I know who holds the future.

—Ralph Abernathy

Black Tales of Horror: The End

For Black Americans, generally, the horror genre continues to be a study in anti-Blackness, exoticism, gender oppression (particularly nonbinary and trans people), and neocolonialism in which Black people are portrayed as outside of Western images of enlightenment while being subordinated to a system of primitive images—political, economic, cultural, religious, and social. With Blackness a marker for difference, it must be noted that nonconformity within (expectations) of Blackness presents (at least) a double marginalization. Location (the 'hood), class (lower class), and heteronormativity are powerfully confining. These limits are a burden and reality for Black Americans' participation in the genre—there are fewer horror movies in which Black people can simply “be,” be diverse and different, be scared or scary. More, this sense of being often cannot happen without the additional specter of the “message movie” in which the effects of racism and anti-Blackness alongside the quest for social justice loom large.

Non-Black horror has been particularly confounding on this point—in one instance, either excluding Black characters or reducing them to one-dimensional stereotypes, drawing on narrow tropes, or, in another, inviting Black characters to do battle against The Man. The response to such exclusion from Black creatives is more “us” horror films (pun intended—we see you, Jordan Peele). “Black horror” was born, in part, out of exclusion but also for us—for Black audiences.

Indeed, Black horror is experiencing qualitative and quantitative ascendancy. For example, Black performers have graduated from the wild-eyed, nameless tribespeople of *King Kong* (1933) to horror villains (rather than Enduring heroes) on their own terms. Black horror antagonists frequently have a sympathetic, almost antiheroic backstory involving them being wronged. Sometimes they are victims of racial injustice who enact vengeance, à la Candyman, as in *The Skeleton Key* (2005), *Jessabelle* (2014), *Blackstock Boneyard*, *Body Cam*, *Ritual* (2002), and *West of Hell* (2018). Other times, they are victimized for non-racial reasons, as in *Us* (2019), *Bones* (2001), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Thriller* (2018), *Sound of Violence* (2021), *The Whistler* (2006), and *The Madness Inside Me* (2020).

Black horror is also a curative to so-called color-blind(ish) casting, in which a multi-cultural, “one of each,” crew of young horror victims is assembled. *The Descent* (2005) and *Dracula 2000* (2000) asked audiences to quickly take note of their diversity, but in a progressive irony to also quickly ignore it. This disregard of race was facilitated by the scant hailing of Blackness—there would be no cultural references like those that were enjoyed by Chris in *Get Out* or the Wilsons in *Us*.

Still, there remains an undercurrent narrative about race that centers on its discursive unsustainability. Declarations of “race ends here” (Gilroy) are bolstered by claims of internal sameness, superficial external differences, and the cumbersome work of trying to maintain what Louis calls a “raciology” in a world that claims to embrace anti-racism.¹ Black horror may not be a solution to these ideological debates, but it does step into the discussion in a way that color-blind horror does not and cannot. This book has found it worthwhile to give careful consideration to the ways in which horror—“Blacks in horror” and “Black horror”—speaks (or does not) to Black identity, Blackness, or even to racially coded cultural practices, styles, and esthetics, and the ways in which such films may (or not) dismantle racial hierarchies.

It is advocated here that “Black horror” (like “queer horror,” “Latinx horror,” “animal horror,” “eco-horror”) has an important place in the genre. Out of the culturally attuned come, some of the most compelling takes on common themes as well as new innovations—filmmakers Oscar Micheaux and Eloyce Gist are prime examples of such contributions. Morality tales in horror are completely common; the turn to Black forms of worship and the reflection on Black respectability, as seen in *Go Down, Death* (1944) or *Def by Temptation* (1990), is what is novel. Nollywood (“Nigerian Hollywood”), with its horror films based on the occult, supernatural aspects of religion (e.g., Devil possession) bolstered by sickening special effects, and mixed with healthy doses of real live church services and messages about alienation from one’s communities, has at times united with Black American horror in an interesting instance of morality-tale cross-culturalization.

These compelling takes and new innovations continue as Black people bring unique interpretations of the vampire and the boogeyman as symbols of racism and gentrification (e.g., *Blacula* [1972], *Candyman* [1992 and 2021], and *Vampires vs. the Bronx* [2020]), and they have even harnessed the werewolf, controlling its

moon-cycle changes while making it a warrior engaged in class warfare (e.g., *Bloodz vs. Wólvez* [2006]). Black characters even prove to be unique zombies, refusing to fulfill a neo-slavery fantasy by presenting independent, avenging undead (e.g., *Land of the Dead* [2005], *The Girl with All the Gifts* [2016], and *Blackstock Boneyard* [2021]).

In the past, Black characters have been the source of “the funny” in comedy-horror, putting on full display their incredible talents while being denied their humanity. Today, “Black horror” says that Black people no longer need to be assigned “saintlike goodness to counteract the racism . . . automatically direct[ed] toward a Black character on screen.” The hilariously harmless Black portrayal is certainly not the equivalent of a “normal” white character.² The Wayans’ *Scary Movie* (2001), which grossed an incredible \$157,019,771 domestically and \$278,019,771 worldwide, turned the joke back on horror.³ The movie, and its sequels, includes spoofs of horror’s clichéd treatment of Blacks, thus exposing such practices. By turning the lens back on itself, Black creatives have worked to subvert such treatments through their own comedy.⁴

Brought together, the story of Black people in the horror genre is a compelling history and contemporary examination of the understanding of Black Americans, as displayed through a popular culture form, over the last century. There are plenty of lessons here about stereotypes and oppressions—particularly as they pertain to depictions of the continent of Africa, natives, and Voodoo. However, this is also a tutorial in subversion—yes, the servants did ridicule their white master (so what if he was German) in *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943). This history also reveals a rise of consciousness and resistance, with the likes of actors Clarence Muse and Spencer Williams saying, “No more” to Hollywood’s stereotypes.⁵ Films such as 2005’s *The Skeleton Key* and even Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) continue to associate Voodoo (and other Black religions) with a dark wickedness. As Wester observes in *Skeleton Key*, “the altruistic white body negotiating the terrain of New Orleans constantly risks running across hidden locales of destructive power: everyday places, such as the Quality Wash and Dry Laundromat, . . . hide hoodoo priestesses who are willing to cast a curse for a few dollars.”⁶ However, as early as 1934, with *Drums o’ Voodoo*, and over the decades with *Scream*, *Blacula*, *Scream* (1973) and *Tales from the Hood* (1995), the struggle to reclaim Voodoo is ever-present. The dead inner city or ’hood remains a contradictory presence in horror, both celebrated and reviled; however, increasingly, Black characters are being depicted outside of its confines. Black characters have made it out of the ’hood and into, for example, the suburbs and the rural. However, their brushes with places beyond that, such as outer- or virtual-spaces, have been less frequent and have had to overcome portrayals of being, as Janell Hobson would describe it, “digitally primitive.” Over the years, Black characters have been shown as resistant to exploiting technology, from *Alien*’s (1979) Parker (Yaphet Kotto) and *Dracula 3000*’s (2004) Humvee (Tiny Lister), space travelers who simply want to pummel, to *Strange Days*’s (1995) Lornette (Angela Bassett),

who is a space-craft-piloting technophobe.⁷ But an increasing presence in sci-fi horror, particularly from Black actresses like Angela Bassett in *Supernova* (2000), Gugu Mbatha-Raw in *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018), and Mamoudou Athie in *Black Box* (2020), has made for a promising outlook for displays of otherworldly and digital Blackness. Indeed, the next frontier of horror, Black or otherwise, is here with technologically driven fear of the synthetic, digital, and virtual.

This is also an accounting of the financial and representational hardship that continues to plague Black filmmakers. Charles Burnett laments industry practices that fail to promote Black films, such as studios who will buy a Sundance film, only to warehouse it, or who renege on promises of promotion, failing to even purchase \$50 newspaper ads.⁸ Indeed, director H.M. Coakley screened his film *Holla* (2006) for free for eight weeks before it was placed in two theaters in Atlanta and Houston for one night on December 1, 2006. After that, the film's distributor, Lionsgate, marketed *Holla* as straight to DVD.⁹

While Hollywood has increased its openness to Black stories, particularly over the past decade, the Black presence on the big screen remains tenuous due to a lack of significant growth in the Black presence behind the scenes. Setting aside the COVID-skewed 2020 statistics that saw the percentage of Hollywood films written by Blacks jump from 5.6% in 2019 to 13.5% in 2020 and the percentage directed by Blacks jump from 5.5% to 15.1%, the number of Black writers and directors has lagged since the start of the 2010s.¹⁰ From 2011 to 2019, an average of only 9% of the writers of the top films in America were of *any* racial minority, Black or otherwise.¹¹ This is despite the fact that racial minorities comprised nearly 40% of the nation's population during that time. The average percentage of minority movie directors during that time was slightly better (13.7%) but still fell significantly short of proportional representation.¹² Similarly, Black producers were involved in only 6% of American films from 2015 to 2019.¹³ The impact of this lack of diversity off-camera is magnified on camera, as the probability of a movie with no Black producer having a Black director is only 3%, while the addition of a Black producer skyrockets that probability to 42%.¹⁴ Likewise, the likelihood of a film with no Black producers to hire a Black writer is less than 1%, whereas that figure jumps to 73% with the addition of one or more Black producers.¹⁵ Black directors, in turn, have influence on the inclusion of Black writers, as 30% of writers on Black-helmed films are Black, while less than 1% of writers on films from non-Black directors are Black.¹⁶ It is thus clear that representation matters even in the roles that audiences do not see on screen.

Finally, though much of horror's history has been about the removal of Blacks from the genre, the substantive point to take away is that today "Black horror" is rather progressive, showering the genre with everything from intellectual exterminators, to (helpful) conjure women, to cannibal rappers. It has been said before, and it is worth saying again here Black is back.

More, the rise of Blackness in horror has become unyoked from singularly "woke" narratives, even as they are not unmoored from Blackness. The 2022

film *Night's End* stars Geno Walker as Ken, a Black male agoraphobic shut-in with severe anxiety who, interestingly, is slow to confront the fears in his personal life but works bravely to confront the evil in someone else's. Ken does not simply “happen to be Black,” thereby a Black guy parachuted into a role without cultural references. Rather, he performs his Blackness with subtle realism as, for example, he engages (via videoconferencing) with his Black Brother, Terry (Felonious Munk) in a warm interaction of humor, care, and fear. The same holds true for Steven Barnes and Tananarive Due's “The Lake” in the anthology *Horror Noire* (2021) based on Due's short story of the same name. In this eco-horror thriller (what's really up with the water?), there is no question that Abbie LaFleur (Lesley-Ann Brandt) is a Sister in Blackness, but the star of this film is a deadly lake.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Black horror has come a long way. But as is the case with any racial progress, it is susceptible to the whims of the majority. Hollywood is trendy and, like history as a whole, it is cyclical in nature. Just as the backlash against the 2008 election of Barack Obama triggered the 2010 Tea Party Republican inundation of Congress and the 2016 election of Trump (along with the racism and xenophobia inherent in his promise to “Make America Great Again”), so too is the cinematic landscape vulnerable to any hint of audiences tiring of pushes for racial and cultural diversity. Conservative rallies against so-called “wokeness” in the entertainment industry mirror movements against critical race theory in schools, stigmatizing terms like “woke” and “CRT” in the same way that had previously been done with “affirmative action” and “Black Lives Matter.” Conservative movements have created their own horror stories, using fear-mongering techniques to make the white majority believe that any advancements attained by minorities are a threat to their way of life. Just as the interracial Cheerios commercial was demonized for “shoving multi-culturalism down our throats,” these endeavors are white supremacist dog whistles to not only sweep Black issues under the rug but also turn the tables and claim their own oppression by Blackness in a post-Trump environment in which truth is merely a construct to suit one's aspirations.

So far, mainstream America has come along for the Black horror ride, largely on the strength of Jordan Peele. But for how long? The U.S. has shown itself to be as fickle when it comes to Black cinema as it is when it comes to Black rights. Starting with the Blaxploitation 1970s, the popularity of Black movies with mainstream audiences has ebbed and flowed. The red-hot Black filmmakers and stars of the 1970s and 1990s found Hollywood to be capricious in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, when the next “flavor of the month” came along. With few Black creatives in positions of influence (writers, directors, producers, and executives) in Hollywood, there are precious few champions for Black horror who have the power to keep it in the spotlight out of sheer will. Until that changes (and it must change), in order to maintain and build upon the prominence of Black

horror, Black creatives have to continue to innovate and tell stories that not only represent who they are but also enthrall audiences of all races. Through the universality of the genre, Black stories can thrive. New Black voices have to emerge to bolster Black horror and to prove to the masses that it is not a one-person show. Peele has established himself as a visionary, a brand that can be trusted within the genre, but he cannot support Black horror alone. His momentum must be built upon to create the next generation of Black horror. Certainly, he has opened doors for many, and there have been exciting projects from young Black filmmakers like Nia DaCosta (*Candyman* [2021]), Remi Weekes (*His House* [2020]), Mariama Diallo (*Master* [2022]), J.D. Dillard (*Sweetheart* [2019]), and Emmanuel Osei-Kuffour (*Black Box* [2020]), but it remains to be seen if they choose to (or are allowed to) return to the genre consistently.

There is certainly plenty of real-life horror upon which Black Americans can draw. Although not all Black horror needs to be race- or social justice-based, the current environment provides ample fuel for nightmare scenarios. While the current spotlight on racial violence and discrimination should serve to reduce the number of high-profile instances in the near future, racism simply slithers into other corners of society under the protection of a range of institutions (e.g., politics, academics, health care). From thinly veiled attempts to curtail the voting power of Blacks to laws designed to censor any insinuation that America's historical foundation is anything but morally pristine, these are attempts to whitewash history, like the gentrification in *Candyman*, and to erase the foundation for social justice and Black advancement. These are the horrors haunting Black dreams today. They are particularly insidious because they attack the mind instead of the body, and as such the absence of corporeal trauma in these moments makes them all the more difficult to translate into on-screen horror.

But the horror genre has a way of peeling back the layers of society and delving into the darkness beneath. And so it shall, hopefully while making room for Black sensibilities to continue to germinate and bloom. For over 100 years, Black horror has found a way, and with the determination of those committed to its survival, it will continue to do so. It is the hope that the advancements of the past century—the toil of pioneers like Oscar Micheaux, Noble Johnson, Eloyce Gist, Duane Jones, Marlene Clark, Bill Gunn, William Crain, and Rosalind Cash who, like the Black cowboy pioneers referenced in *Nope* (2022), supported representation in a genre that did not return the support—will not have been in vain.

A Very Brief Word From Your Author

Almost without fail, I am asked about my favorite horror films. This is a ridiculously tough question for me. However, I will try to identify my top films. So, here they are in no particular order: *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror* (2019), *Us* (2019), *John Carpenter's The Thing* (1982), *Alien* (1979), *Candyman* (1992),

Chloe, Love Is Calling You (1934), *Attack the Block* (2011), *Dog Soldiers* (2002), *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973), *Tales from the Hood* (1995), *J.D.'s Revenge* (1976), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Def by Temptation* (1990), *Sugar Hill* (1974), *Blood of Jesus* (1941), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Lucky Ghost* (1942), and *Son of Inqagi* (1940).

Notes

- 1 Gilroy, Paul. "Race Ends Here." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41 (1998): 838–847. Print.
- 2 St. Louis, Brett. "Post-Race/Post-Politics? Activist-Intellectualism and the Reification of Race." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (2002): 659. Print.
- 3 Hicks, Heather. "Hoodoo Economics: White Men's Work and Black Men's Magic in Contemporary American Film." *Camera Obscura* 53 18 (2003): 28. Print.
- 4 "Scary Movie." Box Office Mojo.com. IMDb.com Inc., n.d. Web. August 10, 2010.
- 5 The Wayans are no longer associated with the *Scary Movie* franchise.
- 6 A June 1, 2009 fire at Universal Studios consumed the *King Kong* set, thereby destroying a historical artifact that was also a monument to the racist treatment of Blacks.
- 6 Wester, Maisha. "Keys to a Hurricane: Reading Race, Class, and Abjection in The Skeleton Key." P. 67. *Film International* 12.1 (July 2014).
- 7 Hobson, Janell. "Digital Whiteness, Primitive Blackness: Racializing the 'Digital Divide' in Film and New Media." *Feminist Media Studies* 8 (2008): 111–126. Print.
- 8 Burnett, Charles. Personal communication, January 29, 2009.
- 9 Coakley, H.M. Personal communication, November 27, 2006.
- 10 Hunt and Ramón. 21, 27.
- 11 Hunt and Ramón. 27.
- 12 Hunt and Ramón. 21.
- 13 Dunn, Jonathan, Sheldon Lyn, Nony Onyeador, and Ammanuel Zegeye. *Black Representation in Film and TV: The Challenges and Impact of Increasing Diversity*. McKinsey & Company. 5 March 2021. Web. March 6, 2022. www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/diversity%20and%20inclusion/black%20representation%20in%20film%20and%20tv%20the%20challenges%20and%20impact%20of%20increasing%20diversity/black-representation-in-film-and-tv-the-challenges-and-impact-of-increasing-diversity-final.pdf?shouldIndex=false.
- 14 Dunn, Lyn, Onyeador, and Zegeye. 6.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.

INDEX

Note: *italic* page numbers indicate figures; page numbers followed by n refer to notes.

- Abbott and Costello films 78, 107n3
Abby (1974) 154, 158, 164, 180, 181, 195n78, 238
Abernathy, Ralph 357
abolition/abolitionism 23, 55, 128–129, 192n2
Abominable Snowman, The (1957) 132
Adamson, Al 129
Africa 44–47, 82–84, 86, 114, 115–117, 119–121, 132–133, 153, 359; and colonialism 115–116, 117, 119, 126–127, 133–134; and decolonization 12, 135, 136–137; indigenous religion of 54, 132, *see also* jungle films
Africa Addio (1966) 135–138
Africa Blood and Guts (1970s) 137
Africa Speaks (1930) 45
Afro-American (newspaper) 105, 114
Aikens, Vanoye 131, 155n13
AIP (American International Pictures) 163–164, 179
Albino (1976) 137
alcohol 24, 36, 93
Alexander, Terry 151
Alfred Hitchcock Presents (1955–1965) 106
Alien (1979) 172, 173, 213, 359, 361
Alien vs. Predator (AVP, 2004) 301–303, 302
Aliens (1986) 201, 218
All the Kings Men (1949) 77
Alligator People, The (1959) 113, 123, 133
Amazon Prime Video 347, 3344
Amazonian jungle 114, 117–118, 245
American Civil War 22–24, 343
American Film Institute 30
American International Pictures (AIP) 163–164, 179
American Sniper (2014) 6
American Werewolf in London, An (1981) 215
Amityville Horror (1979) 198, 203–204, 333; remake (2005) 291
Amos 'n' Andy (1951–1953) 87, 106
Angel Heart (1987) 210–211, 211, 235, 349
animal horror films 51, 52, 219–221
Antebellum (2020) 15, 343–344
Anthony, Len 229
anti-assimilationism 13
anti-Blackness 10, 11, 79, 159, 345, 357
anti-racism 13, 138, 337, 358
Ape, The (1940) 78
apes and Blacks 11–12, 45–48, 52–54, 70, 72, 82–83, 102; and Black horror films 86–87, 168, *see also* *King Kong*
Arachnia (2003) 303, 349
Arbery, Ahmaud 317, 318, 352nn21,22
Aristotle 4
assimilation 3, 62, 220
At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul (1964) 139
athletics 184, 319
Atomic Age *see* nuclear weapons/power
Attack the Block (2011) 349, 362

- Attucks Theatre (Norfolk, Virginia) 35
 audiences 1, 2, 9, 14, 18, 27, 28, 64, 291, 346, 361; attendance figures 26, 43; and independent/drive-in theaters 212–213; shrinking 77, 199, *see also* Black audience; white audience
Automation Transfusion (2008) 299
 Avila, Eric 198
Ax 'Em (1993) 252
- B-movies 77, 78, 82, 84, 87, 100, 106, 115, 128, 184, 252
Backroad Diner (1997) 252
Bad Boy (1939) 89
 Baker, Josephine 45
 Baker, Rick 214–215, 216
 Baldwin, James 163
 Barker, Clive 260, 273n46
Barnyard Mix-Up, A (1915) 101
 Bartmann, Sarah 45
 Baskett, James 100
 Bassett, Angela 9, 300
Bataan (1943) 79
Beast Must Die, The (1974) 185
 beasts, Black people as 11, *see also* apes and Blacks
Beat Street (1984) 228, 244
 Beaudine, William 100, 104
 Bellegarde-Smith, Patrick 54
Beloved (1998) 236, 246, 255–259, 258, 260, 300; release of 274–275n72
Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1970) 53
 Benjamin, Walter 235
 Benschoff, Harry 163
 Berry, Halle 290, 300, 301
 Berry, S. Torriano 252
Best Man, The (1999) 108n27, 301
 Best, Willie “Sleep ‘n’ Eat” 12, 47, 71, 75n60, 79, 96, 98, 102–103, 103
 bestiality 30–31, 45, 46
Beulah (1950–1953) 106
 Bibly, Kenneth 128
 Biograph 18, 19, 22
 Birdsong, Sylvia 56
Birth of a Nation, The (1915) 8, 22–26, 27, 57, 79, 138; campaign to ban 25, 47; and Dixon’s novels 22, 25; DJ Spooky’s remix of 30; and Ku Klux Klan 25, 26, 30; monstrous in 23, 24–25, 27, 28–30; plot of 22–23; popularity/status of 26, 30; responses to 31–32; white woman in 24–25, 60, 324; and Woodrow Wilson 22, 25–26, 30, 55
Birth of a Race, The (1918) 11, 31
 Black audience 1–2, 8, 9, 105, 249, 357; in silent era 32, 33, 35, 36–37, 38; 1930s 6, 44, 54, 64; 1960s 146, 147; 1970s 158, 177, 184, 191; 1990s 240
Black Box (2020) 346, 347, 360, 361
 Black characters: attempts to reform 64, 84–85, 108n25, 116; and buddy movies 200–201; in central/nuanced roles 13, 15, 86, 116, 140–141, 143, 148; exclusion/invisibility of 7, 12, 201, 357; expendability of 1, 4, 52, 113, 116, 117, 120; extras 23, 48, 82; increase in 346–347; servants *see* servants; token/stock 78–79, 200–201, 208, 291; typology of 3, 108n25; villains 349–350, 358
 Black cinematographers 9, 157n50, 229, 237, 252
 Black cops 201, 260
 Black criminality 21, 36, 108n25, 160, 202
Black Devil Doll From Hell (1984) 226–227, 228
 Black film movement (1990s) 229, 244, 251, 271
 Black horror films 2–3, 6, 8–10, 154, 358, 360, 361; silent era 31–39; 1930s 56, 92; 1940s 71–72, 84, 86–92, 94–96, 105, 106–107, 236, 358; 1970s 158–159, 181–182, 188–189, 199–200; 1990s 14, 236, 237–240; 2000s 277–278, 280–283; 2010s 313–314, 337–338; and Black Power *see* Black Power movement; and Blacks in horror films, compared 2; D.I.Y. 228–229; and hip-hop *see* hip-hop; with moral/religious themes *see* morality; religious themes; rural 253–255; white-scripted/produced 44; *see also specific films*
 Black invisibility 7, 12, 13, 106, 111, 112, 123, 201, 204
 Black labor 112, 113, 124, 222–223
 Black Lives Matter 5, 315, 329, 330, 361
 black magic 56, 57, 64, 90, 128–129, *see also* Voodoo
 Black male gaze 24, 25, 48, 80, 115, 117, 118, 138
 Black middle class 86, 253
Black Moon (1934) 48, 61–63, 63, 84; primitive natives in 61–62
 Black Nationalism movement 13, 124, 154, 250
 Black “native” body 47

- Black as Night* (2021) 334, 347
- Black Panther* (2018) 5
- Black Power movement 12–13, 154, 159–160, 162, 165, 168, 236
- Black press 33, 44, 105, 118; exclusion by Hollywood of 72n5, *see also Chicago Defender*
- Black producers 278, 360
- Black religion 2, 7, 9, 12, 54, 123, 180, 253–254; Obeah 57, 68, 128–129, 130, *see also* Voodoo
- Black sacrifice 13, 206, 208, 210, 230
- Black Shampoo* (1976) 163
- Black Sunday* (1960) 139
- Black theaters 32, 38, 147
- Black vampires 158, 163, 178, 192n2
- Black women's roles 13, 19–20, 32, 65–70, 71, 80–81, 115; 1930s 45, 46, 62, 65–66, 68; 1940s 86, 87, 90, 91, 106–107; 1960s 132–133; 1970s 172–189; 1980s 224–227; 2000s 300–307; heroic/Enduring Women 173–180, 185, 187, 239, 242, 251, 306; as hypersexual 45, 46, 173, 177–178, 224, 303, 349; and love 65; tragic mulatto stereotype 65–66, 68, 250, 267; and Voodoo 38, 62, 66, 67, 68, 69–70, 81, 90
- Blackenstein* (1973) 13, 158, 164–165, 167, 179
- blackface roles 11, 18, 20–21, 23, 26, 27, 28, 44, 82, 96, 110n75, 115, 137
- Blackness 1–2, 3, 4–5, 7, 357, 358, 360–361; in silent era 18, 20, 21, 23–24, 25, 27, 28, 33, 34, 38; in 1930s films 51–52, 53, 60, 61, 62, 67; in 1940s films 80, 81, 98, 101, 105; in 1950s films 116, 120; in 1960s films 129, 142, 148–150, 153; in 1970s films 13, 158, 160, 162–163, 176, 183, 184, 185, 191; in 1980s films 13–14, 198, 201, 210, 211, 219, 220; in 1990s films 240, 242, 243, 247, 249; in 2000s films 14, 277, 278, 281, 283, 285, 286, 293, 295, 299; in 2010–2022 films 314, 320, 322–323, 324, 329–330, 342, 348; anti- 10, 11, 79, 159, 345, 357; and bass 73n24; and Black horror/Blacks in horror films 8–10; as diverse/complex 2, 10, 13–14, 342; and empowerment 160, 163; as evil *see* evil, Blacks as; and heterosexuality 162–163; as monstrous *see* monsters/monstrous; as primitive *see* primitive/native Black depictions; and sexual predation 24–25; sympathetic depiction of 60–61, 64, 70, 74–75n57; and whiteness 13, 81, 153
- Blacks in horror films 2, 5, 6–8, 9, 11, 15, 37, 124–125; and Black Power movement 12–13, 154, 159–160, 162, 165, 168; and Black sacrifice 13; and brutal buck characters 30–31; and historical trends 3–4; jungle *see* jungle films; *see also* specific films
- Blackstock Boneyard* (2021) 337, 358, 359
- Blacula* (1972) 13, 107n12, 154, 158, 160–162, 162, 164, 165, 179, 250, 313, 358; homophobia in 161–162
- Blade* (1998) 236, 267–269
- Blair, Betsy 106
- Blair Witch Project, The* (1999) 236, 283, 290, 293
- Blaxploitation films 5, 13, 14, 154, 155, 159–163, 172, 177, 184, 199, 309n25, 361; and “bad nigger” 172, 182, 185; and Black Power movement 159–160, 162; decline of 189–190, 271; homophobia in 161–163; misogyny in 160, 178
- Blige, Mary J. 2
- Blind Beast* (1969) 139
- Blood Feast* (1963) 139
- Blood of Jesus* (1941) 12, 89–92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 105, 176, 236, 237, 272n8, 362
- Blood Tide* (1982) 208
- bloodlust 62, 64, 139, 151, 175–176
- Bloodz vs. Wolves* (2006) 14, 280, 283, 359
- Body Cam* (2020) 337, 358
- Body Disappears, The* (1941) 71, 103
- Body and Soul* (1925) 34
- Bogle, Donald 25, 30, 48, 60
- Bond, James III 9, 237, 251
- Bones* (2001) 14, 249, 286, 287–288, 350, 358
- Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000) 293
- boundary violation 5, 8, 18, 52
- Bowman, Laura 84, 86, 94
- Bowser, Pearl 34–35, 41n70
- Boy Eats Girl* (2005) 303–304, 349
- Boys of the City* (1940) 20
- Boyz n the Hood* (1991) 5, 244
- Brazilian horror films 139, 349
- Breakin'* (1984) 234n83, 244
- Breeders* (1986) 227
- Bride and the Beast, The* (1958) 114–115, 117
- Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) 43
- Bride of the Gorilla* (1951) 114

- British Empire 120, 125–126
 British horror films 107n2, 126–127, 131–132, 133–135, 139, 349
 Brooks, Kinitra D. 5–6
 Brotha Lynch Hung 289–290
Brown Gravy (1929) 89
 Brown, Sterling A. 3
Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1957) 118
 Brown, Wally 82
 brutal buck characters 30–31
 buddy movies 200–201
Bugged (1997) 252
 Burnett, Charles 88, 109n47, 228, 253, 360, 363n8
 Bush, Anita 32
 Bush, George H.W. 30–31, 201–202, 265
 Butters, Jr., Gerald R. 19, 118–119
Bwana Devil (1953) 120
By Right of Birth (1921) 31
- cable television 216, 279
 Campbell, William 46
Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh (1995) 107n12, 330
Candyman 3: Day of the Dead (1999) 279, 330
Candyman (1992) 2, 7, 15, 31, 59, 107n12, 168, 260–264, 263, 313, 350, 351n2, 358, 361; urban setting of 253, 260–261; white woman in 236, 270
Candyman (2021) 15, 330–333, 331, 334, 339, 347, 348; and urban gentrification 330, 332–333, 358, 361
 cannibalism 58, 72n13, 138, 241
 Cannon, George 31
 capitalism 153, 175
 Capitol, attack on (January 6, 2021) 315–316
 Caribbean 55, 62, 67–68, 79–80, 119, 126, 130–131, 151; Obeah in 128–129, 130, *see also* Haiti; Jamaica
 Carney, Alan 82
 Carpenter, John 221, 279, 290, 362
 Cash, Rosalind 246, 271, 285, 348, 361
Cat People (1942) 78
 cautionary tales 12, 14, 90
Cave of the Living Dead (1964) 124–125
 censorship 35, 85, 97
 Chaney, Lon 113, 219
Charlie Chan series 79, 97, 101, 102
 Chenault, Lawrence 32, 35, 36
Cherry Tree Lane (2010) 294, 295
 Chesnutt, Charles 37
 Chicago (US) 260, 270, 280
Chicago Defender 33, 34, 36, 105, 118, 146–147
 chicken, as Black food 20, 24, 79, 101, 108n25
 child-like, as Black trait 20, 63
Children of Corn III: Urban Harvest (1995) 14, 270
Chloe, Love is Calling You (1934) 68–70, 362; lynching in 69–70; racial identity in 68–69; racial violence in 69; Voodoo in 69, 70
Chop Shop (2007) 305–306, 311n73
 Christianity 89–96, 105, 128, 130, 176
 Civil Rights Movement 3, 118, 119, 121, 124, 125, 138, 140, 144, 154, 295, 338; and police violence 144, *see also* NAACP
Clansman, The (Dixon) 22, 25
 Clark, Cedric 3
 Clark, Marlene 175, 185, 195n95, 361
 class 5, 6, 10, 15, 152, 191, 325–326, 357, 359
 Clover, Carol J. 3, 10, 27, 300
Cloverfield (2008) 293
Cloverfield Paradox, The (2018) 347, 360
 Coakley, H.M. 281
 Code, the *see* Hay's Code
Coffy (1973) 177, 184
 Cohen, Rob 191
 Cold War 112, 138
 Coleman, Robin Means 3
Collector, The (2009) 292, 294
 colonialism 54–55, 155n3; in 1950s films 115–116, 117, 119, 120; in 1960s films 125–126, 128, 129, 130, 133–138; and violence 12, 55, 56, 57, 126, 135, 136
 color line 10
Colored American Winning his Suit, The (1916) 31
 Columbia Pictures 85
 Columbus, Christopher 54
 comedy 8, 9, 18, 200, 240, *see also* slapstick comedy
 comedy-horror films 20, 26–27, 33, 38, 78, 79, 189–190, 340, 359; 1940s 81–82, 97, 98–103
 comic relief 12, 47–48, 63, 67, 71, 87, 96, 140; whites as 14, *see also* Best, Willie
 “Sleep ‘n’ Eat”; Moreland, Mantan
 communism 112, 121
 Congo 44, 45–46
Congo (1995) 137

- Congo Pictures, Ltd. 46
Conjure Woman, The (1926) 37
 Conley, Nellie (Madame Sul-Te-Wan) 20, 98, 100
Conquest of the Planet of the Apes (1972) 53–54
 conservatives 217, 219, 265, 277, 317, 361
 consumerism 148
Conquest, The (Micheaux) 34
 “coon” films/characters 18, 79
Coontown Suffragettes (1914) 18
 Coppola, Francis Ford 235
 CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) 179
 COVID-19 pandemic 146, 317, 346–347, 360
Craft, The (1996) 11
 Crain, William 160, 164, 178, 361
 Crane, Jonathan Lake 6, 202, 266
Crash Dive (1943) 79
 Craven, Wes 9, 250, 264, 297, 311n73
Crazy as Hell (2002) 282
Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954) 7, 117–118, 158
 Creed, Barbara 304
 crime films 6, 77, 89
Crimson Skull, The (1921) 32–33, 35
 Cripps, Thomas 8, 10, 26, 79, 85, 91, 95, 114, 139, 190
 critical race approach 6, 361
Critters (1986) 198
 Crothers, Scatman 197, 206–208
 Crowther, Bosley 81
Crypt franchise 248–249, 310n9
Cryptz (2002) 281, 283, 306
 Cuba 121
 cultural fetishism 18, 135
 culture wars 10
 Cundieff, Rusty 14
Curse of the Cat People, The (1944) 82
Curse of Frankenstein, The (1957) 132
Curse of the Swamp Creature (1968) 124
Curse of the Voodoo (1965) 126–128, 134
 Cussans, John 57
Cutthroat Alley (2003) 281

Da Hip Hop Witch (2000) 283, 293
 DaCosta, Nia 15, 339, 361
 Dahmer, Jeffrey 265–266
Dawn of the Dead (1978) 147–150, 149, 240, 351n2, 362; and consumerism 148, 149–150; remake (2004) 291, 298–299
Day of the Dead (1985) 147, 150–152; remake (2008) 299

Day X (2006) 286
 Dayan, Joan 62, 66
Dead Heist (2007) 283
Death Ranch (2021) 337
Death Valley: The Revenge of Bloody Bill (2004) 299
Death Wish series 197, 202, 231n21, 295
 decolonization 12, 126, 135, 136–138
Deep Blue Sea (1999) 51, 284
Def by Temptation (1990) 9, 38, 236, 237–240, 239, 244, 271–272n5, 362; critical reception of 240, 249; heroic woman in 92, 239, 306; religion in 239–240, 259; sexual violence in 238; sin in 238, 243, 247; and Spencer Williams 13–14
 Def Jam 244, 289
 deficient: Blacks as 11, 12, 20, 62–63, 79, 97, 116, 124, 131; whites as 14
 Delgado, Mario “Mars” 290
 Demme, Jonathan 235, 256
Demon Cop (1990) 251–252
Demon Knight (1995) 248–249, 300
 Denzin, Norman K. 247
Descent, The (2005) 358
 Dessalines, Jean-Jacques 55
 Destiny’s Child 45
Devil for a Day (1917) 33
Devil’s Daughter, The (1939) 67–68
Devil’s Disciple, The (1925) 36–37
Devon’s Ghost (2005) 303
 Diallo, Mariama 339, 340, 341, 361
Diary of the Dead (2007) 299–300
 Diawara, Manthia 177, 194n58
 Dickerson, Ernest 14, 237, 243, 248, 249, 279, 287–288
 direct-to-video market *see* DTV market
Disembodied, The (1957) 119–120
Disorderlies (1987) 228, 244
 disruption 8, 14, 89–90, 243
 Dixon Jr., Thomas 22, 25, 26
 D.I.Y. films 228–229
DJ Spooky’s Rebirth of a Nation 30
Do the Dead Talk (1918) 33
Doctor Sleep (2019) 348
 documentaries 19–20, 135–138; hoax 46–47, 72n13
 Dolezal, Rachel 322
 double bills 77, 147
 “Double V” campaign 78, 125
Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde (1976) 13, 158, 164, 165, 166–168, 175, 194n45, 218, 252
 Dr. Dre 247

- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941) 13
Dr. Terror's House of Horrors (1965)
 134–135
Dracula: Prince of Darkness (1966) 132
Dracula (1931) 13, 39n6, 43, 72n4, 158
Dracula (1958) 132
Dracula (1992) 235
Dracula 2000 (2000) 358
Dracula 3000 (2004) 283, 359
Dracula's Daughter (1936) 43
Dream Home (2006) 14
Dreamcatcher (2003) 350
 drive-in theaters 147, 212
 drugs 197, 231n21, 247, 259, 280, 287;
 and Voodoo 211–212
Drums o' Voodoo (1934) 84, 94, 359
 DTV (direct-to-video) market 251, 252,
 254, 278, 279–280, 287, 293–294, 303,
 309n25, 313
 Du Bois, W.E.B. 10, 37
 Due, Tananarive 346, 361
 Dukakis, Michael 201, 202
 DVDs 14, 216, 278, 279, 283, *see also*
 DTV market
 Dyer, Richard 145
 Dyson, Michael Eric 8
- East Side Kids* series (1940–1944) 104
 Ebert, Roger 120–121, 249–250, 254
 Ebony Film Company 33
Ebony magazine 105
 eco-horror 51, 361
 Edelstein, David 292
 Edison Manufacturing Company 19, 20,
 22, 39n4
 Edwards, John/Edwards, Mattie 21
 Elliott, Brenda J. 307
 Ellison, Ralph 111
Embalmer (1996) 236, 252–253
 Eminem 283, 289
Emperor Jones, The (1933) 66
 empowerment 10, 11, 13
 Enduring Women 173–180, 185, 187,
 251, 253, 300
 Erish, Andrew 46
 ethnographic films 19–20
Eve's Bayou (1997) 253–254
 evil, Blacks as 7–8, 11, 30, 60, 67, 94,
 123, 129, 153, 230
Evil Dead, The (1983) 198
Evil One, The (2005) 280
 evolutionary theory 11, 46, 47, 117–118
Execution by Hanging (1898) 19
- Exorcism at Midnight/Naked Evil* (1966)
 128–130
Exorcist, The (1973) 129, 158, 180,
 195n78, 199–200
 exoticism 80, 357
Eyes Without a Face (1960) 139
- Face of Marble, The* (1946) 103
 Fanaka, Jamaa 169, 228, 271
 Fanon, Frantz 21, 126, 155n3
Fatima's Revenge (2018) 337
Fear Street trilogy (2021) 347, 349
 fear/terror 4, 5, 6, 8, 30
 Federal Trade Commission (FTC) 47
 feminism 10, 133, 148
 fetishism 18, 45, 50, 135, 321
Fight for your Life (1977) 168–169, 171
 film noir 77
 film posters 46, 86, 129, 137, 183,
 243–244
 Final Girls 172–177, 242, 252–253, 300, 321
Final Patient, The (2005) 282
 financial crisis *see* Great Recession
Firestarter (1984) 7
First Purge, The (2018) 15, 334–336, 335,
 337, 347
 Fischhoff, Stuart 291
 Fleming, George S. 19
 Floyd, George 138
 Fluellen, Joel 82, 106, 107n15, 116, 153
Fog, The (2005) 291
Fools in the Dark (1924) 38
For the Love of Ivy (1968) 147
 Foree, Ken 240–241
 found footage 14, 293–294, 299
 Fox News 277, 315
Foxy Brown (1974) 160, 173–174, 177, 199
Frankenstein (1931) 13, 27–30, 29, 40n39,
 43, 50, 158, 165
 Frankfurt, Peter 269
 Frederick Douglass Film Company 31
 Freeman, Morgan 323, 350
 French colonialism 55
 French films 17, 18, 139, 294
Friday the 13th (1980) 13, 172, 198, 200,
 203, 206
Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning
 (1985) 201
Fright House (1989) 229
Fruitvale Station (2013) 314
 Frye, Northrop 4
 FTC (Federal Trade Commission) 47
 Full Moon Features 252, 278, 279–280, 281

- Fuller, Samuel 219, 220
Funny Games (2007) 292, 294
- gangsters 129–130, 246, 247–248
Ganja & Hess (1973) 154, 174–177, 176, 191, 229, 292–293, 321; remake (2015) 347
- Gateward, Frances 4–5, 163
- Gemora, Charles 47
- gender 5, 10, 21, 187, 191
- gender non-conformity 160, 161, 162, 170–171
- genres 4–5
- gentrification 15, 205, 261, 330, 332–333, 334, 358
- Get Out* (2017) 2, 15, 317–325, 319, 334, 346, 347, 349, 358; absent fathers in 321–322; Black athleticism in 319; Blackness in 322, 324; post-racial myth in 320–321; reception of 325; white woman in 324; Whitopian setting of 317–318, 320, 324
- Geto Boys 289
- Ghost* (1990) 241–242
- Ghost Breakers, The* (1940) 97, 102
- Ghost and the Darkness, The* (1996) 120–121
- Ghost Ship* (1943) 82
- Ghost of Twisted Oak* (1915) 56
- Ghosts* (1917) 33
- Ghosts* (1996) 218, 219
- Ghosts on the Loose* (1943) 104, 110n72
- Giant Claw, The* (1957) 106, 112–113, 117, 150
- Gibson, Gloria J. 92, 93
- Girl with All the Gifts, The* (2016) 348, 350, 359
- Giselle 51
- Gish, Lillian 23, 25
- Gist, Eloyce/Gist, James 92–94, 106, 252, 358, 361
- Glover, Danny 200, 253, 260, 292, 350
- Go Down, Death* (1944) 94–96, 236, 358
- Gold Digger Killer* (2007) 305, 311n73
- Goldberg, Whoopi 218, 241–242
- Goldsbey, Jacqueline 118
- Gonder, Patrick 117, 118
- Gone with the Wind* (1939) 44, 48, 242
- Goodall, Mark 136
- Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971) 138
- Gordon, Richard 128
- gorillas, *see* apes and Blacks
- Gothic horror 83, 112, 124, 158
- Gothika* (2003) 290, 300–301, 303, 351n3
- Great Depression 44
- Great Recession (2007) 14, 294–295, 315, 326
- Green Mile, The* (1999) 209
- Greenberg, Harvey Roy 49
- Greggersdotter, Katarina 51, 115–116
- Grier, Pam 173, 177–180, 287–288
- Griffith, D.W. 11, 22, 38; *One Exciting Night* (1922) 26–27; *Romance of Happy Valley* (1919) 32, *see also* *Birth of a Nation*
- Gross, Jerry 137
- Guerrero, Ed 9, 23, 199, 200, 223, 251
- Gunn, Bill 174, 361
- Hair Wolf* (2018) 340
- Haiti 11–12, 39, 54–56, 65, 66, 80, 134–135, 211–212; as monstrous 60, 70–71; and road burials 61; slaves' revolution in (1793) 55, 74n40; US occupation of 56, 57, 128; and zombies 57
- Halloween* series 203
- Halloween* (1978) 13, 158, 172, 252, 290, 317
- Halloween* (2007) 290
- Hallow-e'en in Coon-town* (1897) 18
- Halloween II* (1981) 198, 201
- Halloween Resurrection* (2002) 284
- Hammer Films 131–132
- Hannah's Gift* (2008) 293–294
- Handler, Jerome 128
- Hands Across America 329, 353n49
- happy Black trope 44, 48, 96, 108n25, 130
- Hardison, Kadeem 9
- Harlem (New York) 36, 67, 68, 70, 97
- Harlem on the Prairie* (1937) 89, 101
- Harlem Resistance 67
- Harris, Mark 197
- Hartsfeld, Joe R. 188, 189
- Harvey, Georgette 68, 70
- Hate U Give, The* (2018) 5
- Haunted Spooks* (1920) 97, 260
- Hays Code 75–76n72, 85, 139, 158, 192n1
- Heart of Africa* (1915) 46
- Hearts in Dixie* (1929) 60
- Heffernan, Kevin 146, 147, 154, 213
- Hellbound Train* (circa 1930) 92, 109n44, 252
- Hemsley, Estelle 132–133, 1253
- Henderson, Odie 342
- Heston, Charlton 285, 348
- heteronormativity 161–162, 180, 230, 357
- Hicks, Heather 209
- Hill Collins, Patricia 10, 45

- Hills Have Eyes, The* (1977) 155; remake (2006) 291, 292
- Hills Have Eyes Part II* (1984) 201
- hip-hop 14, 30, 228, 244–245, 281, 283–290; and horrorcore 289–290
- His House* (2020) 346, 349, 361
- Hispaniola 11, 54, *see also* Haiti
- Hitchcock, Alfred 77, 106
- Hobson, Janell 359
- Holla* (2006) 281, 292, 360
- Holly, Ellen 159
- Holocaust 77
- home invasion films 14, 294–295
- home video market 216, 243, 251, 252, 278, 279, 283
- Homesteader, The* 1919
- homophobia 13, 161–163, 238, 354n65
- homosexuality 70, 161, 272n7
- 'Hood of Horror (2006) 248, 289, 304
- 'hood movies 5, 14, 245–249, 329, 342
- Hood Rat* (2001) 51, 280
- hoodies 294–295
- hoodoo 20, 42n78
- Hoodoo Ann* (1916) 20
- hooks, bell 10, 338–339, 346
- Hope, Bob 97, 102
- Horrible Dr. Bones, The* (2000) 278
- horror genre 3, 4–6, 9–10, 11, 43; decline of 77–78, 79, 106–107; and duplication 291; first use of term 43, 72n4; “Golden Age” of 43–44; and silent films 20–21, 39n6
- horror movie shorts 13, 17, 21
- horror musicals 123, 216
- Horror Noire* (2021) 348, 361
- Horror Noire* (documentary, 2019) 2–3, 362
- Horror of Party Beach, The* (1964) 107, 123–124, 130, 153
- horrorcore 289–290
- Hound of the Baskervilles, The* (1959) 132
- House of the Damned* (1996) 252
- House of the Dead* (2003) 298, 299
- House of the Dead* (video game) 291, 295
- House on Skull Mountain, The* (1974) 188–189
- House-Rent Party* (1946) 101
- Huckleberry Finn* (1931) 207
- Hughes, Langston 242
- Hughey, Matthew 208
- Hulu 347–348
- Human Centipede 1/2/3* (2009/2011/2015) 6, 292
- human rights 23, 126
- human sacrifice 56, 62, 120, 130, 189
- humor 8, 9, *see also* comedy-horror films; comic relief, Blacks as
- Humphries, Reynold 80, 107n9
- Hurston, Zora Neale 54
- Huston, John 77
- Hutchings, Peter 4, 6, 223
- I Am Legend* (2007) 284–286, 351n3
- I Eat Your Skin* (1964) 130–131
- I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) 79–81, 81, 107nn8,9, 131, 251
- Ice Cube 284
- Ice Spiders* (2007) 303, 349
- Ice-T 244, 283, 284
- Imitation of Life* (1934) 66, 72n5
- immigrants 259, 316–317, 323
- In Zululand* (1915) 20
- income inequality 325–326
- independence movements 126
- independent filmmakers 14, 32, 34–37, 38, 228–229, 240
- independent theaters 212–213
- Indian burial ground trope 204, 205, 206, 232n29, 333
- Indonesia 48
- Inqagi* (1930) 11, 45–47, 49, 65, 86, 115, 136; marketed as documentary 46–47, 72n13, 86; popularity of 46, 47, 48
- Ingraham, Lloyd 20
- Insane Clown Posse 289
- internet 279, 290
- interracial relations 24, 64–65, 66, 68–69, 71, 72n5, 200, 206, 318–319, 348–349, 361
- Into the Dark* series 348
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) 111–112
- Invisible Ghost* (1941) 64, 84
- Invisible Man, The* (1933) 43
- Islamophobia 276, 315, 316–317
- Isolation* (2005) 303
- It* (1990) 281
- Italian films 135–138, 139
- Jackson, Freddie 9, 237
- Jackson, Jesse 314, 316
- Jackson, Michael 13, 214–219; and bodily alterations 218–219; *Ghosts* (1996) 218, 219; *Somebody's Watching Me* (1983) 216; *Thriller* (1983) 13, 214–215, 219, 230; “Torture” (The Jacksons, 1984) 216–217

- Jackson, Peter 51
 Jackson, Samuel L. 1, 9, 237, 253, 254, 290, 323
Jacob's Ladder (2019) 348
 Jacopetti, Gualtiero 136, 137, 138
 Jamaica 67, 128–130
 James, LeBron 51
 Japanese films 139
 Jasper short films (1942–1947) 104–105
Jaws: The Revenge (1987) 200, 232n35
Jazz Singer, The (1927) 18, 39n5, 110n75
J.D.'s Revenge (1976) 164, 185–187, 362
Jeepers Creepers (2001) 209–210
Jet (magazine) 181, 199–200
 Jim Crow era 24, 35, 70, 102
 Johnson, George 31, 34
 Johnson, Noble 31, 43, 48, 361
 Joi, Marilyn 184, 195n90
 Jones, Darby 80, 82
 Jones, Duane 144, 153, 174, 229, 286, 313, 361
 Jones, G. William 19, 89
 Jones, Grace 224, 225
 Jones, James Earl 208
Juice (1992) 243–244, 249, 269
 jungle films 39, 44, 45, 114, 119–121,
 see also apes and Blacks; native Black
 depictions
Jurassic Park (1993) 1, 4
- Kahn, Richard 86
Karen (2021) 15, 344
 Karloff, Boris 27, 64, 78, 106
 Katrina, Hurricane (2005) 276, 299
 Kaufman, Lloyd 237, 243, 271n5
 Kennedy, Dane 125–126
 Kenya 46, 120
 Kersey, Paul 202
 Kikuyu people 45, 120
Killer Among Us (2021) 337
Killer Shrews, The (1959) 113–114, 117
Killjoy (2000) 278, 280–281
 Kinetoscope 17
 King Jr., Martin Luther 140, 141
King Kong (1933) 7, 48–52, 50, 71, 78, 168, 292; as animal horror 50–51;
 Kong's racial coding in 49; as love story
 64; plot of 48–50; primitive natives in
 48, 49, 51, 52, 358; valuing of white
 women in 48–49, 59
King Kong (1976) 51
King Kong (2005) 51–52
 King, Rodney 264
- King, Stephen 3, 218, 281, 348, 350
King of the Zombies (1941) 12, 71, 98–100,
 101–102, 140, 158
 Klein, Aaron 307
 Klotman, Phyllis 177, 194n58
 Knight, Suge 247
Konga (1961) 135
 Kozol, Wendy 1
Kracker Jack'd (2003) 281–282
 Krueger, Freddie 7, 203, 243, 252, 262, 350
Krush Groove (1985) 228
 Ku Klux Klan 22, 25, 30, 32, 36, 221,
 246, 336
- L.A. Rebellion 228
LA Times 46
Lady in White (1988) 203–204
Lakeview Terrace (2008) 349, 350
 Lancelot, Sir (Calypso singer) 81, 82
Land of the Dead (2005) 147, 152–153,
 296–297, 358, 359
 Landis, John 214–215, 216, 279
Last House on the Left, The (1972) 155,
 311n73; remake (2009) 291, 292
Last man on Earth (1964) 285
 Lathan, Sanaa 301
 Lathan, Stan 228
 Lawrence, Novotny 178
 laziness, as Black trait 20, 61, 63, 100
Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III
 (1990) 240–241
 Lee, Spike 229, 230, 237, 347
Leech Woman, The 132–133, 153
Legend of Bagger Vance, The (2000) 209, 285
 Lemmons, Kasi 253
 Leonard, David 5
 Leonard, Sheldon 66, 67
Leopard's Spots (Dixon) 22
Leprechaun series 279, 280, 283
 Lewton, Val 78
 Library of Congress 30, 78, 94, 109n44,
 121n5
 licensing 35
 Lincoln Motion Picture Company 31, 34
L'Inferno (1911) 95
Little Monsters (2019) 57, 347
Little Rebel, The (1936) 207
 LL Cool J 284
 Lloyd, Harold 97
Los Angeles Examiner 47
Los Angeles Sentinel 105, 146, 264
 Louis, Willard 21
Louisiana (Smith) 94

- Louisiana (US) 55, 69, 74n45, 89, 94, 98, 100, 113, 142, 253–254, 337
- L'Ouverture, Toussaint 55, 74n40
- love stories 64–70, 71; and Black women 65; *Chloe, Love is Calling You* (1934) 68–70; *King Kong/White Zombie* as 64; and “mulatto” stereotype 65, 66, 68; *The Mummy* 64–65, *see also Love Wanga, The Love Wanga, The* (1936) 55, 65–67; racial identity in 65, 66; remake of *see Devil's Daughter, The*; titles/releases of 75n67; Voodoo in 66
- Lubin, Sigmund 20, 21, 22, 56, 101
- Lucky Ghost* (1942) 100–101, 362
- Lugosi, Bela 58, 64, 82, 104
- lust 30, 51, 57, 60, 65, 115, 175–176, 227
- Lynch, Vernon 9
- lynchings 24, 25, 69–70, 154, 261
- Ma* (2019) 337, 350
- Machine Gun Preacher* (2011) 137
- McMurray, Gerard 15
- mad scientists 29, 78, 124, 135, 148, 150, 248, 348
- Magic island, The* (Seabrook) 57–59, 61, 71, 128
- “magic lanterns” 17, 39n3
- magical Negro trope 206–207, 208–212, 241, 285, 308
- Mailer, Norman 154
- male gaze: Black 24, 25, 48, 80, 115
- Maltese Falcon, The* (1941) 78
- Manatu, Norma 91
- Manoir du Diable, Le* (1896) 17
- Mantan Runs for Mayor* (1947) 101
- marketing *see* promotion/marketing
- Marshall, William 160, 178, 180, 313
- masculinity 50, 91, 151, 169, 268–269
- mass media 44, 85
- Master* (2022) 339–343, 340, 347, 361; and real-life horror 342–343
- Matheson, Richard 284, 286
- Mattera, Jason 307
- Maverick Entertainment 14, 279–280
- mediated messages 6
- medical theme 282
- Medovoi, Leerom 163
- Meek, Allen 338
- Méliès, George 11, 17, 18
- Menace II Society* (1993) 5, 249
- Mercer, Kobena 219
- Mercy, the Mummy Mumbled* (1918) 33
- MGM 13
- Micheaux, Oscar 11, 21, 31–32, 33, 34–37, 44, 56, 89, 154, 358, 361; *The Conjure Woman* (1926) 37; *The Devil's Disciple* 36–37; output of 34; *The Scar of Shame* (1927) 92; *A Son of Satan* (1924) 34–36
- Midnight Hour, The* (1985) 217–218
- Miller, Flournoy 100, 101
- Mims, Sergio Alejandro 228
- minstrelsy 12, 79, 96, 97, 107
- Minstrels Battling in a Room* (circa 1897–1901) 18
- miscegenation 35–36, 75n72, 85, 115, 117, 118, 133, 348
- misogyny 10, 13, 160, 169, 185, 187, 288
- Monae, Janelle 2
- Mondo Cane* (1962) 135–136
- mondo films 135–138
- Money Talks in Darktown* (1916) 33
- Monogram Pictures 78, 100
- Monster from Green Hell* (1957) 12, 115–117, 153
- Monster Walks, The* (1932) 47, 102
- Monster's Ball* (2001) 301, 303
- monsters/monstrous 6, 7, 12, 27–30, 38, 71, 100, 106, 117–118, 142; and *Birth of a Nation* 23, 24–25, 27–30; and *Candyman* 260, 261, 262; Haiti as 60, 70–71; and sexuality 30, 179; white 13, 60, 203, 229–230, 243, *see also* apes and Blacks; zombies
- Moore, Melba 9, 237
- Moore, Rudy Ray 189, 190, 309n25
- morality 8, 12, 13–14, 32, 37, 47, 286–287, 288, 358, *see also* Hays Code
- Moreland, Mantan 12, 71, 79, 96, 97–102, 98, 140
- Morris, Earl 84, 86
- Morrison, Ernest “Sunshine Sammy” 20, 98, 104, 260
- Morrison, Toni 255
- MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) 146; rating system 158, 192n1
- “mulatto” stereotype 23, 35, 65, 66, 68
- multi-culturalism 348, 358, 361
- multiplex theaters 213–214
- Mummy, The* (1932) 43, 64–65, 71, 106
- Mummy, The* (1959) 132
- Mummy, The* (1999) 235, 236
- Mummy's Ghost, The* (1944) 77
- Mummy's Hand, The* (1940) 77
- Mummy's Tomb, The* (1942) 77
- Murder Was the Case* (1994) 289

- Murderous Intent* (1985) 229
Murders in the Ruse Morgue (1932) 43
 Murphy, Carl 114
 Murphy, Charlie 9
 Murphy, Eddie 9, 161, 218, 236, 250, 271, 277
 Muse, Clarence 60–61, 62–64, 70, 75n60, 84, 116, 359
 music 81, 91–92, 134–135
 Musser, Charles 19–20, 41n70
My Bloody Valentine (1981) 200, 214
 Myers, Michael 7, 203, 243, 252, 350
- NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) 25, 78, 79, 84–85, 93, 114, 160, 179, 221, 262, 322, 350
Naked Evil/Exorcism at Midnight (1966) 128–130
 Nama, Adilifu 197
 National Film Registry 30, 78, 121n5
 Native Americans 204–205, 230, 232n29
 native Black depictions: in 1930s films 14–19, 57–58, 60, 61–62, 358, 359; in 1940s films 79, 82, 83; in 1950s films 112, 115–116; in 1960s films 128, 136, *see also* *Inqāqī*; *King Kong*; savages, Blacks as
Native Woman Coaling a Ship at St. Thomas (1895) 19
Native Woman Washing Clothes at St. Vincent (1895) 19
Native Woman Washing a Negro Baby in Nassau (1895) 11, 19
 Nazis/neo-Nazis 100, 104, 110n72, 22730
 Negro Actors Guild of America 70
 Nelson, Angela 3
 Nesteby, James 98
 Netflix 347
 Neuert, Richard 105
 New Line Cinema 240–241
 New Orleans (US) 55, 170, 171, 182, 186, 210, 334, 359
New York Amsterdam News 36, 118, 146, 194n58, 264
New York Times 38, 47, 60, 81, 159, 172, 240, 288
 New York (US) 36–37, 140, 141, 200, 212, 237, 334
 news media 153, 338, 344
 Nicholson, Jack 206, 235
 Nicholson, James H. 164
Nigger in the Woodpile, A (1904) 11, 20–21
Night of the Living Dead (1968) 7, 12, 57, 107, 107n12, 140–146, 145, 147, 158, 167, 223, 229, 295, 313, 362; color symbolism in 145; distribution for 140–141; as groundbreaking 140, 141, 153–154, 156n32; plot of 141–143; popularity of 146, 147, 156n40, 351n2; race in 141–142, 143, 144, 146, 153, 154, 294; real-life actors in 143–144; rednecks in 143, 144; send-up of (*Day X*) 286; violence in 145–146
Night of the Living Dead (1990) 242
Night of the Strangler (1972) 170–172, 183
Nightmare on Elm Street, A (1984) 13, 203, 206, 317
Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (1987) 203, 232n35
Night's End (2022) 360–361
 nihilism 6, 12, 291–292
 9/11 attacks 14, 276, 286, 292, 293, 294, 296
Nite Tales (2009) 283
 nitrate film stock 18–19
 Noble, John W. 11
 Noble, Peter 26–27, 98
 Nollywood 358
Nope (2022) 347, 361
 Norman, Richard 32
Now Eat: The Movie (2000) 14, 290, 310n42
 Nowell, Richard 198, 200
 nuclear weapons/power 12, 77, 106, 112, 295
 Null, Gary 159
Nurse Sherri (1978) 129, 183–185
Nutty Professor II (2000) 277
 NWA (Niggaz With Attitude) 247
 Nyong'o, Lupita 2, 326, 350
- Obama, Barack 15, 276–277, 307–308, 314–315, 316, 361
 Obeah 57, 68, 128–129, 130
Oblong Box, The (1969) 133–134, 142
Off to Bloomingdale Asylum (1901) 18
Omega Man (1971) 285, 348
One Exciting Night (1922) 26–27
 one-drop rule 64, 65, 185, 322
100 Rifles (1969) 348
Ooga Booga (2013) 278, 337
 Othering 2, 7, 19, 48, 118, 130, 230; and women 113
 “out of Africa” films *see* jungle films
 OWI (Office of War Information) 85, 97

- Pal, George 104–105
Paranoia (1960) 147
Paranormal Activity (2009) 293
 Parents Music Resource Center (P.M.R.C.) 217
 Parke, Evan 51–52
 patriarchy 153, 175
 Payne, Allen 9
 Peele, Jordan 2, 15, 313, 322, 324, 325, 327, 350, 357, 361, *see also Candyman* (2021); *Get Out*; *Us*
Peeping Tom (1960) 139
 penis 169, 170
People Under the Stairs, The (1991) 9, 250, 264–265, 297
Perils of the Jungle (1915) 83
Petey Wheatstraw (1977) 189–190
 Philadelphia (US) 146, 147, 148
 Phillips, Kendall R. 5
 Pinedo, Isabel Christina 5, 10, 260, 332
Pink Flamingos (1972) 213
 Pinkett, Jada 248, 249
Pittsburgh Courier 37, 44, 72n5, 78, 118
 Pittsburgh (US) 140, 141, 143, 144, 148, 152
Plague of the Zombies, The (1966) 131
Planet of the Apes (1968) 52–53
 plantations 66, 67–68, 74n40, 79–80, 112, 113, 114; owners of 58, 61, 65, 69
Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) 118
 P.M.R.C. (Parents Music Resource Center) 217
 Poitier, Sidney 139, 147, 172, 228
 police violence 15, 144, 148, 212, 245, 264, 314, 321, 331–332, 338, 339
 political ads 30–31, 201–202
 Pollard, Luther J. 33
Poltergeist (1982) 198, 205, 232n29
Pooka! (2018) 346, 348
Poor Pretty Eddie (1975) 187–188
 pop music 214, 216–217
Porgy and Bess (1935) 70
 portable digital technologies 4
 Porter, Edwin 22
 Porter, Edwin S. 19
 Portland, Oregon (US) 105
 post-racial America, myth of 10, 15, 314–315, 320–321
 poverty 148, 197, 247
 “Poverty Row” studios 77, 83
Predator (1987) 218
Predator 2 (1990) 14, 31, 218, 236, 253, 259–260, 280
 Preminger, Otto 77
 Price, Vincent 134, 214, 285
Primeval (2007) 137
 primitives *see* native Black depictions
Prom Night (1980) 214
Prom Night (2008) 291
 promotion/marketing 35, 46, 104, 129, 137, 147, 290, *see also* film posters
 propaganda 30, 78, 97, 100
 Prosperi, Franco 136, 138
 prostitutes 95, 167, 175, 194n45
 Pryor, Richard 200, 228, 271
Psycho (1960) 139, 216
 psychoanalysis 6
Pterodactyl (2005) 283
 Public Enemy 276, 283

Quarantine (2008) 293
Quatermass Experiment, The (1955) 132
Queen & Slim (2019) 5

 race films 8, 13, 37, 72n5, 87, 89, 105
 race riots 36, 53
 racial diversity 153
 racial gaze 1–2
 racial integration 62, 112, 118, 121, 154, 200
 racial metaphors 7
 racial segregation 118, 245, 261
 racial stereotypes 2, 5
Ragdoll (1999) 252, 278
Rainbow on the River 44
 rap music 244–245, 247, 284; horrorcore 289–290
 rape 24–25, 31, 32, 124, 138, 209, 238; and slavery 255, 257
 rape-revenge films 137, 187, 305–306
 Razaf, Andy 96
 Reagan, Ronald 217, 243, 297, 317, 351n11
Realization of a Negro’s Ambition, The (1916) 31
Red Dragon, The (1946) 102
Red Water (2004) 283
 Reddick, Lawrence Dunbar 85, 108n25, 116
 rednecks 143, 144, 148, 150
 Reid, Mark 3
 Reliance-Majestic Studios 22
 religious themes 89–96, 105, 123, 176
Repentance (2013) 347
 Republic Pictures 83
Resident Evil game/franchise 291, 295
Resident Evil: Apocalypse (2004) 299
Resident Evil (2002) 296, 297, 298

- Revenge of the Zombies* (1943) 100, 140, 359
 reversal of racial roles 14
 revolution 11, 13, 53, 55, 56, 121, 154, 212, 326–327
 Rhames, Ving 298–299
 Rhines, Jess Algeron 160
 Rhodes, Gary D. 56, 59–60, 75n60
 RKO 48, 78, 81, 82
 Robeson, Paul 66
 Robinson, Cedric 101–102
 Rock, Chris 284, 292, 355n92
 Rockwell (Kennedy Gordy) 216
Rocky Horror Picture Show, The (1975) 213, 348
Rocky Horror Picture Show: Let's Do the Time Warp Again (2016) 348
Romance of Happy Valley, A (1919) 32
 Romero, George 12, 14, 140, 143, 151, 158, 206, 242, 286, 295–297; *Day of the Dead* (1985) 147, 150–152; *Diary of the Dead* (2007) 299–300; *Land of the Dead* (2005) 147, 152–153, 296–297; *Resident Evil* (2002) 296, 297, 298, *see also Dawn of the Dead*; *Night of the Living Dead*
 Roosevelt, Theodore 44–45, 56
 Rose, Bernard 260, 262
Rosemary's Baby (1968) 125, 304
Rosemary's Baby miniseries (2014) 348
 Rosenbaum, Jonathan 221
 Russia 70
- Sack Amusement Enterprise 89, 94, 95
Sahara (1943) 79
 Sambo and Rastus series (circa 1909) 21
 Santell, Al 38
 savages, Blacks as 7, 8, 30, 39, 79, 83, 108n25, 126, 127–128, 257, *see also* native Black depictions
Saw franchise 292
Scar of Shame, The (1927) 92
 scared Black trope 27, 38, 47, 75n60, 140; in 1940s films 79, 97, 98, 99–100, 101, 103–105
Scary Movie (2000) 277–278, 359
 Schwertfeger, Susanne 220
 science fiction 1, 4, 52–54, 115, 132, 213, 243, 270, 300, 347, 360
 science/scientists 45–46, 82, 98, 112–114, 115, 118, 142, 222, 297; Black 252; Black female 86, 87, 106, 300–301; female 113, 114, 117, *see also* mad scientists
 Scott, Ellen 257
 Scott, Emmett J. 31
Scream (1996) 277, 281
Scream, Blacula, Scream (1973) 13, 164, 174, 178–179, 288, 306, 359, 362
 Screen Actors Guild (SAG) 106
 Seabrook, William 57–59, 61, 71, 128
Serpent Island (1954) 119
Serpent and the Rainbow, The (1988) 2, 7, 57, 211–212, 250, 349
 servants 23, 24, 78, 97, 108n25, 113; in 1930s films 43, 44, 59, 60–61, 69; in 1940s films 78, 97; in 1960s films 124–125, 139–140, 153
 sexual deviance 265
 sexual violence 187, 188, 227, 238; and Black rapists 24–25, 30
 sexuality 5, 7, 10, 169, 170, 173, 175–176, 180, 183, 184, 226–227, 288; and bestiality 30–31, 45, 46, 47; and vampires 224, 268–269, 306–307
Shadow: Dead Riot (2006) 303
Shadowed by the Devil (1916) 32
Shaft (1971) 160, 164, 199
Sharknado (2013) 51
 Sharrett, C. 162
 Sherman, Sam 129, 184
Shine Johnson and the Rabbit's Foot (1917) 33
Shining, The (1980) 13, 197, 205, 206–208, 321, 333
 Shipka, Danny 136
Shooting Captured Insurgents (1898) 19
 shorts 13, 17, 18, 19–20, 83, 89
 shot-on-video (S.O.V.) films 226
 Sieving, Christopher 175
Silence of the Lambs, The (1991) 235, 256, 290
 silent films 17–39, 83, 92, 93, 159; ethnographic 19–20; French 17, 18; Voodoo 56–57, *see also Birth of a Nation*
Silent Night, Deadly Night (1984) 214, 217
 Simon, Adam 286
 sin 12, 89, 90, 176, 238
Single Black Female (2009) 306
 Sisson, Thomas 25
 situation comedy 3, 87
Sixth Sense, The (1999) 236, 290
 Skal, David J. 219
Skeleton Key, The (2005) 358, 359
 slapstick comedy 21, 78, 101, 140
 slasher movies 198–199, 200–201, 203, 252, 281
 slavery 3, 11–12, 53, 54, 65, 80, 96, 132–133, 138, 255; and *Beloved* 255–259; and *Frankenstein* 192n3;

- and Haitian Revolution (1793) 55; and Voodoo 58–59, 66, 246; and white dogs 220
- “Sleep ‘n’ Eat” *see* Best, Willie
- Slumber Party Massacre* (2021) 348
- Smalls, Biggie 247
- Smiling Ghost, The* (1941) 102
- Smith, J. Augustus 94
- Smith, Will 209, 274n61, 277, 284–286
- Smith, W.S. 31
- Snakes on a Plane* (2006) 51, 290
- Snead, James 230
- Snipes, Wesley 236, 268, 269
- Snoop Dogg 14, 248, 283, 287–289, 350
- Snoop Dogg’s ‘Hood of Horror* (2006) 248, 289, 304
- Snyder, Zack 298
- So Red the Rose* (1935) 44
- Sobchak, Vivian 89, 304
- social issues 10, 12, 14–15, 32, 148, 153, 197, 247, 350
- social justice 5, 14, 314, 316, 357
- social justice horror 325–337
- social media 338, 352n34
- social realism 44, 243
- sociopolitical perspective 2, 3–4, 12, 15, 34, 136, 153, 164, 213, 280, 286, 304, 314
- Somebody Help Me* (2007) 292–293
- Somebody’s Watching Me* (Rockwell, 1983) 216
- Son of Ingagi* (1940) 72, 84, 86–87, 89, 90, 106–107, 252, 362
- Son of Satan, A* (1924) 34–36, 41n70
- Sorority, The* (2006) 306
- Soul Vengeance/Welcome Home Brother Charles* (1975) 169, 171
- sound, invention of 18, 44
- Sound of Violence* (2021) 350, 358
- South Pacific islands 51
- S.O.V. (shot-on-video) films 226
- Spawn* (1997) 236, 267, 269
- Spence, Louise 34–35, 41n70
- Spider Baby, or the Maddest Story Ever Told* (1968) 140
- Spielberg, Steven 1
- Spiral* (2021) 292, 347, 349
- Spirit Lost* (1997) 92
- Spooks* (1918) 33
- Spooks Run Wild* (1941) 14, 103
- Stebbins, Robert 61
- Stepin Fetchit (Lincoln Perry) 5n60, 98, 102
- Stern, Ernest 56
- straight-to-DVD films 14, 286, *see also* DTV market
- Strange Case of Doctor RX* (1942) 101
- streaming services 4, 347–348
- Street Tales of Terror* (2004) 248, 304–305
- Strictly for the Wicked festival 290
- Strode, Woody 114
- Sublime* (2007) 282
- subservience 44, 83, *see also* servants
- suburbs 7, 13, 198, 202–205, 232n33, 243, 264, 317; and Native Americans 204–205
- Sugar Hill* (1974) 13, 164, 174, 181–183, 182, 185, 236, 306, 362
- Sul-Te-Wan, Madame (Nellie Conley) 20, 98, 100
- “Sunshine Sammy” (Ernest Morrison) 20, 98, 104
- Supernova* (2000) 300, 303, 349, 360
- Surf Nazis Must Die* (1987) 227, 239
- Swamp Thing* (1982) 250
- Sweet Sweetback’s Badasssss Song* (1971) 162, 164, 194n58
- Sweetheart* (2019) 347, 361
- Switchback* (1997) 350
- Symbol of the Unconquered, The* (1920) 34
- Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* (1995) 248–249
- Tales from the Crypt* (1972) 245, 289
- Tales from the Hood* (1995) 14, 236, 245–248, 304, 359, 362; and gangster culture 246, 247–248
- Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1932) 48
- Tears from the Sun* (2003) 137
- Tearwood, Gladstone L. 8
- television 105, 106, 124, 129, 155n4, 199, 277, 288–289; video streaming services 4, 347–348
- terror *see* fear/terror
- terrorism 14, 276
- Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The* (1974) 155, 158, 190, 213; remake (2003) 291, 292
- Texas Chainsaw Massacre III* (1990) 240–241
- theaters 212–214; Black 32, 38, 147; and home videos/DVDs 216; independent/drive-in 212–213; multiplex 213–214
- theatre 96–97
- Them* (TV series) 15, 344–346
- Thing, The* (1982) 218, 221–224, 361
- Thing with Two Heads, The* (1972) 164, 165–166, 166

- Thriller* (1983) 13, 214–215, 219, 230
Thriller (2018) 347, 358
 thriller genre 6
 Thurmond, Strom 245, 351n11
 Till, Emmett 111, 118, 144
To Sleep with Anger (1990) 109n47, 253
 Toddy, Ted 100–101, 168, 242, 313
Topper Returns (1941) 102
 Torriano Berry, S. 93
 torture porn 14, 292, 294, 295
 “Torture” (The Jacksons, 1984) 216–217
 Tourneur, Jacques 78
 Townshend, Robert 229
 tragic mulatto stereotype 65–66, 68, 250, 267
Transfiguration, The (2017) 334
 trauma porn 2, 15, 337–346; *Antebellum* (2020) 15, 343–344; and news media 338, 344; *Them* (TV series) 344–346, *see also Master*
 Troma Entertainment 237, 239, 244, 271–272n5
 True, Rachel 11
 Trump, Donald 315–317, 324–325, 351nn11,12, 361
 Tucker, Lorenzo 56
 Tupac Shakur 243, 244, 247
 Turan, Kenneth 271
Turbulence franchise 279
Turistas (2006) 292
 Turner, Chester Novell 226, 228–229
28 Days Later (2002) 297–298, 303, 349, 351nn2,3
 “Uncle Tom” stereotype 24, 60, 63, 71, 85
Unconquered (1917) 56
Undertaker’s Daughter, The (1915) 21
 Unique Film Co. 32
 United Nations (UN) 126
 United States (US): attack on Capitol (January 6, 2021) 315–316; Great Recession (2007) 14, 294–295, 315, 326; and Haiti 55–56; income inequality in 325–326; and neocolonialism 130, 155n11; Obama era 276–277, 314–315; “post-racial” 10, 15; postwar 121; Trump era 315–317, 324–325; Watts riots in (1965) 53, 54; in World War II 125; *see also* Chicago; Louisiana; New Orleans; New York; Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; Washington, D.C.
 Universal Studios 39n6, 43–44, 52, 72nn4,5, 78, 236; Classic Monsters series 13
Urban Evil: A Trilogy of Fear (2005) 248
 Urban League 105
Urban Menace (1999) 236, 287
 urban setting 14, 197–198, 236, 242–245, 253, 259, 260–261, 267, 280, 295; and gentrification 15, 205, 261, 330, 332–333, 334, 358
Us (2019) 15, 325–330, 327, 334, 347, 350, 353n49, 357, 358, 361; class inequality in 325–328; race in 328–330
Vamp (1986) 202
Vampira/Old Dracula (1974) 185
Vampire in Brooklyn (1995) 9, 161, 236, 249–251, 253, 267, 300
 vampire films 5, 125, 224, 282–283, 284–285, 334, 358; *see also specific vampire films*
Vampires (1986) 229
Vampire’s Ghost, The (1945) 83
Vampires vs. the Bronx (2020) 334, 347, 358
Vampz (2004) 283, 306–307
Vault, The (2001) 278
Verdict Not Guilty (circa 1930) 92
 video games 291, 295–296
 video stores 226, 243, 251, 278, 280
 Vietnam War 13, 138, 164–165, 295
 violence 4, 6, 13, 18, 24, 53, 138–139, 290; in 1960s films 139, 142–143; colonial *see under* colonialism; and comedy 21, 102; racial 5, 68, 69, 148; and rap culture 243–244, 247, 248; sexual *see* rape; and torture porn 292
 Virginia Board 35
 Vodun 74nn43,45, 128
 Voodoo 43, 55, 208; and Catholicism 54; and Haitian Revolution (1793) 55, 74n40; and Obama 307–308; origin/spelling of 74nn43,45; rituals, myths of 57–58
Voodoo Bloodbath (1964) 119
 Voodoo drums 39, 62, 66, 69, 80, 82, 84, 94, 120, 124, 148–149
 Voodoo in films 12, 39, 56–64, 80, 188–189, 257, 278, 288, 359; 1960s 119–120, 123, 124, 126–129, 130–131, 134–135, 137; 1980s 210–212; 1990s 246, 250; as anti-racist weapon 13; Black horror 56, 94; and Black women 38, 62, 66, 67, 68, 69–70, 81, 90, 178, 179, 183; British 126–129; and human sacrifice 56, 62, 120, 130, 189; silent 56–57; and white women 57,

- 58, 59–60, 71, 81, 82, 119–120; and zombies 56, 57, 58–59, 61, 62
- Voodoo Fires* (1913) 56
- Voodoo Island* (1957) 119
- Voodoo Woman* (1957) 119, 124
- Walker, David 199
- Walter Reade Organization 141
- war films 6, 14, 78–79
- War Information, Office of (OWI) 85, 97
- Wardi, Anissa J. 256
- Ware, Lawrence 342–343
- Warner Bros. 158, 195n78
- Warner, Kristen 286
- Washington, Booker T. 31
- Washington, D.C. (US) 92, 232n33, 253
- Washington, Denzel 270, 284, 323
- Washington Post* 191, 240, 351n12
- Watermelon Contest, The* (1895) 20
- watermelons 20, 79, 103, 104, 105, 108n25
- Watts riots (1965) 53, 54
- Wayans, Keenan Ivory 229, 277–278, 359
- Weathers, Sean 252
- Welles, Orson 77
- Wester, Maisha 359
- Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) 139–140
- Whispering Ghosts* (1942) 103
- white audience 8, 11, 18, 33, 49, 64, 156n15; and slasher movies 199
- White Dog* (1982) 51, 219–221, 221
- white flight 198, 299
- White Gorilla* (1945) 83
- white man's burden 18, 22, 118, 257
- White Pongo* (1945) 82–83, 106, 107–108n15, 108n16, 116
- white saviors 46, 49, 65, 189, 264, 308
- White Skin* (2004) 282–283
- white supremacism 11, 30, 57, 82, 97, 165, *see also* Ku Klux Klan
- White, Walter 78
- white women 23, 24, 24–25, 28, 31, 39, 53, 79–80, 81; and Black male gaze 24, 25, 48, 80, 115, 117, 118; and *Candyman* 262–264; in love stories 64–65; as predator 324; and primitive ape *see* *King Kong*; scientists 113, 114, 117; and Voodoo 57, 58, 59–60, 71, 81, 82, 119–120, 130–131
- White Zombie* (1932) 12, 56, 57, 58–61, 59, 71, 80, 82, 84, 307; Blackness in 60–61, 74–75n57; as love story 64; white woman in 59–60; white zombies in 58–59
- whiteness 2, 8, 9, 13, 30, 48, 153, 266; as deficient 14; and exclusion of Blacks 7, 201; and female sexuality 27; and slasher movies 198–199, 200–201, 203
- Whitney, Salem Tutt 56
- Whitopia 202, 204, 232n29, 317, 318, 320, 324
- Who Said Chicken* (circa 1910) 20
- Wilder, Billy 77
- Williams, Joseph 129
- Williams, Linda 30
- Williams, Spencer 12, 13–14, 37, 71–72, 85, 86–92, 88, 94, 154, 359; *Go Down, Death* (1944) 94–96, 236, 358; *Son of Ingagi* (1940) 72, 84, 86–87, 89, 106–107, *see also* *Blood of Jesus*
- Williams, Tony 9, 75n60, 205–206
- Williams, Vanessa 261, 303, 331
- Williamson, Fred 184, 228
- Willie, Sarah Susannah 322–323
- Wilson, Woodrow 22, 25–26, 55–56
- Winfrey, Oprah 236, 255, 256, 270
- Winston, Stan 218
- Wishmaster* (1997) 7
- Witches, The* (1966) 131, 132
- witches/witch doctors 66, 114, 128, 132, 217–218
- Witching Eyes* (1929) 56–57
- Witherspoon, John 9
- Within Our Gates* (1920) 11, 32, 34
- woke films 5, 318, 324, 325, 360–361
- Wölfen* (1981) 200, 205
- women's roles 172–173, 190; Black *see* Black women's roles
- Wood, The* 108n27, 301
- Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1907) 18
- World War II 77, 78, 100, 112, 125–126
- Wray, Fay 48
- xenophobia 135, 292, 315, 350
- Yoruba 158, 180, 273n36
- You Were Never Really Here* (2017) 6
- Young, Elizabeth 163
- Zanzibar Revolution (1964) 137
- zoetropes 17, 39n3
- Zombie 4: After Death* (1988) 205
- Zombies on Broadway* (1945) 81–82
- Zombies of Mora Tau* (1957) 119

- zombies/zombie films 14, 43, 56, 57–64, 212, 215, 348, 350, 359; 1940s 80, 82, 98–100, 109n63, 140; 1950s 119; 1960s 131; 2000s 295–300; and comedy-horror 98–100, 140; and fascism 100, 109n63; globalization of 295–296; and Obama 307–308; and slavery 58–59, 257; and Voodoo 56, 57, 66, 80; white 58–59, 71, 119; *see also specific zombie films*
- Zombiez* (2005) 283, 299