

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

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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.

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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.
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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

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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

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 imaginistically 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 *Ingagi* (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 imaginistically exoticized and mangled during this decade in now-classic films such as *White Zombie* (1932).

In Chapter 3, “Horrifying 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

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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