

# Black Feminist Articulations of Race & Gender Within the Horror Film Genre

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BLACK FEMINIST ARTICULATIONS OF  
RACE & GENDER WITHIN THE HORROR FILM GENRE

by

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University of Central Florida, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

The intent of this paper is to explore a black feminist perspective within the film horror genre. A black feminist perspective investigates how black women are portrayed within cinematic horror. It serves as a method to further articulate the particularities of race & gender within cinema. If we leave the cinematic space without a structural model of intervention, then we are left with film that remains unchallenged for ostracizing black women. The paper argues that black women become articulated through themes of motherhood, death, and sexuality.

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## INTRODUCTION

Most people are keenly aware of the trope where a black person is the first to die within slasher or creature feature films – an unwritten trope that is often associated exclusively with horror films. Film genre theory can reveal how schematic elements reoccur in film after film. In recent years, film scholars Carol J. Clover, Rick Altman, and Harry M. Benshoff theorize how gender and race interact in film horror. Critics such as Dr. Kinitra D. Brooks argue that within contemporary horror, not enough work is done to highlight how black women are left out.

The purpose of this paper is to explore black feminist perspectives within cinematic horror. A black feminist perspective serves to explore how horror and representations of black women within it become portrayed. This paper will examine the films *Beloved* (released October 1998) and *The Girl with All the Gifts* (released August 2016) as case studies. These films serve to contextualize how black feminist theorists come to deconstruct common thematic elements in horror cinema such as motherhood, death, and sexuality.

A glance into the film horror library shows only a handful of black women in the front of the VHS or DVD cover. Referring to Kinitra Brooks, she pushes the conversation forward in her description of how contemporary media either flattens black women's characterization or ignores their narrative presence. To a point where either their entire subjectivity is rendered invisible, their presence is few and far between (Brooks 18). A lack of representation of black women in most film genre movies means there are minimal narratives wherein which black women can see themselves on-screen. That, in turn, leads us to find how black women are misrepresented in the filmic world. One example, noted by Brooks, is the trope of the black superwoman. The black superwoman, in her study of literary horror, is a trope that supersedes the complex characteristics of her as an individual that is instead constructed to be one-dimensional.

For the case of the cinema studies, there is a need to restructure current film theoretical models. Thus, Brooks' analysis is essential to forward the conversation of black women in cinema theoretical studies and criticisms. It is an articulation of black feminine subjectivity within the cinematic space that deconstructs the normative practices that have become common within mainstream film horror. As a visual text, cinema has a unique mode of communicating because of the way it uses different literary devices specific to filmmaking.

Under a black feminist framework, this intervention begins with the film horror genre and how it is possible to build on Altman's work on genre theory in a manner that is inclusive of the racialization of black women. The relationship between cinema and black womanhood is a significant point of analysis. Questions need to be raised on how black women are not only represented but perceived on screen. It is such questions that Brooks carries over from bell hooks' critical analysis on the oppositional gaze. As hooks state "Even when representation of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve –to enhance and maintain white womanhood as an object of the phallogentric gaze" (hooks 251). The goal of the film critic is not only read a film against the grain but to also reveal inconsistent representations of black women within the filmic world.

The intent is not to divorce literary analysis from film theory completely. It is necessary to treat the visual as a separate form of text. Filmmaking devices such as cinematography and editing serve as powerful tools to convey narrative; it calls for a study of cinematic communication. Scholars often study film as a literary text, but I argue that it is necessary to separate the literary from the cinematic.

## SCHOLARSHIP ON FILM GENRE, HORROR, RACE & GENDER

Alessandra Raengo contextualizes how cinema is different from most literary forms.

Specifically, she addresses how the realm of the visual considers blackness by becoming racialized through both a rhetorical and phenomenological praxis. It is an invisible phenomenon that ascribes meaning to what is present on-screen, to decode what the view finds to be unintelligible (Raengo 53). The assumption would be that blackness exists as a blank slate. However, Raengo elaborates on how the visual racializes black subjectivity.

The subjectivity of black folks become embedded in the filmic world. As hooks states, for a majority of film history, black women have been subjected to the myth of the mammy and the jezebel. She describes that the normative representations of black women have, in turn, created a form of physiological violence (hooks 252). Blackness is thus “a mood, a quality, and a mise-en-scene” (Raengo 111). Raengo’s work is a form to think about how we navigate the cinematic space as both a form of genre and a space of representation.

Harry Benshoff focuses on the asymmetrical relationship between race and gender in horror, a description of how the two categories can often reflect on the anxieties of society (Benshoff 30). The gap between race and gender remains present in these forms of film analysis. One of the mistakes that film scholars can make is to conclude simply for more representation of black women (Brooks 17). Moreover, in her critical analysis, Kinitra Brooks asserts that it is not enough to have black women present in media. Prioritizing the quantity of representation of black women over a critical study of media obfuscates the fact that they are often oversimplified (Brooks 18). Given the lack of presence black women have within the cinematic medium, it is especially telling that there are a finite number of black women in horror films to navigate through these societal anxieties as Benshoff describes.



Therefore, according to Brooks, an asymmetrical relationality between race and gender serve as a conduit to reveal how Negrophobia and Gynophobia develop black women characters that are a one-dimensional version of themselves (Brooks 12). Brooks emphasizes the barriers within the horror genre that foreclose the possibility for black women to become articulated as complex characters. One example is the way their characterization in slasher films such that they are the companion to, as Carol Clover labels, the final girl. Black women are constructed as the mature, superwoman-like friend to give strength for the white female protagonist. The representation of black femininity, as Brooks indicates, are few and far between, and there is much more work needed within filmic horror for such complex articulation to take place within cinema as a visual medium.

Brooks offers insight into what most contemporary film scholars like Carol Clover and Benshoff have previously discussed with blaxploitation and the film horror genre. Clover's study of horror cinema centers around the representation of women within a variety of movie titles. It is an illustration of how there is much room for gender studies and genre theory; however, it reveals how little black women occupy those roles in genre film. At the center of Brooks' intervention, she argues that the lack of discussion of black women resulted in the way black women become characterized in films, such that their presence is subjected to common, reoccurring tropes as she notes in her analysis.

Thus, what can a black feminist framework offer to the film horror genre? Specifically, how can we forward the discussion that goes beyond the realm of representation (Raengo 54)? To investigate these questions, we must change the way that we approach the film genre itself. Rather than examining the visual as a literary text, we should instead treat the visual as a cinematic text. A relationship between the realm of the visual and film genre are often at odds

with each other. As a visual medium, film is often used as an escape from reality. It can be used as a tool to explore different perspectives and aspects about the real world. Therefore, Brooks' assertion on the state of contemporary horror is a springboard to further interrogate the cinematic space that allows for black women to be rendered invisible.

As bell hooks describes, black feminism informs us of how the subjectivity of race and gender become interpolated and characterized in a way that it is read through an oppositional gaze. The oppositional gaze, as hooks states, is a method that can be “both powerful and political” (hooks 247). The oppositional gaze becomes a method in which black women use their gaze towards the realm of the visual to resist the dominant ways their image is molded. Furthermore, it is paramount to consider that the realities of black women are not monolithic (hooks 261). There are differing modes of thought and perceptions which black femininity bring to the table. This paper does not isolate a singular perspective because within circles of film theory and criticism, we have yet to come to terms that the current epistemological approach needs to be re-worked to include a diverse set of perspectives. Examining how gender becomes racialized is an essential starting point to interrogate the oppositional gaze because it deconstructs how such imagery and characterization are put together in a cinematic form (Brooks 25).

This paper will examine the films *Beloved* and *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Based on the novel by Toni Morrison, *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe (portrayed by Oprah Winfrey), a former slave woman who lives in a small, wooden house outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. Throughout *Beloved* there are several occasions of hauntings that occur within Sethe's household as she continues to live a new life post-slavery. *The Girl with All the Gifts* is a film set in a post-apocalyptic future. An outbreak of an infectious, fungal disease causes people to turn into

zombie-like creatures who consume humans. It follows Melanie (portrayed by Sennai Nanua), a bright 10-year old girl who is a hybrid of human and fungal creature.

*Beloved* is an example of a narrative that relies on the historical. There are was a considerable amount of film reviews that considers *Beloved* to be a drama-thriller. However, I want to note that horror is capable of being articulated in a variety of form. It brings into perspective as to what is fearful within society. The work of Maisha L. Wester contributes to both the source material and the genre itself. She states that an audience can take away from *Beloved* “the ways the Gothic may be deployed as a historical mode, using the disquieting and perplexing realities of African American existence rather than imagined terrors, to sustain its aura of apprehension” (Wester 378).

*The Girl with All the Gifts* offers a modern illustration on how depictions of black women are represented. In contrast with *Beloved*, the narrative is not situated on both the historical and gothic. The use of a monstrous mythologies like the zombie film are significant because they exemplify Benshoff’s reading on monstrous Otherness. The protagonist in the film is one who is both perceived as human and non-human. It is an open-ended question that asks the viewer what they consider to be monstrous, it asks for us to interrogate Otherness.

In his work on cinematic genres, Rick Altman posits that “we need to recognize that not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or the same extent” (Altman 12). Furthermore, he states that film genre is categorized in the semantic and the syntactic. The semantic describes the building blocks that formulates a film genre while the syntactic “privileges the structures into which they are arranged” (Altman 10). He suggests that instead of theorizing film genre in either a semantic or syntactic mode, it should be a combination of both (Altman 11). Thus, for film horror, it is an exploration of popular conventions and mythologies

that becomes encoded in filmic language. An isolation of film horror functions as a method to add context on Altman's approach to genre theory.

In Benshoff's description of the cinematic space, he asserts that it can be used as a platform to reflect on the anxieties of white folks. He suggests that "horror film functions hegemonically, in effect enabling socially oppressed people to contribute to their oppression by consenting to the manufacture of their own identities as monstrous Others" (Benshoff 32). Film genre has taken form and reshaped itself by what is most popular within different periods in time. However, we have yet to isolate what is it about the film horror genre that reproduces these cinematic articulations.

## UNVEILING FILM GENRE

Discussions of film genre often center on how scholars analyze cinematic representations from a literary perspective. Brooks' reading of horror are derivative of different forms of media such as novels, visual novels, film and television. A critical study of horror in different mediums helps us to parse through the various modes by which media treats black femininity, however, my focus is with how we approach our analysis and criticism within horror cinema. A reading of film horror contains a distinct relationship that occurs between the screen and the viewer, an embedded language that needs to be more closely explored when studying the intersections between race, gender and the filmic world.

Separation of our current readings of film genre from most media texts can allow for an analysis on how the grammar of cinema affects the genre itself. Genre can be defined as the categorization of elements and patterns within those narratives. Altman states that "Because there are two competing notions of generic corpus on our critical scene, it is perfectly possible for a film to be simultaneously included in a particular generic corpus and excluded from that same corpus" (Altman 7). There can be no finite way to define a genre. It is possible, however, to acknowledge how a genre has evolved throughout the years in accordance with patterns of cinematic grammar within genres.

*Beloved* has a vastly different viewer reception in comparison to *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Towards the conclusion of Benshoff's article *Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription*, he asserts that *Beloved*'s failure at the box office could be attributed to the audience's failure in receiving its serious messaging coupled with "horror movie iconography" (Benshoff 46). *The Girl with All the Gifts* is a stand-alone horror movie that utilizes the more popular imagery of zombies in a post-apocalyptic world.

To understand film is to read between the scenes. For example, recent criticisms of modern horror films refer to a technique known as the jump scare. A jump scare is described as the moment during the film so abrupt that it causes the viewer to jump or gasp (sometimes both) from surprise. A technique such as the jump scare could not be translated as well in literary or visual novels. That is because film as a visual medium has the advantage to elicit instantaneous emotional reactions from its viewers. Whether it is through its visual or audio design, it is an example of how cinema speaks its own language to an audience.

Thus, when I isolate film genre, it is not to argue that it must exist exclusively apart from typical forms of literary criticisms. Rather my argument is that oftentimes it helps criticism of cinema contextualize how the audience translates film grammar. How black women are represented within film horror directs to a visceral phenomenon that is often associated with the way a Western hegemonic system can mold their image (Brooks 27). Filmic language has the capacity to deconstruct such problematic imagery but also uphold them. Earlier in this paper, I mentioned how the mammy and the jezebel are utilized in the media. The jezebel is one stereotype that is exclusive to black femininity, the performance of the jezebel is a white supremacist affect (hooks 256).

A modern example of this would be the ghetto black girl, viewed as an unruly and hysterical character in comparison to the innocent, white protagonist. It is one thread that leads to multiple problematic characterizations exclusive to film. A black feminist reading of the film horror genre reveals the hypocrisy of societal anxieties (Benshoff 30). That is when analyzing specific types of horror cinema such as the slash sub-genre, black women become objectified to a point that they are used as props for their white protagonists. There is no space for the subjectivity of black femininity that explores the anxieties within the cinematic space. Therefore,

to have a black feminist articulation means to reveal the hidden workings within genre film. While film critics discuss the importance of representation, scholars such as Brooks signals the red flag on how there is much work to be done in this field. Representation in cinema only matters when we stop papering over the voices of black women who wish to become more than their flesh (Brooks 68).

## FILM ANALYSIS – SUBJECTIVITY OF BLACK WOMANHOOD AND THE MONSTROUS OTHER

*The Girl with All of the Gifts* is a film that is premised on the zombie, post-apocalyptic sub-genre of horror cinema. Melanie is a young girl who is one of the many infected with the fungal disease along with a swatch of children who were born with the infection (colloquially known as the Hungries). The Hungries are much like zombies since they carry the physical and mental attributes of what audiences typically associate with zombies. The fungal infection, in turn, shuts down a majority of a person's brain functions leaving them to roam around with a hunger for human flesh. But instead of transforming into a full, zombie-like creature, Melanie maintains a large portion of her brain functionality. She can live a normal human life but what marks Melanie as a dangerous creature is her uncontrolled switching into a Hungry whenever she is hungry and smells bare flesh.

Towards the beginning of the film, Melanie is in the favor of Miss Justineau, one of the teachers who oversees Melanie's class. In a desperate search for the cure to fight back against the fungal infection, scientists within the facility use these children as test subjects. But the new generation of children who are born with the infection become the thrust of Melanie's narrative. As with the rest of the children, Melanie is displaced into a para-militarized prison to be contained and used as research material. Melanie is selected to be one of the subjects to be vivisected; certain parts of her spinal fluid will be used to create the antibody.

The race for a cure comes to a head when the entire prison facility is attacked by Hungries whose fungal infection has taken them over completely. The rest of the film follows Melanie and the group of adults from the facility, including Miss Justineau and Dr. Caroline Caldwell (portrayed by Glenn Close), the scientist who wants to vivisect Melanie, to traverse the



land to find new refuge. It is not until much later in the film where it is revealed that there is a tower contaminated with fungal spores that can infect the rest of the population with the disease.

*The Girl with All the Gifts* exemplifies Isabel Pinedo's definition of post-modern horror. Post-modern horror is a fictitious work that is a depiction of a violent disruption of the modern world. The modern world that is often a representation of reality is shattered, leaving these characters to navigate a new world that is both unfamiliar to them and the audience (Pinedo 20). The film is unique because its leading character is a young black girl in a narrative that takes place within a post-apocalyptic society festered by zombies. Another important point to note is the leading girl, Melanie, is also the monster. Melanie is between the line of humanity and otherness, much like the rest of the children born with the fungal disease who are treated like second class citizens.

As mentioned previously, one of the more striking features of the children in *The Girl with All the Gifts* is that their characteristics are very much human. They were birthed by their human mothers who had been infected that, in turn, makes them half human and half Hungry. The Hungries are, by contrast, zombie-like creatures. A majority of the adult Hungries have undead-like features: their flesh is rotting, they have no basic cognitive function and respond to the scent of bare flesh. The children, like Melanie, do not have these physical and mental features about them. Their skin does not rot, nor have they lost complete cognitive function. The only characteristic of them being a Hungry is their need to feed on flesh when it is time for them to eat.

The film, however, frames the children as insubordinate. The treatment of Melanie and the children is illustrated through her routine in the militarized prison facility. The adults' rhetoric function as an erasure between the lines of human and non-human. For example, except

for Justineau and Caldwell, the supporting characters in *The Girl with All the Gifts* do not interact with the children like they are children. The adults have a militant reproach towards them, they are prisoners.

This is an area worth analyzing because it gets at the crux of reading cinematic horror through black feminist perspectives. The guards, for the most part, treat Melanie as if she does embody monstrous traits. At no point, however, does she threaten their lives despite being part of the Hungries. The militarized guards refer to Melanie as an “it”, a rhetorical method to otherize her with no autonomy. Towards the middle of the film, she asks the guards questions about the type of bullets they use only to be glibly brushed off by them, not wanting to give her any ideas.

As a protagonist, Melanie is framed in the film as a brilliant, gifted young girl who both supporting white women within the film take the most favor in. In her previous work *The Importance of Neglected Intersections: Race and Gender in Contemporary Zombie Texts and Theories*, Brooks argues that “the monstrosity of black women stems from the stereotype of the Black Superwoman, also known as the strong black woman (Brooks 467). But here I want to contend that within theoretical discussions of cinema, it is not simply that the subjectivity of black womanhood is framed to be the opposite of white women.

Cinema as a visual space oftentimes placate to white folks with imagery and stories they can relate to. Benshoff states “As many theorists have pointed out, the generic pattern of the classical American horror film oscillates between the ‘normal,’ mostly represented by the white, middle-class heterosexuality of the films’ heroes and heroines, and the ‘monstrous,’ frequently colored by racial, sexual, class, or other ideological markers” (Benshoff 31). The intersections between race and gender, however is where black women become obfuscated in their complexity. Film critics can easily dismiss the lack of depth in Melanie’s characterization

because there is now representation on-screen. To go beyond this analysis, we should rethink how films such as *The Girl with All the Gifts* work as effective horror films. Horror, as a film genre, has a multiplicity of ways to inflict fear and anxiety on its audience.

One can perceive *The Girl with All the Gifts* as an empowering uprising of the monstrous Other. Moreover, the elements of Melanie's class within a para-militarized prison can be read as a reflection on how most children interact with the current education system. The decision to show the viewer several scenes with the children in a classroom-like settings bears a significant point on how we think about the act of otherization. The school lessons that Melanie and the children have is like a how typical class is conducted, taken to the extreme.

In addition, Melanie is visualized as the extraordinary black girl. She can survive but the scientists (who are white women) want to vivisect her. She is not framed as a serial, monstrous murderer with a vendetta against the world. Melanie is a young, black girl with a passion to learn, eager to solve Dr. Caldwell's riddle. Melanie is both a point of sympathy and where most of the existential anxiety stems from. The film, however, leaves little space for the viewer to decode such complex themes. The audience sympathizes with Melanie because she is a child born into a very cruel world. But it does not do much to add depth to her character. Her gifted intellect is not an area that the film explores. Rather, Melanie as a character, works as a plot device to push the plot forward.

*The Girl with All the Gifts* sheds light onto the more common themes within cinematic horror such as motherhood, death and sexuality. These themes work interchangeably with each other differently than in other popularly known horror titles. First, Melanie is figured as maternal. This is illustrated near the end of the film where the group discovers the beacon tower that is covered with fungal spores. The beacon ultimately decides the fate of humanity, releasing

the fungal disease into the airspace effectively killing the remainder of humankind. The conclusion of *The Girl with All the Gifts* is Melanie releasing the spores into the airspace to create a new evolution, a new generation of humans who are capable of being both human and non-human. Her act at the end of the film can be arguably be perceived as a monstrous act: inadvertently wiping out thousands of survivors and imprisons her teacher in the biology lab to teach for the rest of her life. Melanie's final act is one where she is responsible for the birth of a brand-new generation of humankind, even while killing off the older generation. The fate of humankind is affected by her choice to live in a world where they have evolved as a species.

The movie does not sexualize the women in the main cast. For Melanie, she wears short, curly hair and wears prison attire that are two times her own size. But it is her intellect that is the focal point of her emotional connection with Miss Justineau. Her desires are stemmed from wanting to learn: asking Miss Justineau to read the class stories or asking the army men why they choose to use soft bullets instead of hard bullets. At no point during the film does Melanie engage in a romantic relationship. This is one point to note because of the way black girls are often coded as objects of affection and desire (Brooks 21). Here she is a point of intrigue for who she is: half-human, half-Hungry and a gifted child. Her sexuality, in turn, is subdued. A point of analysis that needs to be carried over to the way film scholarship approach horror cinema. Sexualization of black girls in the realm of the visual is one that is not only coded but perceived on screen (Raengo 56).

Death as a theme in *The Girl will All the Gifts* is a common reading of zombie horror films that emphasizes mass-death and a race for survival. There are several visual elements that illustrate this, such as the scenic elements between the rust of a post-apocalyptic world and nature. There are certain scenes that contain a lot of greenery growing on top of abandoned

buildings and other metropolitan areas. Other zombie films such as *Train to Busan* and *28 Days Later* are set in locations where they are abandoned and polluted; trash and gore are all over the cities' streets. Utilizing nature is an example of how *The Girl with All the Gifts* uses its set-design to foreshadow the ending of the movie. Melanie's decision to wipe out the rest of humankind is perceived not as a hopeless fate but a new future blooming from the old. It is a scenario where the monsters ultimately win but there is a silver lining to that fate.

In contrast to *Beloved*, *The Girl with All the Gifts* is a film that plays on tropes of a post-modern horror. It is a speculation of a future that reaches beyond Melanie's selfhood. Even if there are parts that play a simplistic reproach to her characterization, the ending of the movie posits new possibilities that carries into a new generation. For *Beloved* its ties are heavily rooted within the horrors of slavery.

As a film, *Beloved* is a unique area of discussion on the intersection between cinematic horror and black femininity because the viewer is posited to view not only the fictional but the non-fictional horrors of the overarching narrative. Based on the novel by Toni Morrison, *Beloved* centers itself around Sethe, a woman who was subjected through years of treachery as a slave woman. Sethe has a home where she and her daughter live; two of her sons abandoned the house after experiencing a poltergeist haunting at an early age. It is not until later in the film where both Sethe and her daughter, Denver, discover a body of a young girl washed up from the river. Her name is Beloved. At its core, *Beloved* is a horror film that teeters between fictional and non-fictional horror. As a cinematic experience, it posits the question on how its visual narrative provokes fear within the viewer. There are also numerous areas that can be discussed about the three themes of sexuality, motherhood and death.

The monster in *Beloved* is not as objective compared to *The Girl with All the Gifts*. At first glance, viewers are to speculate that it is the ghosts that lurk within Sethe's house is the monstrous Other. In order to investigate the monstrous Other, we must first look into the historical context that becomes the foundation for the film. The distinction here is with how the movie is deeply tied to the non-fictional horrors of Middle Passage slavery. *Beloved's* connection with the fictional and non-fictional emphasizes Raengo's point of racialization, in the moving image, to be a visceral phenomenon that the viewer encodes for themselves (Raengo 54).

The impacts of the slave trade have an impact on the way white supremacist ideology has gone about to strip away the image of black femininity. A return to a discussion on the themes of sexuality, motherhood and death allows us to further understand how horror as a genre operates around the subjectivity of black women. All three themes seem to be intertwined with each other upon further investigation. Sexuality is one theme in the film that illustrates how black women are represented in both the filmic and non-filmic world. One example of this is in the scene where Beloved comes into Paul D's shack to convince him to have sex with her. The viewer is put out of their comfort zone to witness what becomes a rape scene.

Beloved enters the shack naked and desperately pleads with Paul D to touch her. Thus far in the film there is little that the audience knows about Beloved. There are little context clues to piece together her mystery, but this scene reveals her desires for Paul D. Her sexuality is now front and center in the narrative. One could villainize Beloved because she is the one who advances on Paul D, but it is, in turn, a reflection of the way black women are thought about on screen. What the scene reveals is a complex entanglement of psychological trauma of black sexuality.

History is one theme I return to because it has an impact on the way horror cinema is received by audiences. In the context of the scene within the shack, there are several elements at play: first, when we consider Beloved as a symbol of the hauntings of Sethe's past. She is not simply a character on-screen but a bleak reminder of both the physical and psychological violence that Sethe endured as a slave woman in Sweet Home plantation. Beloved is not oversexualized in the manner of looking attractive on camera, but the reflection of how white supremacy saw her as an object. Additionally, considering how the scene is set up, there is very little natural light that escapes into Paul D's shack. This lighting augments the hopelessness and dread of the scene. It sets an uncomfortable tone. The viewer is to witness Beloved as a promiscuous young girl who only thinks selfishly.

Motherhood is another element in *Beloved* that allows us to consider how black women are portrayed on-screen. There are a series of scenes where Sethe as a mother begins to unravel. It first starts off with Sethe saving her money to buy extra fabrics and food for both Beloved and Denver for the Christmas holiday. Later, she is fired from her job for being late one too many times. But the excess of these gifts she provides for them come to a head after Christmas. There is a visual parallel between the joyful romp of Denver and Beloved flaunting around in their new dresses, having a dessert with each other and the mess accumulated after the fact. The mix between confetti and dust become one in the same, as if it has not been cleaned up for weeks, months even. This is the beginning of Sethe's disassociation from the rest of the world.

The build-up to Sethe's disassociation is notable because of how she handles the fact that she is not only a mother to Denver but now to her long-lost daughter, Beloved. The audience can start to witness how Sethe is working towards repenting for her sins. It is Sethe's attempt at giving her daughters a good holiday, because now she had the freedom to do so, yet she remains

traumatized by the past. Thus, the horror is her return to the hauntings from her past. As a mother, it is impossible for Sethe to continue towards a future of being truly liberated.

Once more Brooks derives the definition of haunting from Avery F. Gordon. She cites that haunting “as the re-visitation and reclaiming of ‘something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there’ which ‘makes itself known or apparent to us’ (8)” (Brooks 241). Furthermore, she states: “The act of haunting provides a methodology of resistance and transformation for black women in horror. There exists a mutable tension between Black women’s bodies of literature and their horror discourse in which both are ‘worrying the lines’ of each other’s constructed boundaries. Such tension demands that Black women’s ontologies be complexly considered in the construction of a racially gendered episteme” (Brooks 242). A significant portion of her argument is that it becomes impossible to stray away from these narratives because it traps black women into the same narratives that are stuck within the context of slavery. The movie demonstrates the existential horrors of white supremacy by characterizing black folks who are trying to move towards a future that is no longer tied with the slave trade.

Here I would argue that narratives that stem from the Middle Passage are worth analyzing because they allow us to unpack and explore the horizons that not articulated through a simplistic perspective. It is ahistorical narratives that mainstream Hollywood tends to produce that relates to Abraham Lincoln who ended slavery. For example, the analysis of motherhood in *Beloved* is tied to its proximal relationship to the way white supremacy has haunted Sethe and black folks all over the United States. The way in which *Beloved* is the anchor that pulls Sethe away from being a mother to Denver demonstrates the trauma that Sethe faces.

The visuals in *Beloved* offer context to the viewer to formulate the double entendre of black femininity and sexuality. An example of this is to compare Denver and *Beloved*, both



characters who symbolize Sethe's past and present. The way Denver is depicted throughout the movie is that she is growing up for her mother. As Sethe grows wary with raising Beloved, Denver must navigate a life that goes beyond the family house. Beloved is Denver's opposite, she is vulnerable to the world around her and becomes deeply dependent on Sethe. The two characters symbolize an internal struggle with black femininity under an oppressive, white institution: To either become the strong black woman or to be infantilized for their vulnerabilities.

## CONCLUSION

There are multiple ways that horror is defined. Genre theory reveals the complex relationship genre film has with its audience. The cinematic representations of black womanhood, however, bear importance for the viewer. Much of what Benshoff and Pinedo outline in their work is that our history impacts the way filmic images become important to popular culture. But we cannot deny that much of film theory and criticism lack the space for how race and gender matter in cinema. Genre film is constructed by certain power structures.

In this paper, I analyzed two horror genre films that included black women and girls in their cinematic narrative. These films come few and far between. In discussions of black women in horror film genre, there are only a finite number of films with their presence. Genre film studies must confront the frameworks that exclude the horrors of others, not just black women but LGBTQIA+, indigenous, and disabled bodies as well. These voices structure how we approach genre film and, in turn, the filmmaking process.

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