



## AFRICAN AMERICAN GOTHIC AND HORROR FICTION

### AN INTERVIEW WITH MAISHA WESTER

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**Maisha Wester** is an Associate Professor in American Studies at Indiana University. She is also a British Academy Global Professor, hosted at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on racial discourses in Gothic fiction and Horror film, as well as appropriations of Gothic and Horror tropes in sociopolitical discourses of race. Her essays include “Gothic in and as Racial Discourse” (2014), “Et Tu Victor?: Interrogating the Master’s Responsibility to—and Betrayal of—the Slave in *Frankenstein*” (2020) and “Re-Scripting Blaxploitation Horror: *Ganja and Hess’s* Gothic Implications” (2018). She is author of *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (2012) and co-editor of *Twenty-first Century Gothic* (2019).

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**Paula Barba Guerrero:** In your article “The Gothic and the Politics of Race” (2014), you explain that the popularity of the gothic genre is, in part, because of its function “as a discourse on the terrors of racial otherness and racial encounter” (157). Specifically, you argue that gothic novels operate at different levels, sometimes producing discourses of racial otherness that serve to “shore up the normative” (157), but, other times, countering those hegemonic views via their depiction of horror (168). Could you perhaps comment on the uses of Gothic Horror with regards to race politics, especially considering the treatment given by law enforcement to both Black Lives Matters’ protestors and, more recently, to Capitol rioters in 2021?

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**Maisha Wester:** I think you actually provided the best example of how Gothic Horror has really impacted racial politics and the treatment of racial minorities in the Black Lives Matter movement, where people were peacefully protesting and officers showed up fully armed to the tooth and dressed as if they were entering war territory in contrast to the capital rioters who were clearly armed and prepared to take hostages and who were escorted into the capital by far less equipped police officers, and so there is a clear sense of how not just African Americans, but even those who are fighting for the rights of African Americans are read as not just disruptive but as violent, aggressive, hostile, monstrous as it were. But this is not the first time we have seen this; for instance, we also saw this back in the 1960s, with social groups like the Black Panthers and the “snicks”, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—the name stresses non-violence—, and yet they were deemed terrorists, which is, in America in particular, a very pertinent and impactful kind of monstrosity. Meanwhile you had explicitly violent white nationalist groups like the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) going around lynching people left and right, even attacking white Americans who sided with African Americans, and they were not termed terrorists. There still is resistance to terming them terrorists. So, historically, this kind of inequity and the ways in which the idea of Black monstrosity leads to it, even if it is not spoken, is so inherently a part of our ideology that it produces a profound disparity in treatment. And, thus, by the time we start thinking about individual Black subjects, we can look at the kind of Jim Crow violence and lynching that African Americans were subject to. African Americans could not pursue any kind of judicial recourse for the violence they suffered. Instead, it was deemed justified. But, what kind of person do you have to be to justify such an egregious and excessive assault on the body? When we talk about lynching we are not just talking about murder, we are talking about, usually, torture, murder, dismemberment, occasionally a bonfire. That suggests a level of monstrosity, because if you think about your stereotypical horror monster, you cannot just kill them once; you do not just stab Michael Myers and call it done; you do not just set Freddy on fire and be gone; you have to subject them to a process of torture and assault. So, to see African Americans subject to this suggests a similar kind of thought process. And I talked about this in terms of Jim Crow, but we should consider the ways in which contemporary assaults on Black bodies by law enforcement and by private citizens are a continuation of that lynching ideology and treatment. What Ahmaud Arbery went through in Georgia is just mind-boggling. And, so, yes, what we are seeing today in terms of race politics utterly exemplifies the ways in which we have been unable to think of minorities, particularly African Americans for this discussion, but minorities in general, as more than Other, as monster looming at the margins waiting to gain access.

**PBG:** Considering how these events show us where we stand in terms of racial justice and, as you just mentioned, how contemporary racial politics are partly impacted by some dismissive gothic conventions and negative stereotypes of traditional Gothic Horror, one could easily jump to conclusions and assume that the genre is not a suitable medium to call for intervention

and revision of our social performance. Yet, in the aforementioned article, you warn us against these simplistic assumptions, upholding the impact of the African American Gothic. You explain that whereas traditional gothic fiction imposes racial demands on those deemed Other—often turning them into monsters—the African American Gothic articulates terror and, broadly, gothic tropes as counter-discourses, calling for a revision of the genre (168-170). Examples of this could be Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) or Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), novels that illustrate the ambivalence and horrors of being Black in the US. Yet, you also mention writings by Richard Wright or Alice Walker, *Native Son* (1940) and *Meridian* (1976), which some may not recognize as purely gothic. Could you elaborate on these genre revisions and their overall impact on minorities’ representation; on the ways in which the genre and its most traditional tropes are reworked in some of these and other contemporary novels by African American authors to vindicate a historically discriminatory treatment?

**MW:** We can go all the way back to the slave narratives with this, as I do in *African American Gothic*, but these early authors really use gothic tropes, stylistic tropes, in a genre that otherwise might have been considered literary realism. So, for instance, if we look at your average plantation master overseer or slave catcher in the slave narratives, we have a kind of nightmarish villainy, a villainy that seems omnipresent and omnipowerful. It is just inconceivable how much authority they have to disrupt your life, how much control and power they have over you as an individual. You will also see the use of closed dark spaces. So, for instance, in much of Bigger’s flight through Chicago (even though it occurs across the cityscape) he emphasizes the darkness and the cloistered nature of the city; that it is not the space that is contained, not in terms of actual structures, but because of surveillance. But you also see this again in Ann Petry, in which her home, her apartment becomes a gothic-like maze. It is super dark, the hallways are narrow and dim, and she is easily captured there and cornered there by any man that would assail her. You also see endless escape capture cycles in these texts. So, it is on the one hand kind of literary realism, but when you look at the tropings, it is also a gothic nightmare. It does not depend upon the supernatural. And to some extent, even if you look at *Get Out* (2017), a film as recent as this, there is a similar sense of realism to that film. What is unrealistic, or seemingly unrealistic given the times we are in, is the excessive nature of that violence. The medical procedure they use is excessive, but not impossible. This is very possible to some extent. So, then, these early writers were in many ways talking about the ways in which horror is based on reality. They are simply taking what was subtextual in the genre and making it textual, and saying “no, we do not have to add a layer in order to make this terrifying, the reality itself is terrifying.”

Later writers, like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, use more traditional gothic tropings, but not as the point of horror. So, if you look at Walker and Morrison, they have hauntings, they have people that suffer madness—well, the violence of rape is not just gothic, that is unfortunately and historically real and contemporarily real—, but these traditional supernatural trappings really provide more of a contrast to the horrors of real life. They act as a

measuring ruler to stack up what is happening in reality. One of my favorite points about much of Morrison's work is to call out how often ghosts appear in her stories and we do not pay attention because the reality she is depicting is so much more disrupting and terrifying than the ghost is. It is just kind of not bothersome, the least of our concerns. By the time you get to later writers like P. Djèlí Clark, who is author of *Ring Shout* (2020), Tananarive Due, or Matt Ruff, you find that they all embrace the notions of the supernatural terror as a source of fear. But, really, even here the supernatural communicates what is equally illogical and incomprehensible in real life, like the degree of the power and protection which white privilege grants. There was nothing like watching the white police officers in *Lovecraft Country* (2020) and thinking, well, no, that is just the workings of white privilege, and it does really seem like there must be some magic to make that degree of protection possible. But this takes us back to the Capitol Hill Riots, which was surreal in and out of itself. And, so, watching that was a gothic moment for me as a person of color thinking "how in the world do you have that much power? Are you one of those magicians from *Lovecraft Country* that you managed to make it to the state of Florida unmolested and are now left free walking about the country, though you try to kidnap statesmen?" So really the supernatural just makes manifest what is already illogical and bizarre in our actual world. Because, in some ways, to think about the kind of violence which the KKK is capable of, you have to wonder if they are not some sort of supernatural beast to be able to do that. And, so, these authors make that leap because it is what we were already wondering.

**PBG:** To expand on this idea of the supernatural as a genuine representation of historical horror, I would like to discuss the ways in which the gothic genre can confront racism and reclaim historical experiences while correcting its own complicity in some racial institutions. I am thinking, for instance, of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which adapts gothic tropes and introduces them literally—in the form of a speculative, literalized underground railroad—to retell the history of slavery through the eyes of Cora, the protagonist. In this sense, I wonder if gothic and horror fiction can also reverse tropes traditionally ascribed to racialized bodies, which have consistently defined Black individuals as threatening and feared monsters. You explore this in your book *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (2012), as well as in the aforementioned article (2014), where you speak of the "fear of racial others" and the fear of losing the integrity of the white body both literally and figuratively: as the protagonist's corporeality that is sexually threatened in, say, *Frankenstein* (1818), and also as the State that becomes allegorically *contaminated* by othered bodies, as is the case of some contemporary horror films and shows where racial bodies are portrayed as supernatural parasites—zombies, for example. In your work, you explain that this correlation is the result of the adoption of some gothic traditions by contemporary horror fiction (*African American Gothic* 168; "The Gothic and the Politics of Race" 1-32), offering a chronology of debts and inheritances that explains the continuation of xenophobic discourses in both genres. In which

ways is the representation of the racialized body relevant for the revision of the US gothic tradition and of horror fiction? Why the body? And how can it be reclaimed as a site of vindication?

**MW:** Well, because the body is the primary site which we understand as impenetrable. We assume there is a degree of unassailability about the body. It is definite borders. There is clearly what is inside and what is outside, and we choose what to let that is outside into the body. It is our primary point of power, of maintaining borders. And, thus, any assault on the body then really threatens our sense of power and control over other borders in the world, such as for instance the home, the domestic space. We also like to assume we have a degree of authority over who comes in and who comes out of that border. It is not permeable. And, yet, what the Gothic does time and time again is remind us of the permeability of bodies, borders, and boundaries. The question then is when should those boundaries be disrupted and permeated? And, to some extent, I think, when we think about minority Gothic, the horror is on insisting upon the rigid boundary and the rigid border; of saying that there is always going to be an Other; that there must necessarily be a place of population that cannot access the norm, the center; that there must always be an inviable body that we do not accept; and that this is natural. And, so, it is that notion of “the natural” that, I think, especially minority authors become concerned with, because in talking about the nation as a body, you may wonder to what extent won’t you go to in order to protect its boundaries, its borders. Because, if the nation is a body, then, it should not be readily entered into. You should have ability to invite and reject, instead of thinking of the body as something which is ultimately permeable. I mean, we are living in the time in which bodies are clearly permeable and it is a source of horror, but there are times in which that boundary must be breached. This is what ideology is. And so, for minorities, that resistance to permeability becomes a source of terror because we are not just saying “well, there are clearly contagions that will destroy,” but there are also different ideas which now we want to read as contagions; ideas that are disruptive. There are different cultures and populations which we are going to now read as disruptive and contagious because they can destroy.

So, if we look at, for instance, the work that *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) does—and I would like to read the original *Birth of a Nation* as a horror film—, we see that it was a horror film for white audiences up to a point where the Klan enters and then, suddenly, it stops being a horror film, and becomes just a horror film for Black folk. But part of the reason it was a horror film was because of this idea of bodily permeability taken to a national level. The body, the national body, was in trouble at the beginning of that film. What did we need to do? We needed to cleanse it of its minority contaminants, we need to exile them, essentially attack them, have our white cells attack them and re-marginalize them into an oppressed position. And so that was a film that very much also played with the notion of the literal body and the national body. What you see happening in the film, literal bodies are constantly under attack in the states of disrepair, in states of illegibility. And this is what made especially those bodies

which were eligible horrifying. And, so, we needed again to fix our borders. This, I think, is one of the reasons why the body is so significant, especially when we think about the racial Gothic. Not to mention the ways in which the body is our primary signifier of racial difference, the reason why we say “oh, well, we’re going to arrest you and beat you on the way to arresting you” or “yeah, sure, you’re going to kidnap a couple politicians, no biggie.”

**PBG:** Speaking of racial boundaries, what about immaterial bodies, like those of ghosts? Disembodied, racialized specters are not a definite border either. They are permeable and liminal but can also claim and occupy space. They are haunted and haunting. You tackle this ambivalence in another article entitled “Haunting and Haunted Queerness” (2007), where you argue that there is a connection between the need for boundaries and containment, and the processes of cultural identity formation and memory retrieval. You claim that in novels such as *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), the grotesque is embodied as a haunting mechanism that allows Horace—the protagonist—to re-appear as a specter, forcing his community to overcome ostracizing ideologies (1051). Similarly, Morrison’s *Beloved* introduces the ghost as a figurative representation of the haunting memories of slavery. In a way, then, the haunting specter breaks taboos and opens difficult yet much-needed conversations. It functions as a legitimizing and reparative force. Nonetheless, spectral and monstrous presences in contemporary horror films often vilify the Other, introducing them as violent and deadly, led by a desire to transgress boundaries and take control of space. This is conspicuous in films such as *JD’s Revenge* (1976), *Candyman* (1992) or *The Amityville Horror* (2005), where the racial Other is depicted as an evil specter capable of possessing bodies and occupying intimate space; a ghoul that needs to be hunted down. This could also be true of *The House Invictus* (2019), where the spectral qualities of the ghost are transferred to the house and its inhabitants that restrain the protagonists’ movement and force them to mercilessly confront a deadly history. In these films, the specter haunts and is also h(a)unted. So, focusing on the h(a)unting/haunted dyad that the spectral body seems to bring forward, would you share your thoughts on gothic specters in contemporary gothic and horror fiction? In which ways does the spectral body correct or bolster official narratives, histories, and ideologies? Which boundaries does the ghost trespass? And how does it differ from the supernatural materiality of the monstrous body that we have discussed before?

**MW:** I think, especially in terms of their place in history and culture and the absence they might signify, that what these spectral bodies are really showing us are the ways in which we are still unable to confront our history. And, so, in a lot of cases the ghost also becomes an aspect, a component of the monster. So, for instance, the best example I have of this is *The Amityville Horror*, where you have these Native American ghosts haunting the place and they are a product of this supreme villain and hunter Jeremiah Ketcham. Even though they are his victims, they still are a component in his monstrosity and in the horror of the location and so what we see about these girls is that they are not figures of sympathy or empathy, they’re

figures of terror. Why? Because they are reminding us of a history that we really do not want to think about, and that we are still not ready to think about. And, in that case, it just really points to America's difficulty with dealing with history. But I cannot just say it is America. We see it in the UK, we see it in a lot of Western countries. This inability to grapple with the villainy they committed in order to achieve their current position, to say that our leaders were both virtuous—they did some really good things—and then they did some really awful things to get us here. How do we resolve that? And, then, how do we address those that have been the victims of our previous villainy? And, so, the ghost, then, even when it is a victim, also becomes a point of terror, especially when it is the ghost of a racialized body. Another example of this is *The Skeleton Key* (2005), a movie I have been hating on for a long time, partly because of what the director said in the extras about presenting the story of the lynching of two of the Black characters, who are the primary ghosts in the story. Again, the entire horror stems from the fact that they will not let the history of their crime go, that they insist that we remember and deal with it. That is one of the problems with them. But he terms their lynching a “small crime” and I do not know how you look at any lynching and think of it as a small crime, considering its components. But that really just alludes to the ways in which we are not ready, or perhaps do not want, to deal with history and recognize it in its full ugliness and its murkiness.

At the same time, when we think about minority films, the ghosts are also a way of refusing silence and subjugation. They are that memory that says “hey, hey, nah, nah, we're not cool, don't think we're all progressive, don't even think about calling us post-racial or color-blind society. We still got some stuff that you refuse to talk about much less recognized. We can't get to a point of equality until you recognize the previous sins and begin to atone for them, because until you recognize them, you are going to keep doing them in different ways.” And, so, the ghost is a memory that reminds us that we have some stuff that needs fixing. We got some reparations to make—and I say reparations not in terms of payment, but in terms of fixing systems. So, I think, this is what *The House Invictus* is really doing as well because it is talking about the ways in which—and again this is drawing back to about your previous question about the body—it is not just a house as a haunted space, but the body as a haunted space. Because that film is about the ways in which a group of, in the film, Black men but, in general, African Americans are haunted, have been contaminated by this white supremacist ideology, which makes intra-racial oppression possible, so that we do to each other what races have done to us historically for generations. So, then, now what we are seeing are the ways in which the individual becomes haunted. It seems to be in a haunted house, but ultimately it is about what is going on in that person's mind from the get-go. But the haunting can also be a way to disrupt, to say that there are other ways of thinking about and experiencing history. So, if you look at a book like Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), we see that her haunting allows her access to history in a way that those who are not haunted do not have access. Haunting, then, is not a point of terror. It is just a point of difference. And the problem, the source of terror, is that

other people refuse to accept her ability to embody and re-experience that history in ways that they cannot and insist that history needs to stay dead and gone, not something that we continue to contend with. So, the notion of the ghost really is complex. It can be really radical and revolutionary in its potential, but it really depends on how you use it.

**PBG:** Haunted houses, ghosts, monsters, all these representations of the Gothic across media that we have been discussing suggest that there is plenty of room for new horror figurations dealing with those historical events that continue to be unspoken. They attest to the fact that the gothic genre is all-encompassing; that it allows us to consider plenty of situations, experiences, and stories from a different lens. So, in your view, what is the future of the genre and of its depiction of these racial politics of otherness? Where do you see the future of the African American Gothic compared to that of more traditional Gothic fiction?

**MW:** I definitely see African American and ethno-Gothic in general are becoming far more popular. You are going to see more series like *Lovecraft Country* (2020). In fact, *Them* (2021-) comes out today. You are going to see more Black graphic horror novels, such as John Jennings's *Box of Bones* (2018), as well as voodoo culture. You are also going to see more blending of Gothic and other genres, like music and Afrofuturism. So, most of us are really familiar with Childish Gambino's amazing video "This Is America" (2018), which is highly gothic in its depictions. Less well known but equally gothic is "Bonfire" (2011), in which he is actually positioned as a ghost, re-experiencing his own lynching, but experiencing it as a narrative of entertainment for later campers. But, then, you are going to see more musical genres, I think, incorporating the Gothic. You are going to see more songs like Clipping's "The Deep" (2017), which is a blend of Gothic and Afrofuturism. It is gothic from a Lovecraft point of view, so you belong to some ancient, underwater society and you are coming back to stage a much-needed war on the surface dwellers. That is terrifying if you are not on the right side, but it is still necessary. So, who is the monster here? You are going to see a lot more, I think, in terms of Afrofuturist Gothic. Afrofuturism has long held a gothic component thanks to authors like Octavia Butler, but I think we are going to see more authors like Nalo Hopkinson, Linda Addison, and Chase Burke coming to the forefront. I think we are going to see more independent Black horror thanks to new technological access by folks like Uche Aguh, the director and writer of *The House Invictus*, but there is also Mariama Diallo, who created this amazing hilarious short horror film called *Hair Wolf* (2018), of interest to those working on the politics of appropriation and gentrification. There is also Frances Bodomo, who is another short film director, of *Everybody Dies!* (2016). So, I think you are going to see more independent Black horror and, hopefully, more non-minority writers, like Matt Ruff, trying to correct the racial dynamics in the genre. You will see them moving away from the likes of Lovecraft and Stephen King, to a more corrective Gothic, a more corrective vision of what it means to be American, not just white American.



## Open Q&A session

**Paul Mitchell:** I just want to pick up when you mentioned a couple of things that I am really keen on myself: *Get Out*, the movie, which I just think is one of the greatest movies made in the US ever, and Childish Gambino's video "This Is America." I just wanted to talk to you about those two. I do not know if you have come across the work of Sheri-Marie Harrison, who has talked about the "New Black Gothic" (2018)—I think she works in Missouri— and, basically, she sort of said something really interesting which I just wanted you to respond to: she sort of says that there is a kind of interesting new weapon in the New Black Gothic which is humor, and you just mentioned there at the end like a couple of examples, and I was just wondering your opinion on that, the use of humor actually as a weapon within the Gothic as a way of coming back and a way of subverting some of those gothic ideas.

**MW:** I think humor is actually really important in in terms of African American existence in general. So, for instance, the notion of "laughing keeps from crying" is one that has been long present African American tradition. It is best, perhaps, exemplified in Smokey Robinson & The Miracles' "Tears of a Clown" (1967), which is about the tradition of laughing at that which causes agony. I mean, in many ways and think of it as a gothic trope, but also as a real mechanism for surviving horror. It becomes a way of not letting horror destroy you at your soul; to be able to say that there are things here that are so ridiculous even as destructive as they are, you just have to laugh at it. It also becomes a way of intervening in the power of the supreme antagonist, the villain; and, if we think about this in terms of the ideology, of white dominance, especially in terms of the notion of differential treatment (that because of white privilege you get to be sir, always, and you get to be treated a certain way), then, of saying well, I am going to laugh at whiteness, because even as it is a point of destruction, it is stupid, it is ridiculous. This becomes a moment of seizing power, of saying you do not have complete agency over me, you do not have control over how I respond to you, you do not have such power that I can only quiver in terror, but I can choose to reject you and to call you out for what you are which is a silly child. I do not have to only react in ways that ultimately can reiterate your authority because, even in acting, responding solely in terror, we are still reiterating authority, it is just a violent authority. When we laugh at someone, we completely dismantle that authority. We say that you too can be critiqued and deserve critique. So, I think that historically laughter has a very real and significant point in African American community that is now being reintroduced to horror. There is a reason why it is only now just being reintroduced and that is because of how Blacks have historically been the comedic points in horror films. So, this is one of the problems with the *Scary Movie* films (2000-2013), that they reiterate that notion of Black death and violence to the Black body as a point of humor. But if you go back to these earlier 1930s, 1940s horror films, the point of relief from terror is always some excessively terrified Black body who is acting in comedic ways. And, so, there has been a hesitance to return to reintroduce comedy because of how fraught that relationship has been in horror previously.

**Alissa Burger:** You were talking about contagion and permeability of the body and, of course, we are all sort of wrapped up in this whole COVID-19 post-, and, of course, one of the things that I think we have all had to grapple with is that the response to it is not equitable at all. It is definitely having more significant impacts on marginalized populations and I know, for instance, that when my school went online, there were some students who had access to Internet and they were able to just keep on keeping on and other ones where it was a huge issue. We know that the availability of the vaccine is not equal across the world. And especially when we look at these things in parallel to other stuff that is going on racial justice-wise, other conversations that we are having—social justice conversations, political conversations—I think there is a really interesting, potentially gothic narrative moment, because there is not a lot of art being made right now. There is not a lot of filmmaking or television-making, so we are engaging with the gothic narrative maybe in real time, in real ways or different ways through news and coverage and those kinds of conversations, and I was just trying to figure out how might that sort of conversation fit with the contagion and the permeability and the parallel racial justice conversations.

**MW:** The horrors of COVID films always feels like “no, too soon. We are still in it. I just can’t.” But if you look at racial horror films, what we see is that there is not necessarily “too soon,” especially when we think about minorities that have been under literal systemic and bodily attack. And, nonetheless, we see them producing horror films that are just about grappling with this issue, even as we are in the midst of it. And, so, I think we can actually learn from ethno-gothic films on how to grapple with something that feels too soon, but which needs grappling with, because you are absolutely right. And if we wait on dealing with the disparity in terms of access to the vaccines, in terms of access to important, now life-sustaining, technology, it is because only those in need of these technologies would put their lives in danger going out to seek human contact. If we do not start to grapple with that so this is a conversation, that is quickly going to go away. We are going to see it quickly disappear in the post-COVID celebrations because I cannot imagine how joyful it will be once we are like “oh, come, it’s just a flu.” We are very willing to focus on the good stuff and just completely forget any of that bad, that any of these problematic components existed, especially in the US. I think you are going to see it dealt with in terms of historic context because again this is not the first time African Americans have been lower on the totem pole when it comes to receiving treatment and having their lives saved through medical industry. I think you are going to see a complicated representation because, especially when we talk about Black hesitation to be vaccinated, there is also that awareness of how Blacks have been historically abused by the medical industry, how habitually this industry produces cures that ignore conditions that are prevalent in minority communities, like “oh, you have high blood pressure and diabetes, we kind of forgot to look for that while we were developing this. Sucks for you. You can’t use this.” So, you are going to see some commentary. I do not know if it will be in film. Actually, P. Djèli Clark just came out with a short story called “Night Doctors” (2020), which literally deals with

the question of medical abuse of Black bodies historically. I think he is thinking about that within a COVID context: what does it mean to be a Black doctor and then how do you remedy this history of medical injustice towards the Black body as now a soul Black physician? What do you do? Do you just know it and go on do you provide differential treatment? Or do you enact vengeance? What do you do? I think we are going to see some interesting things coming out. I do not think Black filmmakers are going to be silent on this, and I know Spike Lee is looking to adapt one of Lovecraft's texts for a film coming up. Hopefully, he remedies his gender issues and hopefully he also thinks about what that narrative has to say about life mid pandemic for minorities.

**Anna Marta Marini:** As you were mentioning *Hair Wolf, Vampires VS. the Bronx* (2020) just came to my mind. And I was thinking, do you see renewed use of gothic tropes, like the vampire, in the production of Black popular culture that is also applied to issues such as gentrification? Most notably, there was a Black vampire and there were already some cases, but do you think that now it has been used to address some issues that are very current and impending?

**MW:** Well, on the one hand, it has already been used to address issues, and my best example of this is *Ganja and Hess*, which is a Black vampire film that does not ever use the word vampire, but it is entirely about the idea of social economic vampirism and the willingness to live as a capitalist essentially, which is to feed off the life of others, the labor of others. I think you are going to see more use and more turns to the supernatural and the notion of the monstrous. For quite a while, I think, depictions of monstrosity in Black horror were quite fraught because, again, when we call someone monster is to set them up for destruction and label them a figure for assaults. And there are so many ways in which African Americans have been consistently called monster throughout socio-political history. And, so, trying to figure out how to appropriate tropes of monstrosity without that consequence, how do you reclaim the monster from its damned place as a figure to be destroyed? I think we are seeing more of that coming out. In terms of thinking about how behavior informs monstrosity, the best example I can give is actually from Nalo Hopkinson's collection *Skin Folk* (2001). She has a short story that I love to talk about called "Greedy Choke Puppy" and it is the story of a *soucouyant*. But, while it seems to be the story of a single *soucouyant*, it turns out she is actually a descendant from a family in which all the women are *soucouyants*, including the grandmother who is there taking care of her now. So, clearly, they have managed to live and participate in community. What we discover in the story, though, is that what makes her a monster is not her difference, but her behavior, which is explicitly Western consumerist, privileging beauty ideals of youth and whiteness. That is what makes her a monster, not the fact that she is a *soucouyant*. So, by the end of this tale, her grandmother says to her "you know, the way to live, the way to do this is by loving others, loving your community, loving your grandmother, loving your work. Love is the answer." She was very Beatles "love is the answer." This practice of continuing to

consume that you have been told is what you are supposed to do, that you have been told is who you have been told you are, is not the truth. And, so, I think that we are not going to escape the notion of monstrosity. We cannot ignore it. It is a label that is going to follow us. How do we appropriate it? How do we twist it on its head? How do we show that difference is not monstrosity, that it is behavior that is monstrosity? Jewelle Gómez, author of *The Gilda Stories* (1991), is another excellent example of this. She has an amazing lesbian vampire, who is pretty much a vegetarian for a vampire. She is super humanistic in her vampirism, but she is encountering humans that are far more monstrous than she ever could be or imagine being. And, so, in that case, her vampirism is a way to estimate, like, look you have something that has literally been about being a monster in traditional Gothic and that is not the problem here. So, what do we make of the real problem? How horrifying is that? I sense that you are thinking a bit about Guillermo del Toro's *The Strain* (2009) because that is another excellent example where it is the behavior. Because you do have hybrid vampires that fight on the right. You also have humans that are horrible. One of the primary vampires in *The Strain* in particular used to be a Nazi general and so he was a monster, and, if I recall, in the book Setrakian notes that he was a monster before he ever became a vampire. So, I think you are seeing more emphasis on the behavior. Difference itself is not marked as the source of terror. Difference is just difference. We do not have to ascribe hierarchy or status to it. It is how you act—if you are normal, if you are mainstream, if you are the different, if you are the Other—, it is ultimately how you act that defines your monstrosity.

**Laura Álvarez Trigo:** I was thinking about the British movie *His House* (2020) almost all the time that you were speaking because many of the themes that you brought up connect to this idea of movies about these immigrants from South Sudan, if I am not mistaken, that immigrate to the UK and they are haunted by this demon/specter from their past. And I wanted to ask you if you could elaborate a bit on how these inspectors sometimes can represent their own identity—of this non-white people—when they immigrate to a white country, how did it represents their identity and they are haunted by it in the sense that they want to go back to their identity but also they want to keep it a little bit away maybe so they get integrated better or they are sort of passing in a sense. I was thinking also about *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), which also brings this idea of the passing with white Americans speaking, and there is also some horror in that movie. So, I was wondering about how that horror, the specter, and the hunting comes from this struggle between going to my identity and trying to keep away from it to fit better in the system.

**MW:** *His House* is wonderfully complex. It is not just about identity, it is also about the trauma: what do you do with the trauma it took to get here? It is an indictment of the social health system and the mental health system here, because clearly these are people that will obviously be suffering from PTSD. Why don't we get them immediate help when they arrive? There is so much to do with that film, so, I think, especially when we think about the creature that is

tracking them, it is a question that creates an embodiment both of gilts—because its promise is that if you let me have this body, I will return you, I will resurrect this lost person that you wronged grievously—and legacies—because it is also a question of what you bring with you, what you choose to bring with you and how you hold on to it. So, in terms of dealing with the ghosts of the young daughter that drowned, a question of “are you mourning? Are you melancholic?” arises. There is a real sense of the ghost illustrating the need to be a mourner for that culture which you have had to leave. That is not lost, but, in leaving it, you can still survive. Because one of the important elements of that film is that at one point the wife says: “well let’s just go back,” and it seems that maybe that is how terrible the horror is, how excessive the attacks are, and how ill-fit and unwelcome they feel here. But, at the same time, there is also this sense of “I have lost something integral to my bodily and spiritual integrity that I cannot exist without. And, having lost that, I am threatened with disintegration. I must reclaim it.” So, it is very much also about moving through and learning what it means to mourn and let go without utterly losing. So, in some ways, the ghost is a lesson in the difference between the supposed threat of assimilation versus acculturation. You do not have to assimilate and entirely lose. You can remember where you came from. You can practice the food culture. You can speak the languages. You can acculturate, but you do not have to lose who you were in making this move. You do not literally have to shed your skin. And I am thinking of that scene where, offering himself up to the demon, he slits his forearm open so that you can see the tendons and nearly the bone. That, for me, suggests a sense of utter bodily loss. It implies that, in coming here, I am falling apart. This place is literally pulling me to pieces. But what is also pulling me to pieces is the memory of what I have suffered, what I have been through, and what I have done to get here. That movie is just a study in psychology and social services. Ultimately, it is the ways in which they are still nonetheless forced to reckon with this. They are trapped in this space. They are told that they cannot leave the house, which feels very COVID-like. But, the film is also alluding to the injustices of the society they have immigrated to, because now they have been told that they can only exist there, as contained subjects, ignored and left to their own monsters. There is a kind of supreme villainy there, for that as horrible as the demon is, there are witnesses that could intervene and who refuse to do so. For me, that becomes one of the supreme sources of villainy in the film, and it is a very passive-aggressive felony. I think that is, perhaps, one of the horrors, because: do you attack us with passive aggressive systemic institutionalized violence?

**Elizabeth Abele:** I was thinking about the figure of the ghost. You probably have many examples of this happening, but, in *The Shape of Water* (2017), you have at the forefront this mixed-race, mixed-species couple but, then, hidden in the subtext of the film is what was happening in Baltimore at this time. So, again, we find this otherness where race is very important to what is being talked about while it is not being explicitly talked about. Could you elaborate on the relevance of silences and absences?

**MW:** So, I think what you are seeing, especially when we think about *The Shape of Water* is a way to talk about how earlier films have guided us in rejecting otherness, any kind of otherness. I am seeing it as a supreme kind of alienation, but also, particularly about Guillermo del Toro, as the ways in which he also plays with notions of stereotypes to suggest that there might be some truth in the stereotype, but that it is more complex than what we reduce it down to. There is far more to it than it we can get in our little snippet. I think that he is also marking the ways in which we still fail to really fully contemplate even the place of the racial minority in history, their contributions in history, the ways they have always been historically present, contributing to American society—even as we are constantly vilifying and demonizing them. I think that what he is also doing in terms of thinking about racial history is teasing out the ways in which race produces violence among whiteness. One of the things we do not think about are the ways in which whiteness itself also suffers from this history of systemic racial oppression because of how it teaches individuals and systems to read bodies as objects, as disposable. We tend to think about it primarily in terms of race, but you can think of it—especially when you think about *The Shape of Water*—as status in terms of disability. Are you a different? I am thinking about the time when you would have had the eugenics’ movement popping along, which would have said that she, as a mute person, does not get to have a job or a family, be gainfully employed, or entirely independent, because we do not want to reproduce this incorrect or broken whiteness. So, again, that idea of people who do not speak. I think he is calling out a large swath of whiteness that does not allow lower class, impoverished or imprisoned individuals to speak. You cannot speak if you are from the wrong gender or sexuality. Then, in what ways has this history of racial disenfranchisement produced you as an Other as well? Who is also been defined as less than suitable, less insufficient, child-like? So, that is a really interesting film to think about, but del Toro himself is just a really interesting figure to think about in terms of what it means to think about not just the minority within communities, within dominant American culture, but also what it means for dominant American culture to refuse and reject what we do and say. “If you do not utterly assimilate, you do not get to be one of us.” What are we losing? What is at stake that we are not really thinking about or seeing at all?

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