Diversity In Genre Fiction

The Agency Of Black Authors In Contemporary Horror Fiction

Lisa Wood

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Abstract

Blacks do not enjoy the same agency in genre fiction as members of other communities do. This fact is confirmed by a review of the body of work completed by Blacks in this space between the 18th-21st centuries as a whole as well as a deeper dive into the perceptions of the quality of the work, and the cultural expectations of the output. Because of that, many Black authors do not claim the genres that their work clearly references, deciding instead to remain more mainstream. This results in an inauthentic approach to their storytelling, which, by extension, limits their readership. Equally as often, Black authors, regardless of the genre within which their work falls, are relegated to a catch-all section designated for any and all fiction created by those in that racial group. For example, Octavia Butler, who was an accomplished science fiction author, experienced limited exposure and, by extension, readership because her books were shelved in the Black section as opposed to the Science Fiction section of bookstores. The creation of the newly minted Afrofuturism movement under the speculative fiction umbrella is a response to the sidelining phenomenon that many Black authors experience, however many titles within this new genre suffer the same fate. The concept of otherness as it pertains to Black speculative fiction writers will be explored, as will the paths that led to the current state. An eye toward diversity will also be reviewed in an effort to support exposure and access to Black creators. This review of the construct that Black authors have been oppressed by has been assessed through personal experience, to wit my novels *Crescendo*, the award-winning vampire tale *The Promise Keeper*, and *The Realm*, as well as my lauded screenplay, *Inexorable*. These four contributions to the speculative fiction canon represent a Black female author creating relatable characters in a space where

diverse voices have been systemically muted, and form the blueprint for the intersection of genre and race.

Black authors have a rich history of writing prose that is moving, challenging, and important to social consciousness, however they have a marked lack of presence in speculative fiction genres—specifically the horror genre. In the same way that women are not immediately thought of as horror fiction authors even though powerhouse female practitioners such as Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley were at the forefront of the gothic genre, the predecessor to what we now know as the horror genre, and though the genre still boasts many formidable female authors such as Anne Rice and Tananarive Due, Black authors are not often associated with this style of writing. That is not to say that Black authors are not connected to literature as a whole. Indeed, the perspective that Black authors have enjoyed in publishing is evident and poignant, however restricted and siloed. Black creators in both film and literature have been relegated to producing content that speaks of the race narrative, whether fiction or nonfiction entries. In this commentary I will discuss how that came to be, consider the implication of the practice, and present an argument for a restructuring of the system that has been in place for over a century while connecting my work and effort toward changing ingrained expectations. In doing so I will discuss the pervasive nature of bias and how it has colored expectations in publishing, both from a creator and a consumer's perspective. It is important to discuss representation in and consumption of media by looking at more than one form. Both visual depictions and written forms have been put into practice to convey messages to audiences and their success is evident when pop culture is analyzed. Access in the form of education and monetary means dictate what form of media one is exposed to and at what

prevalence. It is for that reason that films and texts will both be utilized herein to illustrate how comprehensive the approach toward bias has been.

Inasmuch as reflecting on what has occurred is important to understand how we have arrived at this current state, a path forward toward change is necessary to facilitate conversation about the new era in publishing. In my own work there are several examples of the versatility that Black authors bring to the table. While there are several referenceable works that I have penned as L. Marie Wood, my novels *Crescendo*, *The Promise Keeper*, and *The Realm*, as well as my screenplay, *Inexorable* exemplify the tenets of my thesis most closely. *Crescendo* is a novel about a man who is unsure if he is losing his mind amidst a host of personal challenges. As he navigates the emotions that surround the disintegration of his marriage, grapples with infidelity, and recognizes slow fracture of mind, he is forced to contend with family history, unearthing ghosts that threaten to ruin him. These characters represent human beings in relatable struggles in a setting that is accessible. That the characters are Black is only a portion of who they are. Not calling their race into the discussion was a deliberate act; it served to present Black men and women, individually and as couples, as people first and foremost. The desire to reflect this reality stemmed from the inherent bias in the publishing world, from agents to publishers, toward identifiably Black characters and the lack of connection some feel toward them.

In *The Promise Keeper* I took a different approach. Set in what is now Benin, West Africa and traversing the world over centuries to land in modern-day New York City, the characters in this novel are deliberately identified as Black. This vampire tale dives into several concepts that, while stylized and action-focused in the text, touch upon very profound aspects of life, debunking

stereotypes and misconceptions related to Black people in the United States. The notion that a majority of young Black women procreate so that they can enjoy the financial support attached to their offspring as allocated by the American Welfare system is dismantled as the care and concern that the unwilling vampire, Angie, demonstrates for her unborn child causes her to flee through centuries and across continents to protect him. The construct that Black love exists predominantly in the carnal sense rather than emotional is challenged by the connection between Angie and her love interest, Jonathan. The archaic assertion of gender hierarchy is felled when Zaji rejects the eternal life that her maker forces upon her and escapes his control. While presented in a fictional setting, these real-world mindsets are addressed and an alternative view presented in support of Black mothers, Black love, and women of all races.

In *The Realm,* a fantasy/sci-fic/horror novel about life after death, I make use of music references and locales that loosely allude to the racial makeup of the characters, but never confirm. As an author, I believe that the relationship between the reader and myself is give and take; readers approach work that falls in the psychological and mystery categories with an interest in discovery. Indicators of race are sprinkled within the work in the same way that clues to what Patrick, the main character, must do to save his family are and, as a matter of course, some clues are important and others are not. The racial ambiguity employed here is designed to do two things: let the reader use their imagination to flesh out that aspect of the characters and determine whether or not, or more importantly, why they deem it important.

Inexorable is an end of world screenplay that makes clear that for all of our differences, we, as human beings, are the same and will suffer a collective fate. It

is a nod toward the melting pot suggestion that is humanity and forces the characters to look bias in the eye as the world collapses around them.

Literature Review

The Black contribution to horror fiction and film has been both marginalized and categorized throughout history. Always respected for its ability to impact perspective, fiction and film have been used as vehicles to perpetuate stereotypes about Black people and customs as well as their acumen and intelligence. Robin Means Coleman's work in *Horror Noire, Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* plots the trajectory of Blacks in horror films, making an effort to assess the impact of the imagery shown on film not only to Black viewers, but also to White viewers (2011). It is limited in range, however, as it only covers visual media. Kinitra D. Brooks' *Searching for Sycorax, Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* continues the scholarship, making deeper connections to literature to round out the perspective that Blacks are portrayed as, at minimum, different from other people, in effect "othered" for contrived reasons that are as nebulous as they are long-standing. Brooks' important work in *Searching for Sycorax* furthers the discussion about race and its portrayal and/or omission in the horror space but does so from a female creator's lens (2018). While it is poignant and significant to the growth of Black creators and a timestamp of Black contribution, it only presents a portion of the experience and leaves a gap in the understanding of the Black perspective in this medium.

Black creators have struggled to find markets that recognize their contribution as normal and not "other". Their search for a construct that Brooks spoke of as "fluid fiction", or a place where black female authors could flourish at the intersection of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, in effect blurring genre lines

(2018) led creators to make their own markets in the form of race films, blaxploitation, and Black horror in the case of motion pictures and slave narratives, issue books, and Afrofuturism in literature. Efforts like Sheree R. Thomas' seminal anthology, *Dark Matter, A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), the *Bram Stoker Finalist Anthology Sycorax's Daughters* (2018), and Slay: *Stories of the Vampire Noire* (2020) sprout up on the publishing landscape in the hopes of introducing Black speculative fiction writers to readers, however those readers are not diverse and, therefore the reach of the volumes is not broad. A result of White readers and filmgoers not partaking of the selection that Black writers and filmmakers offer is a lack of readership and viewership from all races. This is a direct result of the persistent notion that normalcy in literature is derived from the contents of the literary canon, which is largely comprised of White males as Kaelyn Barron relates in her article, "The Literary Canon: What's In It and Who Makes the List?" and is punctuated by the concept that has permeated publishing about Black writing throughout its tenure: issue writing by a representative of the race is more acceptable than any other kind of fiction. Robin DiAngelo corroborates that notion by making clear that even award-winning Black authors are considered first by their race and then their occupation in the book *White Fragility, Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018). This perception causes Black success to take a back seat to others, to appear diminutive and less substantial. These mindsets perpetuate "othering".

This scholarship forms the foundation of my argument that Black creators can and should produce genre fiction, pulling away from the anti-racists tomes that are popular but might be a kind of shelved medicine that White people feel they should take, as Yaa Gyasi said in the 2021 article in The Guardian titled, "White people, black authors are not your medicine". It is this concept that governs my

writing and defines my contribution to the genre. My body of work fills this gap in horror fiction by providing protagonists and antagonists that are not defined by their racial makeup, but are instead, significant because of their actions. This mindset is, likewise, in common with author Tananarive Due's practices in the genre (2015).

Discussion

Rarely is one able to pinpoint the beginning of a phenomenon, to accurately determine when something started, when it began to permeate the mindset of a culture, and while the argument made here may be easier to timestamp, choosing one moment serves to minimize the pervasive nature of this reality. Slavery could be marked as the starting point, as could the moment that it was decided that Africa could be invaded and the people enslaved, a moment driven by the assumption of superiority that existed long before the execution of the plan to overtake Africans was completed. But those start dates are almost too easy to identify and set in stone. I submit that slavery, the knowledge of it, if not the practice and aftermath, is not the beginning of the inherent bias toward Black people and the subsequent minimizing of our contributions to society. While people have changed and societal norms have bent, twisted, and in some instances, snapped apart to be reconstructed by something equally malleable and unstable, people are still people and, therefore, social creatures swayed by popular opinion and susceptible to groupthink. It is in this reality that the truth of the otherness that separates Blacks and Whites in America lives; it is here where bias forms opinion and voices it as truth. Therefore, I submit that the pivotal moment that solidified the perception of Blacks as inherently inferior and, therefore different than White Americans, was the release of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a*

Nation. The longest, most technically advanced visual work of the time, the 1915 release of the film adaptation of Thomas Dixon Jr.'s novel, *The Clansman*, was met with overwhelming appreciation. It was the first movie to have a musical score and was, thus, treated as a stage play would be, replete with an intermission and souvenir booklet. *The Birth of a Nation* has the distinction of being the first movie to ever be screened at the White House[1] and to have secured national distribution. It was widely viewed and wildly popular… and it was about the savage Black and the ways that the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) could protect White society from them.

In *The Birth of a Nation,* the seeds of what has become a deep-rooted bias toward Black people were planted. Black people were depicted as violent and lustful, ignorant and animalistic, all amid the film advancements that are credited with innovating the medium. Old wounds were reopened—the largely dormant KKK experienced a resurgence after the film's opening—and new wounds created, some that would not bubble to the surface or be unpacked and examined for decades. Most importantly, Black people were effectively "othered". Society was indoctrinated with imagery and rhetoric that systematically compromised the cultural footprint of Black people, positioning them as outsiders, different, something to be feared because their true nature could never be understood. This message did not only make its way into the natural call and response of emotions for White America; cultural biases perpetrated through media informed the impression that Americans and people from other countries have about Blacks in America. Indeed, Black people have suffered challenges to their sense of self based upon the messages being pushed through entertainment and media. As a Black female creator, I have felt the weight of the "othering" that films like *The Birth of a Nation*, *Black Moon,* and others brought to the fore, implanting the subliminal

message of Black inferiority in the consciousness of people of all races, which is why I reviewed and deconstructed films of their ilk in this commentary.

The concept of Black people as expendable, invisible, or unimportant is ubiquitous. Robin Means Coleman, the author of *Horror Noire*, a study on Blacks in film, recounts that scholar Sterling Brown talked about Black character types in the 1930s, stating that Black characters in literature during the early 20th century were predominately portrayed as the, "…"content slave" or the "wretched freeman."[2] These categories were later expanded and reimagined. Black people began being portrayed in four predominant ways in both movies and literature, horror or otherwise: in service of Whites, as monsters, as victims, or not at all, as though they didn't exist. These categorizations can still be seen in media today.

Blacks in service of Whites

When in service of White characters in horror movies and literature, Black characters provide comic relief as the sidekick or as a guiding light to the needy if they are embodying the magical/soothsaying/clairvoyant presence. They may sacrifice themselves to save a White protagonist or be the first to die even as the murdering force has several characters of other races to choose from, thus allowing everyone else a chance to escape. Black characters may even literally be "the help", filling roles such as slave, maid, butler, fieldhand, chauffeur, and handyman. These characters, often hyper-protective and fiercely dedicated to the White character to whom they are attached, can be seen in many film and literature genres. The horror genre has made use of this characterization notably in *The Green Mile* with John Coffey, a larger-than-life man portrayed as intellectually challenged who was incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. Coffey was caught in the act of trying to use his mystical healing powers on two

dead little girls. This characterization was also on display in *The Shining*. While the movie and book differ in the handling of Dick Halloran, the benevolent chef who shared a supernatural connection with the antagonist's son, Doc, the character's "Magical Negro" depiction is prevalent throughout both offerings.

Earlier cinematic entries used more direct imagery to illustrate the hierarchy. The 1934 release *Black Moon* depicted Blacks as primitive and brash. It also showed them seeming to worship the White family that returned to their island, the fictional Caribbean paradise of San Christopher, throwing flowers at their feet and fawning over them as they walked. In a scene where the Black boat-running transplant from Georgia, Lunch McClaren, is transporting Stephen Lane to the island, he is found singing "Roll, Jordan, Roll", a slave spiritual, as he works. Lunch invites Stephen Lane to sit with him, and in conversation, goes on to describe the islanders, including his love interest— "natives" as he calls them—as "monkey chasers". Lunch then asks his passenger, the White male he was hired to ferry to the island, to help him for a moment by taking the wheel—in essence, asking him to drive the boat—because he's, "…got some business up there with these monkey chasers."[3] Lunch then proceeds to say something in French in a harsh tone and heretofore unnoticed Black men scurry, jumping into action, some seeming to rise from repose. The term "monkey chaser" is problematic, to say the least. While the movie attempts to explain the comparison by likening the islanders' love of coconuts to that which monkeys also displayed, the remark pours salt into the wound that Jim Crow propaganda opened and that was part of the fabric of America when the movie was released. For the line to be delivered by a Black character speaks volumes about the subliminal messaging capabilities in media. These kinds of disparaging remarks from a Black person about their own people create an emotional impact that challenges one's self worth. These

messages from Blacks to Blacks have recurred throughout history. Perhaps one of the most famous examples is the spectacle that occurred in the sports world when promotion for a bout between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier became racially abusive, however it has also happened in smaller, less publicized interactions. An “us” vs “them” quality became an acceptable discussion in Black America on the heels of such behavior, further separating an already fractured community from mainstream acceptance.

There are other moments where the characterization of Blacks in service of Whites shows itself in the film *Black Moon*, but one of them bears relating here because of the subliminal seed planting at play. In a scene where Lunch tenders Lane to shore, an unnamed Black male, shirtless and stoic, performs the effort of rowing four adult males alone. A phrase in French is virtually spat at the man by Lunch to which he simply responds, “Oui,” and continues to work.[4] These images of subservience, laziness as illustrated in the initial boat scene, abuse, and disrespect at the hands of a member of the same race are not showcased as part of the story or something to be paid attention to—indeed, in the tarry scene, two White male characters act out lines related to what they will find once they get ashore. The back-breaking work of rowing them to shore and the disdain etched on the enterprising Lunch go unnoticed by the two White characters—from their perspective, there is work to be done and the Black characters are doing it… end of story. They could just as easily have been offscreen doing the same job entirely unseen. This imagery works to create subliminal triggers. These triggers form stereotypes—responses and expectations—that the viewer is unaware they are cultivating in their psyche, building the framework for what Blackness is and isn’t, and inexorably linking them to the persons connected.

There is a rich literary tradition of reflecting Black characters as in service of White characters. Black characters in classic fiction are often relegated to servitude—roles that require silence in the presence of perceived or purported betters in mainstream literature or roles that render them subservient and/or unsavory. Researcher Sheila Marie Foor's study on Hemingway's depiction of Black people in his writing revealed similar categorizes as those described here. In her assessment of the story "Fifty Grand" she reveals Hemingway's use of a Black character for spectacle, noting that while negativity isn't evident, mistreatment is unchallengeable[5].

Blacks as Monsters

While the characterization of Blacks having the sole mission of being in service of Whites is problematic, the notion of Blacks as monsters is perhaps more difficult to digest. H. P. Lovecraft, progenitor of the contemporary horror subgenre, cosmic horror, likened Black people to, "…a beast in semi-human form,"[6] in his 1912 poem "On the Creation of Niggers." Before that the concept of the Black male as brute was popular in literature and film, creators casting aside the worry of the "self-fulfilling prophecy"[7] such propaganda might bring about; once slavery was over, there was no longer a need to paint Blacks as docile and childlike—the subliminal message for both races that had been borne out of necessity was no longer required. In film, there are additional metaphorical references that inform the view of Black people as the Monstrous Other. Consider racialized monsters like Audrey II in *Little Shop of Horrors*, the titular character of *Predator*, and King Kong, a primal and inarticulate beast. Means Coleman says this of The Gill-man in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, "Bodily, the monster resembles a racist caricature—its lips are large and exaggerated. Its skin is dark."[8] Tananarive Due,

author, educator, and filmmaker suggests that, "…the physicality of monsters like the titular creature could be compared to the way black facial features were misrepresented and caricatured back in the 40s."[9] Means Coleman goes on to surmise that, "The monster permits a counter-image to evolution which is pictured as modern, intellectual, and civilized."[10]

Blacks depicted as monsters was also shown in less literal terms in other styles and genres of literature. Descriptions of exaggerated features, expressions, proclivities, and mental capacity can be found in works such as the well-meaning *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher-Stowe (1852), *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell (1936), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960). Ernest Hemmingway contributed to the "Black as monster" framework with his short story "The Battler". This short story featuring Nick Adams, a recurring character in the author's work, uses descriptive language that paints an unsavory picture of the Black character, Bugs, specifically, "…crouching on long nigger legs over the fire,[11]", giving him an almost spider-like quality. There are many examples of Black people being depicted as monsters in celebrated fiction, illustrating that the progress of time did not dissuade derogatory expression toward Black people, nor did it change the narrative even though society valiantly attempts to dig itself out of the rubble of the past.

Blacks as Victims

Blacks as victims is probably the most identifiable trope in horror movies. The Black character dying first has become par for the course, anticipated behavior, as expected as the fall a running character will take as they try escape the antagonist and as commonplace as the high-pitched shriek moviegoers have come to expect from fearful female characters. When reviewing Black characters

in 1980s horror films, Means Coleman notes that, “Not only were the vast majority of Black characters killed off during this period, but they were often the first to die.”[12] These deaths were frequently used to establish the strength of the antagonist; the characters were usually nameless or undeveloped—forgettable aside from the fact that their deaths gave the White protagonists lead time to escape while simultaneously allowing the audience to witness a brutal, bloody, dominant display.

While sacrifice is the most prominent example of Black character death in all genres of movies á la Miles Dyson in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, Captain Miller in *Event Horizon*, and Stacker in *Pacific Rim*, it is heavily replicated in horror. There is, however, another example of Black character death that has a deeper, more poignant psychological impact. George Romero’s 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*, was a groundbreaking effort, not only for its coverage of the American zombie, but also for the casting of the film’s hero. Ben was played by Duane Jones, a Black actor for whom the movie would be his first on screen role. This would also be the first time that a Black person had ever been cast as the hero of a horror movie.[13] Ben’s character continues to be talked about by Black Americans decades after the film’s release with reactions ranging from exultation that a Black man was shown as having the intellect to devise a plan to stay alive and lead the others throughout the ordeal even though he was challenged by the other occupants of the house—all White, two male—to surprise, which was quickly replaced by awe when Ben slapped a White woman on camera in the racially precarious 1960s, and finally to frustration that, in the end, the Black man was not allowed to live. The so-called “uppity nigger” who had brazenly taken control of the situation, offering plans, fortifying their hideout, and engaging in battle to protect himself and the people in hiding with him, had been put in his place in the end.

The Invisible Black

Even more shocking than the buffoonish comedy relief characters that Blacks have played in film and literature, more jarring than the assimilated sidekick, and, indeed, what has impacted Black and White Americans' views of each other the most is the marked absence of Black people on the screen and on the page. Horror often, "…mark[s] Black people and culture as Other-apart from the dominant (White) population and cultures in the US,"[14] and one of the ways to accomplish that is to make them seem different enough that they don't fit into the narrative, not meaningfully. Whether that relates to the places that they go, where they live, the kinds of cars they drive, the jobs they hold, the music they listen to, or the things that bring them joy, great lengths are taken to show how different those choices are from what White society may deem suitable. As Kinitra Brooks stated so succinctly in her exploration of the Black feminine contribution to contemporary horror, *Searching for Sycorax*, "…we black girls were absent—we were never there!"[15] She continues, further pondering the lack of representation, "[Why] were there never any black women in the group of survivors? …There weren't even any women of color—no Puerto Ricans, no Koreans, no Chicanas, no Pakistanis—none of the many different shades and incarnations of womanhood I encountered on a daily basis."[16] The omission is glaring.

Black omission or othering is not always obvious. Sometimes there is one Black character—usually the aforementioned sidekick—present. This character is visible, shallow as they may be, designed to ingratiate themselves with audiences, to dissuade them from thinking that there is any bias at all… designed to persuade them into thinking that the movie is reflective of life. This singular Black character is assimilated into the fabric of the story but in a cursory way. There is little to no backstory for these characters and none of the major plot beats involve them;

audiences have a hard time relating to or caring about what happens to those characters, which makes them expendable. They are, however, integral to the success of the White character's goals. The language used about and around them is often surface and noncommittal unless a direct attack or negative interaction serves the White character's story arc, allowing them to emerge as the hero. Instead, words like exotic and ethnic have been batted about to describe the Black character, comical in a way that makes the White character feel safe or as if they belong. While those are not inherently descriptions intent on creating a racial divide, they allow for the delta between the Black and White community to remain. Readers and viewers can sometimes miss the moment when they deem the character different than other Blacks either based on demeanor, intellect, or interests, because the othering is so insidious, so covert.

The separation of communities adds to the concept of difference. Robin DiAngelo, academic and author of *White Fragility, Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, notes that, "Virtually any representation of human is based on white people's norms and images."[17] This reinforces the perpetually ingrained notion that White people—how they look, what they do—are the norm and erases Black people and their contribution to society. This dynamic extends to all Black characters: protagonists, antagonists, and supporting roles. Bram Stoker nominated author and academic, Rhonda Jackson Joseph, whose scholarship focuses on the visibility and perception of Black women in horror fiction, posits that, "The absence of black female vampires in the horror genre creates a disservice for fans and black females by denying them the opportunity to experience vampires and monstrosity through a lens of black femininity: to encounter a vampire forged by the fires of black womanhood,"[18] in her presentation "Where My Girls At? The Absence of Black Femininity in Vampire

Culture.” That erasure contributes to the overall sense of distance, of alienness, of unfamiliarity. As humans we are the products of our environments. If the environment we live in is not diverse, if the media we consume does not introduce us to other people and cultures, there is no opportunity for growth and acceptance.

Homogenous societies have no true understanding of other cultures because they have no exposure to them. While the US is a larger structure that is often described as a melting pot of ethnicities and cultures, it is, in many ways, still separated by race and, further, by gender. This means that if a Black person is seen in handcuffs on the nightly news often enough, people from other cultures who do not have access to imagery that shows them otherwise will have no other reference to determine what Blackness is and will ascribe that negativity to the people as a whole. Means Coleman posits that, “Perhaps the most damaging aspect to the limited spectrum of roles portrayed by Black actors in early horror films is that there were no contrasting positive images for a sense of balance.”[19] The absence of Black people in movies that reflect normal daily life imparts the same message and, in turn, garners the same response. The same can be said of Black representation in literature. This lack of visibility serves to perpetuate the idea structure of Black people being inferior to White people. These mindsets are easily reinforced by the human propensity to believe what is shown or told to them without critical assessment and/or research on their part to corroborate the sentiment as fact.

Consider this: movies in the Black Horror genre made in 20th century were set in urban centers with communities that lacked diversity. Mainstream horror movies and literature omitted the presence of Blacks in their created neighborhoods. Black people didn’t see themselves reflected on screen or in books, which forced them to consume whatever media existed if they wanted

entertainment. At the same time, White people did not encounter Black people in movies or books, further perpetuating the concept of Black people as different from them, as “other”. Blacks and Whites didn’t occupy the same spaces, didn’t live in the same towns, didn’t work the same types of jobs, or have the same interests, or so the majority of movies and books would have people believe. This deepened dissonance and fed the undercurrent of racial discord. In more deliberate circumstances, the divide allowed for the proliferation of bias in the form of race talk, which is the deliberate insertion of, “racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than positioning African Americans into the lowest level of the racial hierarchy.”[20] DiAngelo surmises that, “Casual race talk is a key component of white racial framing because it accomplishes the interconnected goals of elevating whites while demeaning people of color; race talk always implies a racial “us” and “them.”[21] This separation is a form of segregation, one that continues to pervade the media and mindsets of Americans without pause, because it is not blatant or overt: it is ingrained in the fabric of our socialization. It is so camouflaged that many people don’t understand the impact or implications that come with it, Many, in fact, are wholly unaware that anything is unusual at play at all. DiAngelo submits that White people, “…are taught that we lose nothing of value through racial segregation.”[22]Therefore, any omission or erasure barely, if at all, registers.

While film and literature are meant to be forms of entertainment, they are also part of pop culture, of what is trendy, of the collective consciousness. The images that we see in media today, ones that reflect what is considered beautiful or metropolitan, ones that define which brands should be used and which shouldn’t, inform our mindsets toward people, places, and things. While it may seem that we are more susceptible to suggestion of this nature in modern times, society’s proclivity for trend following is related to access rather than changing

interests or redefined quests for social acceptance. There are more ways to gain access to materials that shape impressions than before, but the human psyche has always been open to groupthink and the comfort to be found therein. Examples of this can be found in the history of lynching in the US. Often these brutal slayings were turned into events where people would gather, enjoy food, and socialize. Ferris State University offers newspaper clippings and accounts of such events for review, citing that attendees, in the midst of and with full understanding of what kind of gathering they were attending, "…made merry as the blood from multiple wounds dripped from the suspended body of the victim,"[23] at these so-called lynching picnics.

The characterizations of Blacks and the resulting depictions of them in film and literature dehumanize Black people. Indeed, they summarily dismiss Black people's importance all together. The Perception Institute cites research that indicates, "…a subtler form of dehumanization of blacks persists [that] increases endorsement of police brutality against blacks … and reduces altruism toward blacks."[24] This finding is directly related to these culled impressions, the mindsets that snowball as they permeate communities, becoming a part of the patina, so intrinsically linked to Blackness that they are ingrained as legitimate descriptors of Black people. These descriptors work in concert with other symbols and messages that pummel society from all angles, to include standards of beauty, education, health, and wealth, coming together to create an Other, an entity that is wholly different from White society, and therefore something to be held at arms distance, regarded with cautious curiosity, novelized, and feared in differing measures. Foor punctuates this reality by restating Eugene Horowitz's belief that, "Attitudes toward Negroes are now chiefly determined not by contacts with Negroes, but by contact with the prevalent attitude toward Negroes."[25]

Horror fiction is not the only genre under the speculative fiction umbrella to experience the repercussions of “othering” in practice. Though not written as a contribution to the science fiction genre deliberately, the 1899 novella *The Heart of Darkness* by John Conrad sparked the imagination of many of the genres practitioners even as it presented a curious nod to the notion of “otherness”. The piece, which was first released in serial form in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, was often lauded for its ideas and captured the attention of casual readers and academics alike, causing its assertions about Blackness to be consumed in large quantities. In response to a criticism of the work by John Clute where he references a foray into the “unknown” and the “Otherness of alien life”[26], Sheree R. Thomas, speculative fiction author and editor of the premier anthology, *Dark Matter, A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, clarified that, “…the “unknown” element alluded to is the African continent or, more specifically, the Belgian Congo of 1890; and “the Otherness of alien life” is the Africans themselves.”[27] Attridge relates Patrick Branlinger’s scholarship on the story where he argues that *The Heart of Darkness*, “…portrays Congolese villagers as primitiveness personified, inhabitants of a land that time forgot.”[28] This imagery remains connected to Africa today, often rising unbidden in the minds of those in the Western world, a result of systemic conditioning about the continent and its inhabitants.

Black people have been significantly minimized culturally. That perceived lower status has created an automatic bias and skepticism when that bias is challenged. Means Coleman notices that, “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 demon.”[29] That Black people will not be able to do something, whether that is

comprehend a task or think deeply about an issue, has become expected. Black creators were effectively put in a box—allowed to produce, but the resulting work was shunned, criticized, or outright ignored. Accomplishments such as being one of the best-known poets in the 19th century worldwide even though she spent nearly all of her life enslaved in the case of Phyllis Wheatley or being the first Black person to win a starring role in a motion picture in the case of Clarence Muse go unheralded in history, not unlike the scientific, medical, and aeronautical contributions of Black people that are routinely muted.

So Black people created their own.

Reclaiming Agency in Literature and Film

Some of the first entries into literature penned by Black authors were slave narratives. These important works recounted the author's experiences in bondage and represent some of the most authentic accounts of life in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. While *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* by Olaudah Equiano out of London was the first international bestseller[30], notable entries from the US include works by Harriet Ann Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Phyllis Wheatley, and Booker T. Washington, each of whom told stories about life on plantations and the brutality and abuses experienced therein, treacherous escape, or making a new life even as they grappled with the fear of capture. An argument could be made that the earliest submissions of Black writing captured in the US were part of the horror genre.

Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts, in her eye-opening article, "'Black characters are still revolutionary': writers talk about the complexity of race," wrote that Black authors like Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright, "…drove the social commentary of their day, using their creative works as

the vehicle,"[31] and that assertion rings true as we cast a backward glance over history, unpacking the expressionism in *Native Son* and the lyricism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But that formula became expected: it became necessary to success. Lewis-Giggetts attests that, "…it's commonly believed that "good" writing by black authors is birthed from oppression, and marginalization is viewed as a key marker for black literature,"[32] linking legitimacy and authenticity to strife and collective oppression. As in the past and today, books that did not follow that blueprint were, largely, not nominated for awards. They were not stocked widely in the library system. They were virtually unknown. The commentary format that chronicled the Black experience in the United States and gave purview into the Black experience was highly sought after as well. For example, James Baldwin produced some of the most referenceable work in this genre. While perhaps best known for his work as an essayist and chronicler of the Black experience of the time, Baldwin's inroads into fiction are similarly impactful. They make Black life accessible from a different perspective, one that is recognizable and tangible in a way that social commentary is not. Baldwin's fiction shows Black characters in scenarios that are real not only to the Black experience, but to the human experience. Readers are treated to recognizable themes about familial bonds, sexuality, and personal demons that punctuate the human existence. However, these entries are not the most popular in his body of work. The context became cemented in publishing, at least where Black writers were concerned. The delineation was clearly drawn; the Black contribution to literature was to be related to, if not wholly encompassed by, the ills and struggles endured by Black people, whether fictional or biographical. Put plainly, works by Black authors was expected to be social commentary. This mindset still proliferates publishing today.

On the concept of “issue books”, which is the term used to describe books that focus on the struggle and strife experienced by Black people and/or characters, L. L. McKinney wonders if the whispered about notion that those are the only types of Black-authored books that get the attention from mainstream publishers[33] is true. If that concept is extended to recognize that mainstream publishing, or publishing by one of the now Big Four publishing houses, is still the most direct path into bookstores and big box consumer outlets like Target and Walmart, as well as onto the top best seller lists, such as *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, one can surmise that the connection to Black representation in literature is tethered to the exploitation of “the struggle”. Books that do not center on that perceived experience, ones that focus on genre or social issues that concern all races rather than one, receive less attention in the form of resources dedicated to proper marketing and publicity from the publisher, which equates to less visibility in the marketplace and, ultimately, reduced readership.

There was a breakthrough in prose in the 1940s, one that represented the turning of a corner, brought on by one tale that dared to be something different. Researcher and author, Jess Nevin, reasserts the notion that, “at least through the 1960s, the preponderance of black literature might be considered a ‘literature of terror,’ with slavery of course standing in as the ‘original sin’ which provided the artistic matrix for subsequent black authors.”[34] But Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* stood apart from that tradition. At a time when further distinctions on Black literature had been assumed, marking, “African American literature [as] tacitly understood to be African American male literature; and women’s literature was coded as white women’s literature,”[35] author Ann Petry wrote a thriller that included hoodoo, murder, and economic tension nestled in a reflection of the American tenets of hard work yielding results. Novelist and professor and Tayari

Jones recounts, “For Petry, 116th Street is the gritty antagonist, representing the intersection of racism, sexism, poverty and human frailty.”[36] Nevin goes on to list the qualities that *The Street* has in common with a gothic novel, including, “…catatonia, paroxysmal, blood-curdling violence; confinement and entombment; psychosexual neuroses; villainous and shape-shifting characters who worry and dislocate the line separating ‘good’ and ‘evil’; and an omnipresent and palpable specter of impending death.”[37] One of the early entries in crime novels and a literary powerhouse, *The Street* was the first novel by a Black woman to sell over a million copies[38].

Joseph Nazel released *The Black Exorcist* in 1974, which has been described as a blaxploitation version of Blatty’s *The Exorcist*, and it is just one of the crop of pulp novels that hit the market in the 1960s and 1970s. *The Black Exorcist* uses familiar blaxploitation tropes, from a Satanic cult that was a front for the Mafia, to the protagonist, a former pimp who found God. It also offers a surprising dose of realism. “Nazel was an African American man deeply tied to his community, and so *The Black Exorcist* has a real feel for L.A. street life. However, *The Black Exorcist* did not spawn imitators or create a wave of African American authors writing commercial horror novels.”[39] Novels that did not focus on the struggle that Black people experienced in America began to make their way into the marketplace. Black authors like Chester Himes and his hardboiled detective series, and the sometimes humorous, sometimes poignant work of Robert Beck, better known as Iceberg Slim, and his street life fiction are just two examples of authors who produced solid content in the middle of the 20th century that did not reference race with the intention of commentary.

Son of Ingagi is the first horror film to feature an all-black cast. Released in 1940, the monster is a creature brought back from one of the doctor's excursions abroad. The creature is kept in the basement of the house and, upon drinking a potion found there, turns murderous and slays her. An unwitting couple inherits the home and later discovers the creature in residence. This film was written by Spencer Williams who was a pioneer in the Black producer and director spaces and an accomplished actor in his own right. This film, as well as the work of Oscar Micheaux, who is regarded as, "… the most successful African-American filmmaker of the first half of the 20th century,"[40] are part of a genre of movies called race films.

Race films are movies that are produced with Black audiences as the intended market. They often were comprised of all or predominantly Black casts and had a Black crew, producers, writers, and directors attached. Race films showcased Black people in a variety of roles, unlike early film submissions produced by Whites that routinely cast Black actors as, "…singers or dancers, or as maids, butlers, porters, and other servants."[41] Writer and producer, Paul D. Miller, surmises that race films,"…featured actors who were of African heritage, and the films were significant for showcasing how talented actors could do more than play the stereotyped roles offered to them in major studio releases. And they were produced by independent production companies and focused on the everyday life of what it meant to be Black in America."[42] These films countered traditional depictions of Blackness onscreen, dispelling the stereotypical and disparaging precedents set in movies where White actors appeared in blackface, where Black people were quietly tending to the duties of servitude in the background, or where they were omitted from society all together. Race films, "… gave African American audiences and actors a forum to articulate their own

identity outside of the studio system which rarely bothered with the full spectrum of that identity."[43]

The need for race films speaks of the response to the oppressive machine that relegated Black imagery to lesser or "other" status. While race movies were, "… a product and mirror of segregation…"[44], they stoked a desire to produce images depicting Blacks as real people rather than as caricatures of themselves, in equal part subservient, buffoonish, and villainous, and to have some control over the messages being propagated, consumed, and internalized by other races, as well as their own.

The 1970s brought in what were termed blaxploitation films, a genre named as such by NAACP Chapter president, Junius Griffin[45]. Professor and author of *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture*, Yvonne Sims, determined that over 200 movies under this umbrella were created by the midway point of the 1970s in many genres including action, westerns, comedy, drama, and horror, all of which featured stereotype-busting characters that were, "self-possessed Black men…in control of their own destinies."[46] There were many horror gems produced during that era, such as *Ganja and Hess*, *Blackenstein*, and the movie that started it all in 1971, *Blacula*. While these films were polarizing during the 1970s and are still controversial today, when looked at through a modern lens, there are some important considerations to be taken into account about that style of movie as a whole. Sims relates that, "…before the blaxploitation era, Black actors rarely had leading roles in widely distributed films."[47] While these movies are largely considered to work in the extremes, films like *Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde* had Black characters who were doctors, scientists, detectives, pimps, prostitutes, business owners, and average

Joe's. This kind of variegated approach to moviemaking presented a kaleidoscope of human experience through a Black lens.

In the end, however, these efforts in both literature and film may have served to polarize audiences rather than act as vehicles to showcase the kinship between the racial groups.

Several questions arise from the racialization of writing, nearly all of them from within the Black community. White Americans do not seek out Black literature naturally. Books sales for what were once called "issue books" and have now donned the more contemporary term, "anti-racist books", often rise when something happens in the world: a murder at the hands of a police officer; a demonstration of racism caught on film; news coverage about a racial slight. A month after George Floyd was killed by police in Minnesota, seven out of the ten books that topped the *New York Times* Best Seller list were related to race.[48] White readers flock to bookselling venues all over the country to buy the latest collection of essays from Ta-Nehisi Coates or Jabari Asim when racial conflict occurs, presumably trying to educate themselves about the plight of Black people in the country they share, but the author of *Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi, challenges that motivation. She states, "So many of the writers of colour that I know have had white people treat their work as though it were a kind of medicine. Something they have to swallow in order to improve their condition, but they don't really want it, they don't really enjoy it, and if they're being totally honest, they don't actually even take the medicine half the time. They just buy it and leave it on the shelf."[49] This supposition means that much of the work that Anna J. Cooper, Ralph Ellison, and James Cone is read primarily by Black people, which equates to espousing a message that is already being contemplated by the audience, in effect, preaching to the choir. Therefore, if White Americans are not reading Black authors

consistently, is the message to be understood that Black readers only want to read books that relate to the race narrative or trauma? A bigger question for genre writers emerged through that apparent truth: can Black writers find success if they do not write within the confines of race narrative, which effectively guides story creation to a specific end goal rather than allowing authors the latitude to develop them organically? This represents a lack of agency that many Black authors writing in the horror genre and, by extension, under the speculative fiction umbrella, experience.

The question of the human experience is at play when considering point of view, what it can be defined as and how it can be displayed on the page and screen. Should the human experience be defined from a socioeconomic perspective, which would include variables such as the type of job one has, how much they earn, and what kind of living conditions they experience; a racial perspective, which would bring with it advantages and disadvantages gleaned from societal norms, or an education perspective, which would speak to exposure and hierarchy? Or should there be a shared experience that all humans interact with, a common understanding that exists regardless of the aforementioned status, race, and education distinctions… indeed, an experience that exists in spite of them?

Can one author represent the experiences of an entire group of people? There are some authors who are unofficially identified as the voice of their race. Amy Tan is considered the voice of Asian Americans; Sandra Cisneros represents the Latinx community. Toni Morrison is often looked to when a voice for Black Americans is sought. None of these authors are consistently found included as part of the literary canon. When talking about opportunities where diversity is being promoted, DiAngelo admits that a

different list of authors from the accepted standard is consulted; writers like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin are tapped instead of Charlotte Bronte, Henry James, or Oscar Wilde. “We go to these writers for the black… perspective.”[50] She goes on to state uncompromisingly that Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winning author, Toni Morrison, “…is always seen as a black writer; not just a writer.”[51] This distinction promotes the “us” and “them” mindset—in fact, it fosters an “us” *vs.* “them” dichotomy. Further, the assumption that these writers “speak for” their race, that they could ever possibly present the full scope of experiences that others with their same racial backgrounds have experienced in America, nullifies the extremes, the peaks and valleys, flattening them into the symmetry that the author chooses to relate.

This curious practice begs a very simple question: why? What are certain authors singled out as the voice of their race? What makes their messages more palatable even as they challenge the accepted norm? Several answers can be supplied to respond to that, including the unstated truth that there is only room for one. More than one message of strife and struggle can be considered more of the same, and by extension, an unnecessary repetition in mainstream media and publishing. I offer an example from my publishing path in horror fiction to illustrate this point. My novel, *The Promise Keeper*, a vampire tale about a woman who seeks to protect a secret as she navigates her experience as one of the undead was sent by my agent to one of the then Big Five publishers. One of the publishing houses enjoyed it, spoke positively about it to the agent, but then ended the conversation with a rejection because they are already had one Black horror author on their roster, and they didn’t know how they would

accommodate another one. Of the trend toward putting Black-authored books in a silo, Jeffrey Renard Allen, author of *Song of the Shank*, laments, "…publishers have no surefire way of selling books, so they tend to pigeonhole authors into marketing categories."[52] The powers that be in publishing make it appear that the silos are fantastically small.

On the dual topic of the content of Black writing and the idea that one voice represents all, Frankie Reddin, publisher and founder of A+F Agency, posits in *Harper's Bazaar* that, "In its most negative guise, the subconscious begins to associate a Black experience with race relations, slavery, violence or erasure. The alternative to this, the 'positives', are reducing the lived Black experience to specific sectors of culture…that can play into racial tropes or appear as illegitimate intellectual contributions to society as a whole…"[53] Reddin goes on to state that,

> Specific to literature, we as Black publishers see first-hand how Black writers are marginalised or hidden by the mainstream. Examples include publications refusing to review a book because they have dismissed it as too niche (too Black or not Black enough) and not of interest to their readers regardless of the quality of the writing. Their response implies that there is not enough space for equal representation or that literature is not judged on content, rather it is judged on the authors perceived importance to society. Another common occurrence is a literary festival or event only having space for one Black writer on a panel thus rejecting all other Black writers regardless of their merit.[54]

The so-called "Black experience" cannot be represented by one author or filmmaker deemed the de facto spokesperson, nor can the Black experience be summed up or defined by a single moment in time. However, this has been the way that Black people and Blackness are understood to be in a mainstream setting. It is what people have come to expect, the stereotype that has been perpetuated and considered fact by people outside of the US; the reality forced upon a person or scenario regardless of indicators toward another truth. It is what is considered "normal", which introduces a troublesome point of clarity to the

argument. From a literature standpoint, the concept of what can be considered "normal" or "regular", which translates into "acceptable" and "familiar" in sentiment, usually indicates a return to the literary canon and the life experiences those authors, predominantly White males, bring to bear. This distinction, "…allows white (male) writers to be seen as not having an agenda or any particular perspective, while racialized (and gendered) writers do."[55]

Black authors have a rich history of creating work in the genres under the speculative fiction umbrella, to include fantasy, horror, and science fiction. While much has been lost to history, we are aware of early efforts that were deliberate contributions to the horror genre. According to Nevin, "The first *known* horror story of the twentieth century by an African American author is Zora Neale Hurston's "Spunk","[56] a story of murder and retribution in the form of a haunting done in southern dialect that was published in 1925. There is an enduring tradition of stories being told outside of the blueprint set by "issue books", for example, Jewell Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* led by a Black bisexual vampire; Tananarive Due's *The Between*, which straddles the main character between real life terror and the horror of his dreams, and; Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, which weaves commentary about coming out with a classic horror tale. Yet readership for these types of releases from Black authors do not enjoy the same reception as similar work from author of other races do—neither from White nor Black audiences. Jewelle Gomez has famously said, "It is the idea that speculative fiction is somehow an indulgence or that it is trivial that seems the most probable reason for its dismissal by literary critics as well as its lack of appeal to most Black readers and authors."[57] Gomez goes on to identify the reason that speculative fiction subgenres like horror and science fiction are not considered part of the

literary canon by stating poignantly that, “the need by some writers and readers for Black literature to serve a higher purpose-that is, to address racism directly-sometimes leads Black writers to ignore, to some extent, other issues.”[58] This point is perpetuated throughout 20th and 21st century publishing.

Even when a Black author has works that are popular in other genres, the horror projects that they have written are less known. For example, Alexandre Dumas is best known for his adventure novel, *The Three Musketeers*, but many do not realize that he penned a vampire novella titled *The Pale Lady*. Octavia Butler, a prominent science fiction author, infused elements of horror in some of her works including *Kindred* and *Fledgling*. Many Black authors employ supernatural and/or gothic elements in their stories, including classic writers like Charles Wadell Chestnutt and Pauline Hopkins, as well as contemporary writers like Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor. Brooks, when discussing how speculative fiction from Black authors who write in other mainstream genres is received, states, “I insist that there was a successful privileging of specific authors and readings of their work, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Ann Petry, Zora Neale Hurston, and others…[O]ther writers and readings of the aforementioned authors’ works that were associated with “lower” subgenres such as horror, science fiction, and fantasy were actively ignored, passively neglected, and /or marginalized to spaces in which they were not sufficiently nurtured.”[59] Those “spaces” that Brooks points to include their lack of presence on bookstore shelves, on marketing sheets, showcased at national book events, and, in culmination, as entries on the literary canon.

Revisiting the literary canon allows for an understanding of how Black authors, female authors, and speculative fiction authors, specifically in the horror

genre, are regarded. Kaelyn Barron of TCK Publishing offers this criterion, “To be considered part of the [literary] canon, a book has to be more than just great and able to withstand the test of time; it has to be considered *essential*.”[60] That description is nebulous at best, but relevance to the education and fabric of society is, at minimum, one of the variables that contribute to what could be considered “essential”. The distinction of “essential” bears itself out in review; great writers and thinkers like Shakespeare and Chaucer, Austin and Lee have works on this iconic, yet unofficial list. The writers on this list are, by default, considered to represent, “…the universal human experience, and we read them precisely because they are presumed to be able to speak to us all.”[61] Many lists contain Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which would be considered a win for horror fiction and women at the same time, if this tome were always affixed there. But it is not. Is the existential debate over what constitutes life and, further, what it means to be human, not considered a study of the human condition? In a similar way, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a novel about a child haunting her mother-the woman who killed her-appearing first as an apparition, and then in a physical manifestation, is some critics and scholars’ idea of a book that should be part of the literary canon, but it is not consistently added. Even if *Beloved* were to remain on the list, many don’t consider it a horror novel, including the author. Toni Morrison did not write *Beloved* with the intention of penning a horror novel with all of the connotations and tropes associated with the genre, yet the tale endures as such, perhaps quietly. Is the discord that persists around this work, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, about Toni Morrison’s not claiming the horror in this sympathetic ghost tale or is it part of the hair-splitting intricacy that separates emotion from craft, literary fiction from genre fiction, or Black authors from the horror genre? Is this implicit bias at work or a product of the relative anonymity of Black contributions to the horror

genre? An important note to consider is that if this tome is not considered part of the horror genre, there is no other representation of horror fiction written by a Black author in residence.

The literary canon itself, which includes titles such as *Gone with the Wind* and *To Kill a Mockingbird,* perpetuate the persistent dogma that the proliferation of “issue books” espoused: the notion that Black authors have their place and it is mired in the strife experienced in perpetuity. This sentiment is echoed by readership trends. At the same time, fictional entries into the market penned by Black authors, ones that present a perspective of oppression that is emotionally challenging and visceral in some respects, but where that specific suffering alone is not the sole impetus for the work, do not enjoy the same mainstream reception and are therefore unknown outside of niche readership. In *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière…Noire de Salem*, which was published in 1986 and translated into English in 1992 with the title *I, Titbua, Black Witch of Salem* Maryse Condé, a French novelist from Guadalupe, creates a historical fiction tale placing the child of a slave squarely into the Salem Witch trials. It is a story of survival that spans the island of Barbados to Massachusetts in the United States and back again to the Caribbean, where the story concludes. It is historical fiction based on a very real slave accused of witchcraft. Condé masterfully created a believable storyline about a woman of whom virtually nothing was known, including a fictional interaction with Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*, effectively weaving what is now termed magical realism with the bones of a true story, yet this work is virtually unknown by mainstream readers.

Allen articulates the state of publishing for Black authors quite well by stating,

> Although a number of African American fiction writers have achieved acclaim, the fact remains that our society by and large views the work of black writers as insignificant, of less importance than the work of white authors. With that mindset, too few works of deserving fiction by black authors get published. Of the books that do get published, too few get reviewed. And often book reviewers only talk about black authors in relation to other authors, as if what we write plays no part in shaping the intellectual, political and cultural conversation in our country and abroad.[62]

What Allen outlines represents a trend that has been in place for Black creators since the dawn of our contribution to these forms of entertainment. Thomas posits that, "…the contributions of black writers to the sf genre have not been directly observed or fully explored,"[63]and I extend the distinction of sf to encompass the genres under the speculative fiction umbrella, including horror. I also submit that the full breadth of opportunities to explore creative landscapes will never be realized until speculative fiction from Black authors becomes sought after reading by the wider, multicultural community.

Reddin surmises that, "We need to see the joy in Black literature at this time and beyond because what recent events have exposed… is that Black Lives Matter, not just Black deaths."[64] Whether this comes in the form of a brand new literary space being launched or allowing creators the latitude to traverse genres, upend expectations, and create what they want to create is not the consequence that is most important. What is imperative is that for Black authors to reach a wider audience, one who will find their works as relatable as those they have selected when following racially informed rules, the existing structure must be dismantled.

The work has already begun. Ytasha L. Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* said of the Afrofuturism subgenre, which has roots in science fiction and the existential nature of cosmic horror, "Afrofuturism does not just create technologically advanced futures where Black people reign; it looks at the past and exposes how Black people have been written

out and erased from scientific history. It exposes Black inventors and scientist that were forgotten or replaced with the image of white people."[65] Readers of this subgenre are often able to see characters from diverse racial backgrounds working in concert to achieve the goal of the story. This is reflective of the real world where we work closely with people from all races and ethnic backgrounds and is in stark contrast to the expectation of Black-authored fiction that has held sway over readers for more than a century.

In the end, Black authors strive to create a viable marketplace where they can tell the stories that speak to them as people, not only as Blacks.

Black filmmakers have experienced similar categorization to Black authors as they create and release the films that interest them. In 2001, the Hughes brothers, biracial twins who had previously released films like *Menace II Society* and *Dead Presidents* found their movie *From Hell* under scrutiny because of its departure from what had been previously termed "hood dramas". Researcher Deron Overpeck states,

> In *From Hell* (2001)—based on the graphic novel of the same name—the brothers attempt to examine the Jack the Ripper murders within a similar framework, but also with the goal of making something different from their "black movies." Unfortunately, in doing so, they lost the social critique of both the source material and their previous films. The brothers' ideas about black movies and about themselves as filmmakers and the critical response to *From Hell* illustrate how black movies continue to exist in a cinematic ghetto."[66]

A curious situation unfolds as we review the history of Black film. The race films of the early 20th century did not change the mindset of society about Blacks and our contribution to entertainment. The blaxploitation films produced prolifically in the middle of the 20th century have problematic undertones that impede the

genre's legitimacy in scholarly study. Indeed, Brooks called the genre's seminal work, *Blacula*, "…superfluous and culturally problematic."[67]

The effectual role reversal that the exaggerated masculinity, bravado, and inherently "hip" demeanor that many of the actors portrayed in blaxploitation films didn't help matters. It had an opposite effect, one that perpetuated the concept of a marked difference between communities, encouraging the idea that there is little to no common ground between Blacks and Whites. The focus on showcasing these differences, celebrating them in a manner that appeared antagonistic, critical, and disparagingly humorous further cemented the notion that there is an "other". Means Coleman suggests that movies of this ilk often contain, "…a self-consciousness in the narrative that makes it plain to audiences that the disruption and reversal of type is purposeful-part retribution, part forced atonement."[68]This practice alienated White viewers, having a polarizing effect as opposed to a unifying one. What was discovered was that characters created to embody the stereotypical characteristics that society has been groomed to recognize as Black perpetuates the same problem that the concept of tokenism does: they create a false reality of acceptable Blackness and paint a whole subset of people with the same brush. This practice results in an effectual segregation of Blacks and Whites inasmuch as separate products for separate audiences does.

As the 1980s dawned, Black filmmakers searched for new ways to showcase Black people and Black life. The newest foray into this effort, from a speculative fiction standpoint, is Black Horror. Black Horror is the natural extension of race films and blaxploitation movies in the contemporary market. With a cast and crew that is predominantly Black, this genre boasts movies like *Def by Temptation*, *Tales from the Crypt Presents Demon Knight, Eve's Bayou, Tales from the Hood, and Bones.* Films in the Black Horror genre in the 1980s and

1990s took a page from the blaxploitation era, producing films that served as racial delineators, adding fodder to the argument of segregation—or separation. At the same time, there are some concepts that made it out into the world that inadvertently perpetuated stereotypes set in place by White filmmakers years before.

The 1992 release of the movie *Candyman* did a lot of things at one time: it cemented a Black character as a terrifying antagonist who is as formidable as his press suggests; it features a Black character with staying power considering how few minutes he appears onscreen; it secures an irrational fear in the back of every viewer's mind, regardless of age, race, or creed-one that makes them remember what happens if the warning not to summon him is ignored. It also reveals some of the racial biases that exist within the Black community, putting them on display and creating a polarizing canvas on which we are torn about how to feel.

One might assume that the lynching of Daniel Robitaille, or perhaps even the twin communities of Cabrini Green and the lead character, Helen Lyles', upscale apartment complex—the two dwellings separated primarily by socioeconomic status—and the resulting consternation, is what is being dissected, but there is a more insidious point to be made with this film. The glimpse into the brutality of racism is artfully displayed in this film, forcing moviegoers to reckon, in some way, with what has occurred in order to experience the story they paid to see. Then a muted form of racism came to fore, a microaggression within the Black community was displayed in startling clarity, one that sowed the seeds of the kind of racial honesty that films like Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us* harvested, when Bernadette, doomed Black sidekick of Helen Lyles, is lumped into the collective "White folks" bucket by Anne-Marie, the mother of the child who would later be kidnapped by Candyman. Even though she was Black, Bernadette was

not seen as such because of the nature of her presence in Cabrini Green—her appearance and reason for being there was at the forefront, even before her shared racial makeup. Means Coleman notices that, “The two women are Whitened through class positioning and education level by Anne-Marie, who views such status as the root of Black exploitation.”[69]

Familiar landscapes are shown in the film; an inner city and tenement slum that put viewers, both Black and White, at ease because these locales have become associated with movies cast with predominantly Black actors. Of enduring confusion, though, is why Candyman’s wrath is mostly wrought on the Black community of which he is a part–except when in service of his White love interest. Indeed, it is Helen Lyle who summons him, committing the act that results in death for everyone else who has done so, but not her. That the film endures as a shining moment for Black Horror being viewed simply as horror for the masses is both encouraging and problematic.

The 2000s represented a new, more outspoken version of Black Horror and Black characters in horror. *Scream 3’s* Tyson Fox character, who was an actor cast in Stab 3—the movie within the movie—had interactions with his White counterparts that did not portray him as subservient or “other”. Black filmmakers continued to create their own movies and submitted entries that garnered mainstream audiences, including the *Scary Movie* franchise created by the Wayans brothers that successfully linked horror and humor. Black actors found more work that did not force them to perpetuate the stereotypical behavior that their counterparts in the early 1900s were relegated to. Black stories were being told in a more mainstream and consumable way, but there was still a delta between the understanding of experiences that a diverse lens could provide to mainstream viewers. The 2017 release of Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* changed the

vantage point of Black Horror and its underpinnings rooted in racism, discrimination, and classism. It gave life to the idea of elevated horror. *Culture* journalist, David Jesudason, posits, “Jordan Peele's 2017 directorial debut masterfully skewered racism in US society by satirizing the prejudice a young black man faces in modern America, among white people of all political persuasions—but it was also a watershed moment for horror.”[70] This groundbreaking film also reinforced the concept of disparate fear in a meaningful way.

What people consider scary relies on several factors, including history and environment among them. Black people in the US have different triggers that incite fear in them, ones that may be different from people from other racial backgrounds even if they are close in age, even if they are members of the same community. Being followed in stores, not being believed by those in positions of authority, not being allowed to be a child, such as in the 1955 case of Emmett Till, who was brutally murdered after being accused of menacing a White woman-an accusation that was recanted decades after his death- and in the 2014 case of Tamir Rice who was killed while playing with a toy gun: these scenarios spark terror in the minds of Black people, ordering their steps in a manner that precludes carefree living. This is markedly different than the traditional offering of ghosts, goblins, and supernatural beings that make up the mainstream horror genre. While those characters present opportunities for escapism in the form of entertainment for many Black people, they do not represent true fear that is visceral or that has lingering impact. Dr. Chesya Burke, author of *Let’s Play White*, offers this explanation, “When you look at Black horror versus other types of horror, you will see people not fearing the supernatural or not fearing the horrific elements as

much as they would white supremacy, because white supremacy [is] an actual real reality in their life."[71] The creator of Nightlight podcast, a venue that showcases short stories written by members of the Black diaspora, Tonia Ransom, goes further to define Black Horror by stating, "A lot of Black horror really centers around the fact that there are people out there who want to hurt you and kill you for something that you can't control. And that's super frightening."[72]

The aforementioned breakout movie, *Get Out*, a movie rife with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* vibes, crafts a tale of shattered illusions and the body coveted that manages to bring to life the very real fear that Black Americans experience at some point in their lives: the worry that something isn't as it seems. Audiences came together to watch the horror film like they did in the 1980s; they were able to scream directions to the screen, talk with the people around them about what was happening in the story, and react out loud as a result of this shared experience. The difference this time was that both Black and White audiences could see themselves on screen, see the truths and exaggerations for what they were, and take away messages that were fodder for open discourse once the lights came on. I recall marveling at moments in the movie where I found it hard to keep my laughter low enough as to not disturb. One such example was when the sidekick character, Rod, tells the main character, Chris, that he is angry because Chris never takes his advice—this assertion comes as part of the discussion around the strange happenings at Chris' girlfriend's house. Chris asks what advice he has ignored and Rod replies succinctly, "Like don't go to a white girl's parents house."[73] I attempted to keep my laughter low only to find that I was part of a chorus of people doing the same, the under the breath snickering and muffled chuckling creating a muted cacophony as we lost our battles. When I looked around to share a nod with those close by who were laughing with me, they were,

to a number Black. The White people sprinkled between and around us were not laughing at that same moment. There was no anger on their faces; no frustration was evident—they just didn't get the context of the joke, the real and persistent concern that is not a joke at all, is actually part and parcel of "The Talk" that Black parents have with their children about their interactions with the police, and in every reminder of the manners that have been ingrained in them about how to act when outside of their protective circle. The White people around me didn't understand the poignancy hidden in the joke to which the only responses are laughter or tears. Conversely, the laughter about the line delivered by Dean Armitage, the father of Chris' girlfriend and the surgeon who performs the transplants for all of the auction winners in the movie, about him having voted for Obama twice and would happily have done it again, got little to no reaction from the Black audience members that I could see, but laughter could be heard from the White attendees in close proximity. Any assessment made as to why the comment garnered that reaction from White people would be supposition on my part, however from the Black perspective, I assert that we have heard that before from White people wishing to appear progressive and instead of engendering a feeling of solidarity, it feels contrived and flat. *Get Out* was able to bring to the table a modern-day slave auction, the power dynamic with relationships, and psychological control, in a movie that entertained a multicultural audience. It is one of a scant few Black Horror movies that has been successful at showcasing it all, effectively raising the bar for the next generation of not only Black Horror films, but all horror films.

Black Horror films continue to gain their footing in this new space created by Peele's thought-provoking movie. Some entries continue the work, bringing imagery to the screen that reflects realistic Black characters.

An example of this includes Osei-Kuffour Jr.'s 2020 science fiction horror release about a man who struggles to put fragments of his memory together after a tragic accident, titled *Black Box*. Others have gone further, focusing on "more" rather than "what". Jesudason, brings up a new pattern, citing, "…the new wave of black representation in horror—the way the historical plight of black Americans has sometimes been played upon by directors for scares in a way that turns real suffering into "trauma porn"."[74] Releases such as *Antebellum* in 2020 and Amazon's limited series, *Them*, in 2021 represent examples where the continued aggression toward the Black characters overrides the horror elements. Jesudason credits Dan Hassler-Forest, a popular cultural theorist, as saying that the new outcropping of Black Horror films, "…are kind of exploitative and are shoving the indignities and the physical suffering of slavery and anti-black racism in our face over and over again."[75] This sentiment, of course, does not encompass all of the recent submissions.

Black Horror and its very definition are changing as movies are released and old ideas are revisited. The 2019 movie, *Ma*, about a Black woman who, after being humiliated as a teenager, sets an elaborate trap for the children of those who harmed her, subverts the trope of the Black character dying first, instead taking a page out of *Candyman*'s book and casting the Black character as the antagonist. There are also inroads being made in cable/streaming television with the 2020 release of *Lovecraft Country*, which was produced by Misha Green, a Black woman. There is something to be said about the influx of images that portray Black characters doing the same things that White characters do, and the movies coming out being reflective of that shared existence. It is empowering, regardless of how controversial the execution may be. Due's thoughts on the current state of film corroborate this assertion, adding, "There is a

lot of racial PTSD in the US…[a]nd horror is uniquely suited to give people, who have survived trauma or people who fear trauma, an outlet."[76]

As a Black psychological horror author who produces novels, screenplays, short stories, and poetry, I strive to break out from the cycle of putting work into the world only to find it categorized as Black literature or film, which heretofore has been almost exclusively relegated to "issue books" and Black Horror. With writing that speaks to the human experience rather than any specific racial expression, my content adds American psychological horror stories told from the perspective of a Black person to the literary landscape. And I am not alone. The work of Maurice Broaddus, whose debut novel, *King Maker*, artfully reimagines that King Arthur myth, using an urban setting and element (drug dealers, street hustlers, and the product the sell) combined with themes and story arcs that are identifiable and relatable to members of multicultural groups. Octavia Butler wrote novels that straddled the line between science fiction and horror. She offered a different kind of vampire for consumption in her novel *Fledgling*, indeed, one termed as such symbolically rather than practice, and created a symbiotic relationship with humans that was neither familiar nor prey. The desire to produce material that is speculative in nature is a common thread in the Black writing community.

Tananarive Due, in speaking about her moment of clarity when writing her first novel *The Between*, says that after many efforts at making her writing reflect what was expected—decidedly urban at times, with White protagonists at others, "Somehow, I realized I could write books about black characters who reflected my own experiences, or otherworldly experiences—not just stories of history, poverty and oppression."[77] As the child of an educator who grew up in a middle-class suburb of New York, my attempts at making my work reflect aspects of life that I

did not experience because that is what was expected from a Black author was troubling, to say the least. I, like most Black genre fiction authors, was predominantly exposed to the writings of White authors and the reflection of the world that they presented. But instead of being disheartened by the way that Black people were reflected through that lens, if they were present at all, I understood that I could create material that reflected life through my own lens. It is this understanding that permeates my writing and has informed my output, both creative and academic, for my entire career.

The idea that a Black author is somehow different from a White one has always been a source of contention for me. When brick and mortar bookstores were the prevalent way to purchase books, I was always disheartened at the misclassification of titles by Octavia Butler and Terry McMillian. I understood, even as a young person, that relegating those authors to the “African American Literature” section of the bookstore rather than shelving them alongside their peers in science fiction, romance, or even general fiction severely impacted their readership. Observation showed me that White patrons of the big box bookstores did not make their way over to the African American Literature section—neither did Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, or any other race, at least not with any consistency. That section was treated very much like the reference books in a library are-not visited unless there is a specific need for the material housed there.

I once heard a fellow author, a woman of color, say that she creates Black characters because there are enough people creating White characters out there, and there is some merit to that argument. However, as I find race to be polarizing in larger audiences when called out, whether in

conversation or in media, I choose not to bring it into my work as a named variable with any consistency. That is to say that my work, the stories that I feel compelled to tell, do not, by rote, have Black protagonists and/or antagonists. That does not mean that my work predominantly has White protagonists and/or antagonists; it simply means that race is not a focal point in the piece and is generally not ascribed at all: the tension, tone, and conflict are the focuses of the work. Due speaks of race and her characters in a similar manner. She states that, “While most of the characters in my short story collection are black, race has little to do with their core stories.”[78] It is my belief that the so termed core story should be the focus of any work of fiction, not the racial makeup of the characters or, indeed, the author. In a particularly poignant statement, Due surmises that her characters’, “…skin color rests only on the surface of their deeper humanity, which is true for us all.”[79] Writing without the constraints of race at the forefront of the story frees the author to create scenarios that are not dictated by societal constraints. It is a method that I put into practice with the majority of my work. It is the way that I claim agency in genre fiction.

According to Thomas, the playwright Doulas Turner Ward, after the debut of his one-act play titled *Day of Absence* in 1965, referred to himself as, “a Negro playwright committed to examining the contours, context, and depth of his experiences from an unfettered, imaginative Negro angle of vision.”[80] My mindset is similar to Ward’s in that I believe that my work need not be anything other than what it is to reflect Blackness because I, the author, am Black. The genre that I write in, the themes I choose, the diversity of the characters that I create need not do or be anything in particular to make the story specifically Black because it is such by its very nature. Said differently, my work will always be a Black effort because *I* am

Black and there is a bit of me in each of my characters. My work is horror focused more so than cultural or racially focused. Distinguishing this goes back to what we learned in school about the differences between genre and literary fiction: genre fiction is more plot driven and literary fiction is more character driven. My vampires and ghosts, beasts of the night and haunted houses are the focus more so than the racial makeup of the living, breathing humans engaging with them. This is horror, by definition. This distinction is important because, if used as a blueprint by all creators, it means that all choices about a piece of work can be organically generated rather than formulaically determined. It is a flexibility that White authors have by default. It is one that I lean into wholeheartedly.

I am a firm believer that creators should create what speaks to them. I am not better suited to write Black commentary or racially specific fiction simply because I am Black. There are so many talented authors doing fantastic work in that space, a space that their ideas lend themselves to–a space they choose to work within. As a genre fiction practitioner, I leave the character driven fiction and contemplative nonfiction to the people who do that best. Likewise, I do not subscribe to the notion that only Black authors can write Black characters. In an age where there is much discussion about own voices and material created by BIPOC creators, I submit that this puts up similar walls that speak of “otherness” just as “issue books” and the omission of Black faces in movies did in the last century.

The research herein indicates a history of Black authors’ marked lack of agency in publishing and is punctuated by a thorough review of the collective body of work completed by Black authors in this space between the 18th-21st centuries.

As illustrated, many authors do not claim the genres that their work clearly reference—genre submissions that are solidly horror, science fiction, or fantasy—because the publishing environment dictates a different path, and silos work in a manner that is restrictive to Black creators; it guides prose toward the spaces deemed acceptable for Black authors to occupy. For example, W.E.B. DuBois' enlightening essays on Black people is what is heralded when one thinks of his work, and while those contributions are important to American literature, so too should his science fiction work. "The Comet", DuBois' 1920 short story, is a post-apocalyptic study of human nature. It strips away race to get to the core of human behavior, only to reject it at the end to show how natural impulse changes the narrative. It is brilliant and it is relatively unknown, even though DuBois is one of the most popular Black writers and thinkers of all time. The creation of the newly minted Afrofuturism movement under the speculative fiction umbrella is a response to the siloing and sidelining phenomenon that many Black speculative fiction authors experience, the success of which to promote choice and equality in writing remains to be seen.

My creative writing in the horror genre contributes to the effort to change the narrative of how Black voices are heard in the genre space. My existing body of published work, which includes four psychological horror novels, one novella, three short story collections, ten screenplays (five feature length and five short form)—one of which is in pre-production, numerous individual story publications, and several research-based articles make a sound contribution to the literary body. The awards that several of these works have received punctuate the importance of diverse voices in the genre and encourage a change in cultural perceptions.

My literary contribution embodies my belief system of organic composition and is predominantly in the horror space. The bulk of my work is within the

psychological horror subgenre, however I have penned works in the quiet and visceral subgenres as well. Because psychological horror dips a toe into several other genres like mystery, suspense, and thriller, I have had the occasion to try my hand in those spaces as well, most notably in my upcoming novel, *Mars, the Band Man, and Sara Sue* (Cedar Grove Publishing, 2022). In all cases, my work reflects the lived experience. As such, the characters in my body of work live, work, love, and react in ways that are relatable to the global community. To date I have released over 1,150,000 words into the world, with more than 250,000 more scheduled to see the light of day by 2024. This level of output and the quality thereof helped me to be recognized as one of the 100+ Black Women in Horror Fiction.

My contributions to the horror genre, specifically the ones that promote cultural acceptance and normality, include:

Novels

Crescendo (Cedar Grove Publishing, 2022 re-release, Publish America, 2003)

This ghost novel told from a psychological horror perspective chronicles the main character's descent into what is either madness or a chilling haunting. The reader spirals as the main character does, succumbing to a family curse, never sure what is real or what is true. The main characters in this story are Black, though that is never explicitly stated. Their ethnicity is expressed through historical references, scenario, and an understanding of racial challenges. The main characters are comprised of two suburban couples who walk through life together, until one of their number dies and the secrets that lived between them are revealed with painful clarity. *Crescendo*'s relatable premise reveals secrets to readers as they go along, diving deeper into challenges the befall Black families but could be called by another name and impact other racial communities, such as

colorism and classism. The conflict in this story is universal, the ending jarring, and people from all communities can relate to the result.

Critically acclaimed by field experts and horror fiction enthusiasts alike, *Crescendo* is said to be, "… an awesome thriller that shakes the very foundation of the reader. Aptly titled, the story builds gradually, drawing you into its tangled web of suspense,"[81] by C. Highsmith-Hooks, Criminal Investigator and author. Women in Horror (online) said, "*Crescendo* draws a fine line between what is madness and what is supernatural."[82] This, my debut novel, showed that the fear of not knowing what is happening in one's mind knows no barriers.

The Promise Keeper (Cedar Grove Publishing, 2021 re-release, Publish America, 2012)

This novel is a story about love, despair, murder, and deceit. It is also a vampire tale like no other. The story begins in what is now known as Benin, West Africa where an encounter with a stranger leaves a young woman to live forever as a vampire. She runs, terrified of the "otherness" that this unwanted transformation will bring, and flees her maker who wants more from her than just her life. Spanning space and time, *The Promise Keeper* uses key events in history as fodder for world building, creating a realistic backdrop to this psychological take on a vampire story. With a protagonist from the African diaspora and an antagonist able to shapeshift to suit his needs, this story offers a uniquely psychological spin on a classic horror antagonist.

The Promise Keeper won the Golden Stake Award for Literature at the 2019 International Vampire Film and Arts Festival. This award holds additional significance because it was given during 200th anniversary of the release of John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which is credited as the first published vampire story. Called, "Dark, sensual, powerful, real…" by author K. R. Davies[83], *The Promise*

Keeper is a novel that combines vampire lore, obsession, history, and love together to create an intriguing treat to the senses.

The Realm—Book 1 (Cedar Grove Publishing, 2020)

This horror science fiction mashup set in an afterlife unlike anything that has ever been taught by religion or spiritual groups, is filled with diverse characters. While in this novel the factor that bonds the characters is the horror that awaits them upon dying, the presence of all races and species (there are aliens in this afterlife) and the way they must work together to escape peril. This novel is deliberate in the fact that it does not hold race up as a determining factor for either progress or regression: the characters simply "are", and it is in that sentiment that the plight of Black genre authors can be found.

Considered an, "…artful rendition of The Afterlife… an intricate layering of details that show how life and afterlife exist in symbiosis,"[84] by author and academic, R.J. Joseph, and heralded as a novel that, "… brings cosmic horror into the 21st century,"[85] by priest and horror and science fiction enthusiast, John R. Robison, *The Realm* presents a horror tale that appeals to readers without consideration of race or gender.

Cacophony, The Realm Series, Book 2 (Cedar Grove Publishing, 2021)

Book two of *The Realm* trilogy utilizes the frame narrative technique to revisit the afterlife and follow the living descendant of the original main character concurrently. The novel finds father and son working from the afterlife to save the living descendant from the same fate they succumbed to. In tandem, the living child finds a manuscript written by her long-deceased grandmother and a new world of intrigue is opened to her, one that has links to the very afterlife where her family is, where they are desperately trying to save her soul. These characters are both relatable and identifiable; their actions, thoughts, and behaviors are reflective

of those that men and women the world over can recognize. Of this second book in the series, author Melinda Clayton said, "*Cacophony* keeps the reader on the edge of her seat, guessing until the end, never quite sure who to root for as events unfold and secrets are revealed."[86]

Future novels that reflect the way that I create characters that are part of diverse communities include:

Mars, The Band Man, and Sara Sue (Cedar Grove Publishing, anticipated 2022)

This novel will launch the publisher's mystery imprint. It centers around a housewife who is bored with life and in her quest to find something to occupy her time, stumbles across something she shouldn't have seen.

The Tryst, Affinity Series, Book 1 (Cedar Grove Publishing, anticipated 2022)

This novel, the first in an experimental series that traverses many genres, psychological horror, science fiction, fantasy, and romance among them, introduces readers to three people who find themselves in a love connection that they never saw coming… one that has been in the making for decades. Multi-racial and exploratory, this novel speaks to the emotional connection between people and the gravitational pull that results.

Screenplays

Inexorable

This screenplay brings together race and religious structures to turn a critical eye toward the concept of the end of the world. Six characters find themselves involved in the same accident which puts them in each other's proximity at the moment of their deaths—this specific criterion is the last detail that must be met for the world to end. As their backstories are uncovered in the work, their lived experiences will speak to audiences from their respective backgrounds and be new to others outside of that shared space, however the overarching story

and its culmination reflect the collaborative nature of humans and how racial distinctions are less important than other factors in the end.

Inexorable has won Best Horror and/or Best Screenplay awards at six international film festivals, earned the distinction of Finalist or Semi-Finalist at two, and been included as an Official Selection at fourteen.

The Black Hole

This screenplay is about a group of Black men who gather with officemates to play paintball over a weekend. The game starts off simply enough, guns are loaded with paintballs and each team spreads out to find a position for the game, but everything changes after the first paintball flies. This screenplay is one of the only pieces in my body of work where I take a direct look at race relations. It was the winner of the Best Afrofuturism/Horror/Sci-Fi Screenplay award at the Urban Media Makers Film Festival in 2020 and won Best Horror at the Atlanta International Cinefest in 2021. It has been nominated for Best Horror ad Best Action in two film festivals and selected as an Official Selection in five others.

“271 Raeburn Ave”

This short screenplay is a slasher piece in which the killer doesn’t consider anyone off limits. It boasts an interracial cast of young adults moving off campus into a row house before classes begin. This screenplay has won Best Screenplay at an international film festival and earned the distinction of Finalist or Semi-finalist in two others. It is in pre-production with an anticipated release date in 2022.

“Life in Technicolor”

This is a short screenplay about a woman who is enamored with another woman whom she meets at a coffeeshop. In it, the concepts of sexuality and gender roles are explored through the eyes of the main character, who is Black. This short screenplay won Best LGBTQ Screenplay in an international film festival,

was nominated for Best Short Script at one, and has been selected as an Official Selection in three others.

Short Stories

To date I have written over 175 short stories. I have three short story collections that were published in the early 2000s that will be consolidated into one large volume by Cedar Grove Publishing to be released in 2023. A fourth short story collection is slated to be released by Falstaff Books in 2021 titled *The Tales of Time.* This collection will be in released in tandem with a novella that references it, titled *The Open Book*. A fifth collection titled *Wicked* will be released by Cedar Grove Publishing in 2024.

Recent short story contributions to the “Black fiction is everyone’s fiction” narrative that permeates my work include:

“The Dance” (Slay: Stories of the Vampire Noire, 2020; Cyber-Pulp Books, 2004)

This is a story is about discovery and desire. Set in a dance club over a reggae beat, “The Dance” peeks at the moment shared between the characters as they learn about their true selves and their desires, all while a vampire waits in the wings. The characters are Black; however, the internal monologue and the responses could have been the same for anyone in the world.

“The Ever After” (Sycorax’s Daughter, 2018)

This short story is about freedom from the constraints of the body told from the perspectives of four catatonic people, their forms unmoving but their minds active and expressive. Within this cast of characters is a Black woman engages in a wanton affair, the guilt over which torments her from the corners of her mind, bridging the gap between race and age, culture and creed. This short story was part of the Bram Stoker Finalist anthology, *Sycorax’s Daughters*.

My research contributions include writing and oral presentation about the craft of writing, the impact of Black creators in speculative fiction, and how to reflect race in prose. These submissions have allowed me to speak to a wide range of audiences in the writing community, speculative fiction and otherwise. They have also made my work visible such that I have been invited to participate in the In Your Write Mind Conference as the Guest Author/Guest of Honor in 2022.

Chapters and Essays

My research on the Black contribution to the horror genre will be featured in the upcoming textbook titled *Conjuring Worlds: An Afrofuturist Textbook for Middle and High School Students* (anticipated 2022). The chapter titled “African American Horror Authors and Their Craft: The Evolution of Horror Fiction from African Folklore” explores how spoken word stories have survived through the slave trade to find themselves being retold by authors who descend from those for whom the lore is part of the patina of their lives. This research explores how the stories changed to meet the needs of a ravaged people, then, later, of a community trying to stand on its own.

I have an essay in the upcoming McFarland release centered on the television series, *Westworld*, titled “Westworld and the Reflection of Self: A Reception Theory Analysis”. This essay looks at, among other things, the treatment of the Black community members on the show, the roles they were relegated to, the violence they were subjected to, and the dismissive nature with which they were dispatched. This release is anticipated in 2023.

Presentations/ Discussions

I presented my research on the connection between vampires and otherness at the Vampire Academic Conference in 2020. The presentation titled,

“Real Vampires: The Reflection of Otherness in the Bloody Mirror” dove into the concept of otherness and the marginalization of the “othered” group, likening experiences that Black people face to the treatment of real vampires by non-practicing communities.

I moderated a panel at Balticon 53, the Maryland Regional Science Fiction and Fantasy Convention, called African Americans in Horror where I engaged in conversation about the history of Black participation in the genre, the current experiences and challenges faced, and the future of the genre through this cultural lens.

Active participation in genre organizations allows me a seat at the table, a voice in the discussion. I use that platform consciously to help shape a new landscape for Black speculative fiction authors. Specifically, I am an Active member of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and am also a mentor in the organization. I work with new authors to hone their skills and sharpen their voices. My mentees have been from diverse backgrounds and different countries—none of them have been Black. Being able to share my knowledge of craft, showing that the talent itself doesn’t come from a place of race, allows me to paint Black creativity in a more accessible light. I am the Director of the horror programming track at Multiverse Con. This role includes creating panel topics and finding authors/screenwriters/professionals in the industry to participate. This role also provides me the opportunity to demonstrate Black presence in the genre, influencing interested practitioners and raising visibility to diverse contributions. Specific to the proliferation of Black writers, I am the Director of Curricula in the Diverse Writers and Artists of Speculative Fiction organization. We are a group dedicated to helping diverse voices be heard. I use this platform to encourage Black writers to create the genre works that they are compelled to write.

In my writing and research, I have always attempted to bolster qualities that are unrelated to race, holding them up for review with an understanding that they are the only determining factors that should ever be assessed. As an early scholar, I found that there were not many contributions to the genre from people like me. I began wondering if Black people actively avoided the genre—and if so, why? —or if our voices just weren't heard in this space. At the time, I focused mostly on modern literature, doing a rudimentary compare and contrast between the few genre-related authors I was able to uncover and, later, my own experiences in the genre and the reception of the genre in the Black community. While I uncovered content biases toward the genre from the Black community (horror at the time, but science fiction and fantasy later) the lack of varied literary contribution in any speculative genre by Black authors became clear to me as well. This early research fueled my desire to produce material that not only Black readers, but all readers would consume. As I continue to produce works in this genre that are relative to the lived experience of diverse communities, it is my hope that the marketing practice of genre distinction based on race rather than content will change. I have worked toward that end for over twenty years.

My content is a work in progress, one where I will continue to champion the notion that Black writing is everyone’s writing and that the lived experience can be understood and deemed relatable by people from all cultures and ethnicities. It has been said that “Often the central menace of a work of Horror fiction can be interpreted as a metaphor for the larger fears of a society.”[87] All too frequently that menace has been identified as Blackness, whether allegorically or candidly. Means Coleman posits quite poignantly, “The “strange meaning of being Black” at the dawning of the twentieth century when DuBois was writing has followed us into the twenty-first century as well. That “strange meaning” of being Black in this

millennium continues to be, in part, about “the problem of the color line” …”[88] That this apparent distinction still exists is difficult to abide. There have been many attempts to remedy this mindset, to change the image of Black people that exists in the form of fiction. Collections such as the 2018 Bram Stoker Finalist anthology, *Sycorax’s Daughters*, which was edited by multi-Bram Stoker award winning poet and Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA) Grand Master, Linda Addison, Kinitra Brooks, and Susana Morris, and SLAY: Stories of the Vampire Noire from Mocha Memoirs Press. The other side of the coin has also been shown in the works of Jordan Peele, specifically his debut entry *Get Out* which contextualizes horror from the perspective of the Black male and the coveted body. But there is more to be done to position the work of Black horror creators as accessible and viable in marketplace.

As noted in “Some Vampires Are Real: Racial Stereotypes and Dominant Fears (Re)presented in the Black Vampire of American Popular Film”, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. stated that, “Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems [and] is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application.”[89] In my work I strive to remove the mindset that there is a difference between Black and White literature. That is not to say that there is no credence given to different perspectives, but it considers that backgrounds—economic, academic, racial, religious—are the texture of a story… the things that make us individuals.

Life does not imitate art as the old adage indicates. Instead, a symbiotic relationship exists between the two, each assuming qualities of the other, reflecting truths and repelling them, moving as water does. They coexist, contribute, and detract from each other, are in constant states of reconstruction, of rebirth. Without a marked vicissitude of both states, neither art nor life can change.

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