MARGINALIZATION, SOCIO-CULTURAL SYSTEMS, AND THE ON-SCREEN HORROR GENRE: A CROSS-DEMOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

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Master of Arts 2022

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ABSTRACT

This examination dissects the positions held by the Black community, the disabled community, and people dealing with mental health struggles within the contemporary horror media space, namely film and television. This analysis focuses on the horror content of the Western world, with the bulk of emphasis placed upon examples specific to the US and Canada. In order to analyze the relationship between Blackness and horror, a breakdown of the historical, socio-cultural circumstances of Black people in North America is coupled with an analysis of phenomena across the on-screen horror genre during the time periods in question. Furthermore, the term "madness" refers to the discipline of Mad Studies which seeks to position the experiences and perspectives of people socially classified as mentally ill, disabled, and the like at the center of socio-cultural analysis; this research draws connections between socio-cultural dynamics pertaining to those populations and assesses correlating translations in horror media.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my younger brother, Antonio: my best friend since childhood whose belief in my long-term success represents a divine source of motivation. His personal experiences over the last couple of years have expanded my mind and level of spiritual consciousness in a way that can not accurately be put into words. Nonetheless, these developments have led me to exploring new realms of knowledge and thus prompted this research study and the corresponding creative series concept.

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Introduction

Research Purpose

The horror genre across film and television encompasses a variety of content that's intended to yield thrilling combinations of dread and pleasure. In many cases, horror films and their genre-adjacent counterparts (e.g. psychological thrillers, etc.) prove to be vehicles for social and cultural reflection in addition to entertainment. However, from the inception of on-screen terror all the way to the chilling blockbusters of today (2022), individuals who struggle with classifications of psychotic disorders, disabilities, and the like are almost always stereotyped as villains, antagonists, murderers, and monsters. With regard to racialized groups in horror, furthermore, the representation (and lack thereof) across the ages parallels racial dynamics in culture, and it's reflective of the manner in which racism and cultural-erasure have been systematically present across the film industries of "post-colonial" societies. In "The Aesthetics and Psychology Behind Horror Films," Michelle Park states that "the purpose of horror films is to highlight unconscious fears, desire, urges, and primeval archetypes that are buried deep in our collective subconscious" (3). Park's assessment underscores the idea that while horror films and transmedia projects may be engaging sources of entertainment on a psychological level, the genre has a tendency to echo real-world inequity.

This research examination seeks to explore the horror genre and its relationship to certain marginalized groups, specifically Black people, disabled people, and those who deal with mental health struggles. The accompanying limited series script and eventual production seek to act as a response to some of the tropes and stereotypes discussed throughout the analysis, present a multidimensional exploration of psychiatry and spirituality, and further demonstrate the commercial viability of socially-conscious [oftentimes referred to as "smart" or "elevated"] horror (Graves, "Jordan Peele's").

Considerations

As has been prefaced, my analysis of race in this study is largely limited to constructions of Blackness and whiteness. My personal experiences as an African-American woman as well as the public and cultural discourses surrounding racism and segregation in the United States — the country I was born and raised in — have informed my lens of analysis. Although I do, in the culminating portion of this dissertation, link the relationship between American racism and the horror genre to the potential future of the Canadian media industry, the Black experiences of racism highlighted throughout the examination are

not explicitly those of Black Canadians, despite many of the overlapping macro-cultural similarities. Throughout this paper, I'll be capitalizing "Black" and not "white" when referring to race, ethnicity, and culture. This is because I deem the term "Black" recognitive of an ethnic identity in North America that should not rely on hyphenated Americanness or Canadianess for formal acknowledgement as a proper noun or adjective — the term is also encompassing of groups spread out around the world via the African diaspora, and as such, the capitalization of the B is in part a reclamation tool that emphasizes the global Black community's validity and shared experiences. On the other hand, to capitalize the term "white," as white supremacists do, "risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs" (qtd. in Baudner, "AP says"). Moreover, considering the global white demographic has less shared history than the global Black community, to capitalize "white" would offer a degree of unnecessary and undeserved group-wide cultural capital. Although I don't specifically interrogate the cultural constructions of other racialized groups, recent work by scholars such as Ann Davies of University of Stirling ("Hispanic Horror: An Introduction"); Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano (*Horror the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*); Vanessa Dion Fletcher ("Twisting Conventions: A Feminist Indigenous Perspective on the Horror Genre"); and Fadi Baki and Greg Burris ("The Horrors That Bind Us: A Conversation about the Horor Genre in the Middle East") deserves further research.

In some public discourses, terms like "mental illness," "mental disorder," "mental health struggle," and "madness" are used interchangeably. However, these terminologies all fall within the purview of an interdisciplinary field where language and an understanding of its implications are at stake. Mad Studies is an emerging field of scholarship and theory terminologically coined by Richard A. Ingram of the School of Disability Studies at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson) in 2007 (Ingram, "Doing Mad Studies"). Over the course of my examination, the context under which I'll be using certain terms is as follows: "mental illness" and "mental [health] disorder" when providing an analysis through the lens of psychiatry and Western medicine, "mental health struggle" when providing an analysis through the lens of psychology (this excludes the specific implication of medication and clinical treatment), and "madness" and/or "mad people/populations/demographics" when speaking from the standpoint of academia about broader, all-encompassing cultural constructions, lived experiences, history, and politics regarding those who identify as mad, mentally ill, psychiatric service users/consumers/patients, neurodiverse, and/or disabled (Castrodale 284-6). Although lived experience plays a role in my analysis of some of the topics at hand, the realm of madness is extensive, and my capacities of understanding are limited by my experiences and my degree of preliminary research, which

was informed by the scope of the exploration at hand. Excluding the lived-experienced factor, this statement also holds true for the more specific realm of study and experience within the madness discipline — disability — which Chapter IV explores. As an able-bodied individual, my analysis of disability is crafted without any first-hand knowledge, and while disability is an expansive topic, the discussion I provide is confined to the scope of the research examination in question.

As is the case with many sociological-focused domains of knowledge, all of the ensuing explorations (the creative project included) are part of an ongoing learning process.

Methodology

This examination will take the form of a descriptive study with some remedial and historical study characteristics. The descriptive study approach calls for a curation of facts that demonstrate and describe the relationships in question: in this case, horror's relationship to specific marginalized groups. This basis represents the overarching configuration of my study. However, to accurately discuss the ways in which the horror genre pertains to the lived experiences of particular demographics, this research must incorporate information that provides context on certain historical processes pertaining to said groups, which speaks to a historical study approach. Furthermore, the intention of a remedial study is to formulate plans to improve undesirable social conditions in some way, so this study will take a degree of inspiration from that approach as well; this examination will use portions of the curated data to highlight the ways in which horror has in recent years contributed to inclusivity on a cultural scale and how these efforts can be maintained and built upon to "remedy" some of the more exclusionary tendencies of the genre's past. This study will largely be carried out through a series of wide-ranging case studies within the horror genre itself across the 20th and 21st centuries, and as this is a qualitative inquiry, I'll be drawing from a range of texts, prior studies, some short-form video content, and films to create frameworks for the concepts and phenomenons I seek to explore and analyze. With that being said, I recognize that the collection of information presented in this dissertation represents but a small fraction of the research available on the topic.

Literature Review

In a recent article, cultural tastemaker Noah Berlatsky discusses the way in which Black history is paralleled by Black horror in media ("Re-centering the Black experience"). In other words, Berlatsky breaks down the way in which blaxploitation films, content in which Black characters only exist in service to white ones, movies about the Black experience *of* horror (slavery, segreagtion, discrimation, hate crimes, etc.), and films with Black characters and experiences at the forefront (e.g. *Us* [2019]) all engulf an ongoing history of lived-experience — dehumanization, cultural uprooting, discriminaton, but above all, resilience. This framework is essential for my research because it shines light on the direct linkage between fictionalized media and real-life circumstances. It also reframes the definition of the genre of "horror," suggesting that a historical fiction film set in the 1800s, for instance, may very well fall under the category of "Black horror" depending on its content and depiction of social dynamics. Broadening the scope of "horror" is particularly beneficial when it comes to analyzing the ways in which horror media is reflective of systemically racist realities and conducive to cyclic, collective senses of fear.

A 2021 video essay titled "Rac(ism) & Horror" by Gambian-Canadian-American artist, Khadija Mbowe, accelerates this conversation by pointing out that contemporary horror films are getting perpetually more "probative at the human psyche" as time goes on, implying that horror content is becoming progressively more overt in its awareness and analysis of real-life social relations (Mbowe). This newfound "elevated horror" phenomenon (catalyzed largely by *Get Out* [2017]) not only brings "cerebral narratives and pointed social criticisms" to the forefront, but it has proven lucrative and critically-favorable (Graves, "Jordan Peele's"). Systematic ways of thinking are becoming more commonplace, and thus they're serving as the actual bases for media concepts and plots. An article by culturally-geared writer Carla Hay examines how this socially-charged genre revival has figuratively broken down doors for a new band of Black filmmakers, directors, writers, and creatives to begin reshaping the horror genre at large ("A New Wave"). This sensation yields yet another lens of analysis for my inquiry surrounding racialized and cultural portrayals in horror and its subgenres, particularly how behind-the-scenes representation can correlate to a more diverse and inclusive horror media landscape at large.

With regard to mental health struggles and the media, an article titled "Media and Health" in the Industrial Psychiatry Journal (IPJ) explores two mass communication theories: cultivation theory (the theory that those who spend a lot of time "living" in the virtual world of television and film may have

difficulty discerning real-life social dynamics, principles, and portrayals from those on the screen) and social learning theory (the idea that knowledge is acquired through observation, and many people garner knowledge regarding behavior and social conventions from the media) (Srivastava et al.). This article asserts that these two processes can work in tandem to foster negative associations of mental illness, particularly when the viewer in question does not have any lived experience with madness, personally or relationally. An additional study by the Journal of Mental Health Counseling (JMHC) further investigates the relationship between television watching and attitudes toward people with mental health disorders. Amongst a focus group of 53 college students (mean age 20.54 years), there was a direct correlation demonstrated between time spent watching television and negative associations of madness (Granello and Pauley 162-175). While the results of this focus group may not necessarily be indicative of society at large, it does suggest that the media can be a powerful tool for influencing public perception. The findings of both the IPJ study and the JMHC study imply not only that individuals with mental health struggles are often antagonized on screen to some degree, but also that the detrimental process of "othering" could be linked to said on-screen depictions, posing potential real-world consequences for mad individuals. Not to mention, the surrounding the on-screen social constructions of mental health struggles in North American media are often limited to that of Western psychiatry, even beyond the horror genre. Over the course of this study, I plan to explore these constructions of stigmatization, on-screen madness, and the way horror-genre-specific representations interrelate with the lived experiences of individuals within mad demographics.

With reference to horror's representations of disability in particular, producer and podcast host Fay Onyx highlights certain ableist patterns in horror films, namely in the constructions of mythical and subhuman monsters ("Ridding Your Monsters"). Onyx analyzes the way in which coded discussions of characters like ogres, orcs, and goblins are often indicative of thinly veiled racism and ableism. The use of certain terminology (e.g. "the evil race,""stupid/dumb," and "unnatural" just to name a few) toward mythical monsters oftentimes acts as a guise under which creators and consumers can express racist or ableist sentiments, considering many of those terminologies are rooted in actual worldwide discrimination tactics. Adjacently, in "Horrible Heroes: Liberating Alternative Visions of Disability in Horror," Melinda Hall asserts that mainstream, pop-cultural media in general disregards disability's position as a "political, social, or structural issue," often reducing the meaning of disability down to a medical diagnosis; I believe this assertion can extend beyond disability and apply to mad demographics as a whole. Onyx's work aids my research examination in laying the groundwork for a multidimensional

look at disability's position in horror media, and it works in conjunction with Hall's study to provide an additional introductory framework for the horror genre's representational handling of demographics deemed "abnormal" by certain socio-cultural standards.

CHAPTER I: The Horror of Structural Inequality

Structural inequality can be defined as the organization of societal institutions (e.g. the judicial system, the economy, the education system, the political sphere, etc.) and cultural tools (e.g. media, language, etc.) which work in tandem to foster a disproportionate distribution of goods, wealth, and opportunities in favour of groups with a higher social status (Crossman, "The Sociology"). This phenomenon conversely results in social-sanctioned prejudices and discrimination tactics against demographic groups deemed lesser by some metric. In the context of much of the modern world, white able-bodied collectives have been the creators and beneficiaries of the social systems that have been used to fabricate widespread definitions of normalcy, beauty, and ideals. To say the topic of structural inequality is multifaceted would be an understatement; thus, it can not be tackled in its entirety via this research endeavor. The purpose of this section, nonetheless, is to offer a broad contextual basis for the macro- and micro-cultural landscapes within which all of the horror content this paper surveys is situated.

White Supremacy

Contemporary classifications of race as well as the understandings, manifestations, and expressions of those concepts have their cultural-psychological roots in colonization and the transatlantic slave trade (Salter et al. 151-152). From the 15th to the 19th centuries, many European nations participated in and economically thrived off of the kidnapping and commerce of more than 15 million African people as well as the fruits of their subsequent forced labour and stolen resources (United Nations, "Slave Trade"). Thus, the representations of race, ethnicity, and even nationality within our cultural purview have never been mere depictions of neutral physical categorizations, but rather reflections of historically-derived notions of superiority and inferiority. Europeans constructed their identity as "white," imagined themselves as more developed and more human in comparison to the darker-skinned "others" (whether African or Indigenous) whom they pillaged, tortured, and dominated (Feagin 70-99). These ideologies of human evolution and value not only persist in contemporary expressions such as media, but they have also served and continue to serve as justification for violence against racialized people (Salter et al. 152).

The USA: A Case Study on Structural Racism

Racism may be defined by many as an individually held belief that people of certain races are inferior and worthy of antagonization, but at its more historically-based core, racism is a cross-national structural issue, undergirded by long-standing social policies and institutions enforced almost entirely by white collectives (Bailey et al. 768). The United States — a widely-accepted image of "post-colonial" exceptionalism — is a mechanism through which one can observe this wide-ranging phenomenon and some of its underlying processes. For example, race-oriented ideologies are embedded in many of the country's foundational institutions, one being the United States Constitution — at the point of its inception, this society-guiding document limited the full benefits of US citizenship to people construed as white males, with the "Three-Fifths Clause" of Article 1, Section 2 purporting that a Black person represented three-fifths of a human being (Salter et al. 152; US Const. art. I, sec. 2). As of August 2022, less than 30 revisions have been made to the document since its establishment nearly 300 years ago in 1787 (The White House, "The Constitution"); nevertheless, the legacy of this dehumanizing worldview and its codification is still evident today. For instance, 77% of Republicans — one of two largest, most prominent political parties in the States — asserted in 2018 that the Supreme Court should base its rulings on what the Constitution "meant as originally written" (Bialik, "Growing Share"). Granted, a majority of Americans across the board (55%) said that the Supreme Court should base its rulings off of what the Constitution "means in current times," which may vaguely insinuate that the national collective is comparatively progressive. However, the perpetual usage and acceptance of the Constitution as a guide for principled decision-making and a representation of the United States' societal values suggest a country-wide disregard for the historical and sociological downfalls surrounding the document's very existence.

Furthermore, the Black experience in the US beyond the horrors of slavery has been riddled with tactical structural racism. In the case of "redlining," for instance, the federal government, in its recovery efforts from the Great Depression, established the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933 to determine mortgage-worthiness and distribution of housing loans, using racial composition as part of its assessment — they drew literal red lines (hence the terminology) around communities with high Black populations, indicating that they'd be hazardous investment areas whose residents would not be eligible for any HOLC funding (Bailey et al. 768-771). This process deprived American Black communities of one of the primary assets needed to build intergenerational wealth and made housing access more difficult at large. Furthermore, race- and captivity-oriented violence and population control represent the root the

country's establishment of its nationwide policing system; when the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1865, the loophole that made slavery illegal "except as a punishment for crime" led to Black people being arrested in droves for petty crimes such as loitering and vagrancy (US Const. amend. XIII; Bhattar, "The History of Policing"). In essence, the notion of "probable cause" expanded to engulf simply existing as a Black person, and this development facilitated widescale law-enforcement-sanctioned lynchings of Black people, which White mobs — law enforcement officers included — carried out under the guise of punishment for crimes. This loophole, which exists phrasally unmodified to this day, gave way to the birth of the country's Prison Industrial Complex. This cross-industrial structure has perpetually laid the path for a wide range of rhetorical, political, and social wiles over the course of history that protect white economic interests, while bolstering disenfranchising ideas and images of Black criminality. According to Fatal Force, The Washington Post's police shooting database with information from 2015-2022, white people make up half of the total number of people killed by police in the US; however, considering Black people make up only 13% of the country's population, the number of Black individuals killed indicates that they're getting murdered by police at twice the rate of white people, proportionally speaking. Black people are also disproportionately incarcerated at approximately five times the rate of white people (Rezal, "The Racial Makeup"). In health care, moreover, racist pseudoscience and eugenics movements speak to what pioneered contemporary American medicine, and those roots have endured and contributed to many of today's racial disparities in the health sphere (Bailey et al. 768-771). In a 2016 study conducted to assess racial attitudes amongst white medical students and residents, it was revealed that half of them held unsubstantiated beliefs about intrinsic biologic differences between Black and white people (Hoffman et. al 4296-4301). These false ideas were tied with the focus groups' assessment of Black patients' pain as being less severe than that of white patients' coupled with the higher rate of less appropriate treatment decisions for the Black patients. The intergenerational structural violence against Black communities is intensified by targeted physical violence, lynchings, hate crimes, verbal assaulst, race riots, murders, and so on, much of which was retrospectively deemed appropriate by [white] socio-cultural authorities.

White Fragility

Empirical and statistical data indicate that Black Americans contemporarily face disparities across many different sectors: housing, employment, income, and health are only a few of the realms of life that prove structurally disadvantageous to Black populations, yet many white Americans believe that

the average Black American fares similarly or even better than most whites (Salter et al. 152). When white people are challenged on these understandings, nonetheless, the concept of “white fragility” comes into play and speaks to how difficult dismantling structural discrimination can prove, even in starting from the ground up via day-to-day interpersonal encounters. As critical discourse author Robin DiAngelo explains,

> White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress, [which]... builds white expectations for racial comfort while [simultaneously] lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress... [A] single required multicultural education course taken in college or required “cultural competency training” in their workplace [may represent] the only time [many people]... encounter a direct and sustained challenge to their racial understandings. But even in this arena, not all multicultural courses or training programs talk directly about racism, much less address white privilege. (54-56)

These courses and programs also have a tendency to utilize racially-coded language such as “urban,” “inner city,” and “disadvantaged” as opposed to “white,” “over- advantaged,” or “privileged.” This language reproduces the comfortable illusion amongst white people that race and its interconnected issues represent a Black problem they must sympathize with, as opposed to a white problem that needs to be rectified. Additionally, white people are often conditioned to believe the absence of “them” (the racialized “others”) is what characterizes their schools and neighborhoods as “good” — a coded term for “white” that is widely utilized in interpersonal discourse in the States (58). The watering down of harsh racial realities is further illustrated by a 2016 study analyzing the public displays for Black History Month within predominantly white and predominantly Black high schools — the study indicated that while the Black schools made more explicit reference to racism in their displays, the white schools tended to focus on abstract ideas of diversity or individual achievements while ignoring the systemically racist barriers that made said achievements extraordinary (Salter et al. 152). Textbooks, museums, and national holidays represent but a few additional examples of cultural instruments that continue to uphold white comfort. American Thanksgiving, for example, commemorates the triumph of European settlers, and its typical traditions and celebration methods do not include acknowledgement of the historical wrongdoing against Indigenous peoples, saturating the central meaning of the holiday with themes of nationalist glorification (e.g. manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, etc.). The complex structural configurations of white supremacy and the white fragility it has fostered position white people as tendentious to outward displays

of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt; and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, dismissal/downplay, and fleeing; when they are confronted with these layered realities. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium (DiAngelo 54).

Hegemony

Hegemony refers to a set of beliefs or practices that acquires a status of commonsense truth through the exercise of power (Salter et al. 153). The hegemonically white culture in which "post-colonial" nations operate teaches white individuals that their perspectives are objective and representative of the universal human experience. The notion of hegemony, furthermore, expands beyond race and into nearly all sectors of human existence in which there is a normalized and accepted way of being and/or functioning that a collective society deems important to uphold. For example, heterosexuality and monogamy represent widescale hegemonic models for relationships, love, and romance. From the standpoint of gender, hegemony refers to the affirmation of male dominance in society, primarily by upholding rigid ideas of masculinity that place traits like brute strength, emotional detachment, and the subordination of women (and hegemonically feminine traits) at the core of what it means to be a man/masculine individual (Jewkes et. al S113-S118). This understanding allows one to orient the cultural dynamics surrounding the other key demographics that this research study focuses on — people with disabilities and people with mental health struggles (Mapp 18-57). The hegemony of able-bodiedness positions individuals across the mad population segment, disabled and otherwise, outside of the accepted scope of a traditional human experience, mainly with regard to bodily and intrapersonal functioning.

White, able-bodied [heterosexual] men provide the human norm against which societal deviation is measured, so given the dualistic nature of culture, those with disabled and racialized identities occupy the negative side of the binary (Mapp 18-57; Inckle 44). Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Black scholars and thought leaders such as Frederick Douglas, David Walker, W.E.B Du Bois, James Baldwin, Thandeka, Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison were generally overlooked and "disregarded as fodder from 'the African-American left'" (Bell 7). *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by Du Bois offers powerful insight regarding how the white collective of the early- to mid-20th century "believed an educated negro to be a dangerous negro" (27). When human rights activist Malcolm X, who was considered a "black radical," spoke to crowds of thousands of Black people and proclaimed that, "the white man has brainwashed us… to fasten our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus! We're

worshiping a Jesus who doesn't even look like us!", he was considered dangerous and unhinged (Bell 7). Malcom X's words of truth surrounding the origins of white socio-political power in the States were considered to be that of "a raving lunatic" because he deviated from the societal agenda, goals, and worldviews held by the hegemonic white majority (7).

All in all, our corporeal experiences, including but not limited to skin colour, body shape and size, physical abilities, emotional/psychological processes, and sexuality are integral in informing our identities and the relationships we maintain to ourselves and the world around us (Inckle 43-58). If we experience any of these metrics in a way that varies from those of the population segment regarded as the most powerful and valuable — "supreme," if you will — then our narratives are altered in some way via the hegemonic construction of language. Our lived experiences are also shaped by policy enforcements and system implementations that have been and continue to be spearheaded by a demographic that has historically been structurally oppressive. The vast majority of these wide-reaching social policies and systems place hegemonic comfort and understanding at their centers, which comes at the expense of the comfort, societal worth, and safety of the "other."

CHAPTER II: A History of the Horror Genre & Blackness

Black horror engulfs Black history, and vice-versa — they mirror one another. As stated in the literature review, the concept of "horror" itself expands as it pertains to the Black community: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), for example, would fall under the category of "Black horror" for its heroic depiction of the Ku Klux Klan and the ensuing social reverberations (Berlatsky). Additionally, the limited behind-the-scenes presence of Black creatives across generations up until recent decades speaks closely to the systemic racism embedded in society on an institutional level (Benshoff 31). From the progression of Black characters as tools of violence and ridicule, then trope-centric placeholders and embodiments of stereotypes; to the widespread erasure of black culture in the formation of "mainstream" horror and the surrounding real-world social implications; all the way to the groundbreaking, self-determining cultural works like Jordan Peele's *Get Out* that echo the socio-political landscapes of the 2010s onward, the Black experience has always been central to the horror genre itself and to the construction of on-screen portrayals of fear and terror in North American media.

The Early-Mid 1900s: Overt Racism and Objectification

In horror films' past (starting from the early 20th century), Black characters have often been objectified and/or placed in subordinate roles in relation to their white counterparts (Means Coleman, "We're in"). In the early 1900s, Black characters were regularly played by white actors in blackface, and they were generally on the receiving end of horrific acts of violence (Benshoff 31). As alluded to in the previous section, the Black collective has a more extensive definition of on-screen "horror" than that of commercial Hollywood standards: "Black horror" speaks to on-screen depictions of horror, terror, and fear that exist within the Black experience, tend to manifest in relation to the real-world, yet don't exist on a larger hegemonic-cultural level (Means Coleman, "We're in").

The Birth of Nation is a key example of a movie that would be categorized within the scope of Black horror specifically, despite its commercial identity as merely a drama film. The film uses a white actor in blackface to represent a violent and primitive African-American character, with the primary element of revulsion being that said character is in pursuit of a white woman. The story concludes with this Black character being lynched by the KKK, and a ensuing sense of pride, celebration, and triumph waves over the community. *The Birth of a Nation* was the first film to ever be screened in the White House, and it subsequently received an endorsement from the American president at the time, Woodrow

Wilson. As discussed in Xavier Burgin's documentary film, *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, "The Birth of a Nation*"* — despite its explicit, horrific depiction of violence against Black bodies — gained a stamp of approval from the US president. This approval was then essentially interpreted as fact amongst the hegemonic culture. With this kind of rhetoric ingrained within the social sphere, racial tensions were heightened, and the Black-male-lust trope was fortified to an even higher degree; it was showcased in horror films of the the following decades like *King Kong* (1933), and the effects of the trope persisted in the construction of many Black horror narratives to follow in later decades, such as *Candyman* (1992).

The original *King Kong* correlates to yet another horror film phenomena of the 1930s in which a slew of movies were set in jungles, and black characters (or creaturistic characters that were designed with exaggerated, stereotypically "Black" features) were depicted as both primitive and predatory (Roche Cárcel 1113). In the case of *King Kong*, there was a thinly veiled metaphor for the fear of the Black race pervasive amongst the white collective, embodied by the "dark-skinned" gorilla itself and the savagery and social disruption it represented. In fact, the producers were initially seeking an "ape-like" Black person to play the title role (Benshoff 34). *Ingagi* (1930) is another example of this on-screen equation of Blackness to a lack of civility, as the narrative depicts a fictitious Congolese tribe as a violent, monstrous, monkey-worshiping subculture. Granted, there were some films in the 30s in which Black characters had leading roles, but they were often depicted as necessary solely for the survival of the white leads (Means Coleman, "We're in"). In the 40s, Black actors like Willie Best and Mantan Moreland appeared in horror films (*The Ghost Breakers* [1940] and *King of the Zombies* [1941], respectively) as mere sources of comic relief — they served no narrative purposes other than to be objects of ridicule for audiences to dismissively mock.

Mark H. Harris — the creator of Black Horror Movies, a site dedicated to the portrayal of Black characters in horror cinema — suggests that the primary represetantations of Black characters in the genre during the early-mid 1900s were that of quiet servants, tribesmen, voodoo priesetesses (which later evolved into the "magical negro" trope in which a Black side character bestows supernatural wisdom upon the white protagonist to aid in said protagonist's survival), and the comedic buffoon (Burgin, *Horror Noire*). In "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall discusses how representations of cultural groups in the media are products of the positions they hold within time, space, and history. In other words, despite the rich social and cultural history that a marginalized/"othered" community may possess, a more dominant hegemonic culture has the power to

reframe and reconstruct both the perception of its own identity as well as that of the marginalized community through cinematic discourse — in the case at hand, the cinematic discourse over time corresponds to a visualization of the way colonialism and imperialism have manifested and progressed in Western society (69-71, 76-80). Hall's analysis of on-screen representation is crucial in grasping the degree of socio-cultural correlation of the varied portrayals of Blackness in horror films across history.

The 60s and 70s: The Blaxploitation Era

In 1968, *Night of the Living Dead* starred Duane Jones as Ben, and he was considered horror's first Black hero on a number of accounts (Burgin, *Horror Noire*). Primarily, this was because he served as a heroic protagonist for the vast majority of a commercially successful horror film, fending off zombies with both his ingenuity and physical strength. However, he is unsuspectingly shot at the end of the film by a white mob, which, according to many of the experts' remarks in Burgin's documentary, warrants some degree of reflection amongst the audience regarding where the concept of "true" horror lies. The late 60s also gave way to the emergence of the "blaxploitation" subgenre of horror: a film craze that lasted from approximately 1969-1976 (Benshoff 31). During this era, "black nationalism, [black power]... and black macho became dominant social expressions for many African-American men and women," as the collective fight for civil rights and equality toiled onward (33). This gave way to a shift to a much more militant image of African Americans on-screen, cushioned by displays of a dynamic urban Black culture (Simmons 61-66). Flipping this narrative led to a stronger communal sense of identification with the on-screen portrayals of the Black experience amongst real-life Black communities; however, there were a number of complex socio-cultural circumstances that, in some ways, neutralized the Black catharsis that the trend yielded. For one, the vast majority of blaxploitation films from this time period (horror or otherwise) were created by white directors and filmmakers (Benshoff 31; Simmons 61-66). The characters — males primarily embodied pimps, gangbangers, thugs, and drug dealers, while females were often stereotyped as distastefully brash and/or overly sexualized — were largely constructed on the basis of stereotypes and from white points-of-view. Nonetheless, these films were heavily marketed to Black audiences, and Benshoff suggests that by consenting to the commercial manufacture of these portrayals, Black people were relinquishing agency, thus furthering their already-oppressed status. Secondly, many critics of the blaxploitation trend suggested that the political and social goals of the Black community would be compromised by the messaging embedded in the genre (Benshoff 33-35; Simmons 132-141). Although these films tended to show Black characters triumphing over the

oftentimes-racist white antagonists, the notion of a hegemonically white culture was explicitly challenged and threatened, which translated to fear, discomfort, and pushback from many white communities, both in North America and abroad. This was paralleled by a slew of race riots and assassinations (MLK and Malcom X to name two) in the US in the 1960s (Burgin, *Horror Noire*).

There was also rising concern that the Black psyche would be damaged in conjunction to some of the unrefined depictions of Blackness and what it meant to be Black within the social and pop-cultural realms of the time period (Benshoff 33). In *Women of Blaxploitation*, Yvonne Simmons analyzes the role Black women in particular held in enforcing the blaxploitation genre's relation to pop-cultural identity constructions. Simmons acknowledges that the subgenre offered the first on-screen representation of African-American women outside of the context of servitude; "understanding blaxploitation within its social, political and cultural context allows viewers to…[see] glimpses of empowerment from the heroines' perspectives," but she emphasizes that the film industry generally only believes in the power of Black audiences and Black creativity when it's trendy to do so (28-30, 173). The resulting representations of Blackness by a largely white motion picture industry, in the 70s especially, tended to exaggerate traits deemed undesirable and distinctively "Black" by hegemonic standards; when it came to women, those identified traits worked in tandem to establish four major media depictions of African-American womanhood: "Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, and Jezebel/the bad black girl" (Simmons 30; West 458). These representations alone demonstrate how the cinematic discourse of the era often excluded Black voices from the construction of narratives and characterhood yet utilized pop-culturally modish facets of the Black experience for financial gain, resulting in the cultivation public notions about the collective Black identity with minimal Black input (Simmons 28–9, 173–4).

"Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription" identifies *Blacula* (1972) as the most widely commercially successful blaxploitation horror film, and like the genre as a whole, it was met with a mixture of praise and pushback (Benshoff 34-35). Some of the widely accepted redeeming qualities include the fact that the film had both a Black director and a Black lead; the transforming of the white, sylphlike metrosexual Dracula archetype into the Black, strapping, and rather intellectual new persona of "Blacula" provided varied on-screen representation of Black characterhood; and the often-overlooked sequels (e.g. *Scream Blacula Scream* [1973]) starred a dynamic Black female protagonist. Nonetheless, the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB) — a committee formed by the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and National Urban League in order to protest of the genre — took issue with the film's satirical display of "white vampirism" (Benshoff 35; McHie,

“Blaxploitatoin in American Media”): a euphemistic and narratively appropriate reference to slavery and colonization. CAB protested not only the potential repercussions of *Blacula,* but they also viscerally countered many white-produced blaxploitation films like *Blackenstein* (1973), *Sugar Hill* (1974), and *J.D's Revenge* (1976) among various others within and outside of the scope of horror. Largely due to the fierce opposition on CAB's behalf, the genre was brought to its demise by the dawn of the 80s (McHie, “Blaxploitation in American Media”).

The 80s: Mainstream Horror & Cultural Erasure In The Media

In *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, Robin R. Means Coleman explains that the 1980s marked a regressive shift in public attitudes toward Black inclusion in the media for a variety of reasons. First, the previous decade depicted the “urban world” as largely inhabited by Black people and non-white others, and the 80s exacerbated the widespread public imagery of urban, ethnic spaces (145). However, in that process, the urban space became a mechanism through which one could analyze an array of social issues that disproportionately affected Black communities. The urban scene became closely linked to public ideas about drugs, poorly funded schools with even more poorly behaved students, violence, sexual assault, and murder. The swirl of these media depictions worked in conjunction with heightened racial tensions (given the more assertive Civil Rights rhetoric the Black collective had already begun employing in the pursuit of equality). These factors, on top of lingering political sentiments from the Reagan and Nixon eras, translated to white masses commonly associating Black people with a “culture of poverty,” social welfare programs, and societal deterioration (Means Coleman 146; Mayer 351-354). Black people became fear-evoking in the political sphere, so subsequently, much of the mentality in white-dominated media industries — subconscious or otherwise — was to omit and erase Blackness from the field of view (Burgin, *Horror Noire*). Invisibility was a common thread with regard to Blackness in horror in the 80s, with much of what was considered “mainstream horror” taking place far outside of the scope of the “urban”: *Friday the 13th* (1981), *The Evil Dead* (1981), *Halloween II* (1981), *Poltergeist* (1982), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) are examples that Means Coleman provides of some of the popular, commercially successful films populating the horror-scape of the time, all of which took place in either rural or suburban settings with no Black characters to be found (Means Coleman, 146). Despite the wide scale omission of Black culture and voices from a messaging standpoint, this didn't mean that Black people were entirely absent from the big screen during this era. Muchlike in decades prior, some Black characters were incorporated into

horror scripts to aid the real, often-white protagonists in some way. In the 1980s in particular, this usually meant in “cross-racial, interpersonal encounters” where Black characters offered unrequited loyalty and support to the white protagonists, in many cases dying horrific deaths on the white leads’ behalves (151). Means Coleman uses *The Shining* (1980) to provide a particularly thought-provoking example of this “sacrificial negro” trope working in conjunction with the previously-alluded-to “magical negro” trope:

> Stanley Kubrick’s film *The Shining* (1980) is especially powerful in its two-prong approach to the symbolic annihilation of Blacks. First, *The Shining* represents the defining (re)turn toward the self-sacrificing Black character [Scatman Crothers as Dick Hallorann] — a character who dies in the course of saving Whiteness. Second, the film invokes the ‘magical Negro’ stereotype, in which a Black character is imbued with supernatural powers, which are used, notably, not for his or her own personal, familial, or community protection or advancement; rather, the powers are used wholly in service to White people. (151)

Dick Hallorann’s character possesses telepathic abilities, and he warns the main character Danny, who is white, about the dangers of the hotel the film takes place in as well as the spirits imbuing Danny’s father, Jack Torrance. In the film, Halloran returns to the hotel in an attempt to save Danny and his mother, only to be axed in the chest by Torrance and left for dead. What’s even more curious is the fact that Dick Hallorann’s character survives in the original Stephen King novel upon which the movie was directly based, suggesting an even more racially-charged undertone employed by the film than that which was suggested by the story in and of itself (Burgin, *Horror Noire*).

The Turn of the Century: A Push for Black Representation

In much of the horror film content pervading the 90s and early 00s, the Black experience was largely limited to worn-out tropes (Means Coleman, "We're in"). *Candyman* (1992) was an exception by certain metrics (Burgin, *Horror Noire*). The black-male-in-pursuit-of-the-white-female trope is intertwined deeply in the film’s storyline; however, Candyman was the first Black supernatural killer outside of blaxploitation contexts. From a representational standpoint, this paved the way for the notion that Black people could do or be anything on-screen — a Black person could be the “Freddy” of a movie. Candyman’s origin as explained through the 1992 film initially represents the villain as the embodiment of Black-centered urban legends and, ultimately as the story progresses, the spirit conjured by the history

of North American racism. This idea is further aided by the lesser-known sequel, *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995) in which Candyman's rather tragic, racial-discrimination-centered origin story is further explored.

Though not often pigeonholed as "horror" directors, Spike Lee and John Singleton's commercial success in the film sphere during the late 80s and early 90s lead to a social push for Black stories from an authentic point-of-view (Burgin, *Horror Noire*). In 1995, Spike Lee executive-produced *Tales From The Hood* alongside director Rusty Cundieff: a horror/comedy anthology film that explores a range of social concepts affecting the American Black community (e.g. police brutality, gang abuse, etc.). Though *Tales From The Hood* wasn't critically acclaimed by standard Hollywood metrics, it did work to further dismantle the mold that Black people in horror were expected to fall into, and much like *Candyman*, it signaled that the horror genre (and the industry at large) were on the brink of transitioning Black characters from placeholders and plot tools to more developed on-screen participants (Means Coleman, "We're in").

The Golden Age of Black Horror: Concerns & Paths Forward

Ultimately by the 2010s, audiences were generally seeing more imaginative Black characters within the visual realm of dark genres; *The Girl With All The Gifts* (2016), for instance, is a British zombie film whose main protagonist was not initially written as a Black person. In fact, as the film's director Colm McCarthy explains in an interview with Screen International, there was initially no race specified for the character, but young Black actress Sennia Nanua excelled at the audition. As this little Black girl — the film's title character — surmounted all of the odds over the course of the story, the movie became a deeper social commentary than originally intended. The following year, *Get Out*, Jordan Peele's debut feature, proved a catalyst not only for more unique Black-POV films, but also for increased horror content with pointed social critique on the racial front (Graves, "Jordan Peele's"). Peele has stated on numerous occasions that he made this film for Black audiences — he made it for "every disappointed Black person that's watched a white protagonist make dumb decision," and he also subverts the genre-spanning white savior trope in a rather substantial way (Burgin, *Horror Noire*). From a socio-cultural standpoint, Peele explains that it was his intention for Chris, the film's protagonist, to go to jail at the end of the film (commentators throughout the *Horror Noire* documentary provide even more social context on how Chris having been shot by the police in cold-blood would've been most realistic in accordance with American racial dynamics, particularly with how "lynching" has taken on different

forms over the course of time), but Peele recognized that society, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, had become more publically attuned to the violence of Black bodies at the hands of white social authorities in comparison to the public discourse occurring when he first wrote the script. From a business standpoint, the rise of the BLM movement may largely be correlated to the marketability of socially conscious horror; beyond that, however, “[black communities] needed a hero, [they] needed a release, [they] needed to cheer,” Peele explained. As the police sirens approach at the end of the film, there’s a grim inference that Chris’ story will not have a happy ending. When Rod — Chris’ Black male friend on the police force — emerges from the cop car to save him, audiences are reassured that “there will be no lynching today”: instead, we have agency. That’s the power of *Get Out*.

In many respects, *Get Out* catalyzed the Black horror genre by creating a sense of Black autonomy within the dark media space, and a number of Black-centered horror films that followed in recent years took certain story-telling liberties from a social-commentary perspective that Peele set the stage for (Graves, "Jordan Peele's"). *The First Purge* (2018), for instance, is a horror action film by a Black director, Gerard McMurray, and a largely Black cast that has a narrative constructed as a thinly-disguised analogy of the real-world race relations of its time, but within the context of a freshly imagined dystopian society. *His House* (2020), furthermore, is a British horror film also by a Black director, Remi Weekes, that showcases a South Sudanese immigrant/refugee narrative at the forefront, while incorporating Dinka-culture-specific mythology into the construction of the horror and suspense elements.

One concerning rhetoric surrounding the doors that *Get Out* opened, however, is the emergence of a market for black trauma (Mitchem, “Re-Traumatization”). As discussed in the Literature Review section, systematic concepts on the racial front have become more commonplace, and they’re becoming baselines for tangible narratives. Scholar Deshayla M. Mitchem highlights that the guise under which “trauma porn” (Lena Waithe’s television series, *Them* [2021–], is often referenced as a prime example of this phenomenon) is used as an educational tool to teach historic racism disregards the mental health of Black students who are constantly reminded of the pain and suffering they and their families have had to endure. In an interview for Rolling Stone magazine, Jordan Peele says that “it’s important…that we can tell Black stories without it being about race,” emphasizing that the future of Black horror should not be limited to stories reflecting racism and the adjacent sociological issues. While “trauma porn” in the racial context does play a role in visualizing the horrors of real-life oppression, the pathway forward should

largely be focused on the rise of Black representation both in front of and behind the screen in horror as well as fostering and further expanding upon the more diverse media landscape it yields.

CHAPTER III: The Horror Genre & Madness

The academically rooted definitions of stigma presented by sociology researchers Matthew Clair and Imogen Tyler provide essential, preliminary context for the ensuing analysis of representation, misrepresentation, and sensationalism surrounding madness in horror media. Clair builds off the work of sociologist pioneer Erving Goffman and defines stigma itself as "a [discrediting] attribute that conveys devalued stereotypes," thus the process of stigmatization corresponds to the social construction processes of both the stereotype and its association with lesser value and/or abnormality (1-2). Clair offers an even more explicit definition of stigma creation by framing it as a "co-occurrence of four processes: (1) labeling human differences; (2) stereotyping such differences; (3) separating those labeled from 'us'; and (4) status loss and discrimination against those labeled" (2). As discrimation and power manifest roles within the stigma formation process, it becomes evident that the phenomenon has certain sociobiological functions: the collective exclusion of individuals perceived as threats to the health and/or established social order of a society loosely encompasses the gist (2). In "Stigma Machines," Tyler enforces these ideas by explaining how the power of stigma is crafted and harnessed to govern populations by hegemonic metrics; she goes on to define sites of stigma production today as "journalism, news media, advertising, film, television…digital corporations, digital technologies…[digital] platforms, [and other engagements by media and cultural industries]…[as well as] racist, disablist, and misogynistic hate speech in face-to-face and online settings." Stigmatization has documented negative implications "for self-esteem, academic achievement, mental health, and physical well-being," and the resulting discrimination tactics include but are not limited to physical and verbal assault, unequal distribution of material resources, formal-policy-enforced exclusion tactics, and inequalities in public health levels and politcal/economic power (Clair 1-3). The horror genre specifically has been widely implicated as a site for stigmatization of certain features tied to the mad population and mental health care environments, with horror film and television plots often depicting elements of madness as synonymous with danger, violence, and chaos (Goodwin 224).

This chapter seeks to provide a multifaceted look at various historical, cultural, and social circumstances that have likely contributed to stigmatization of madness in mainstream narrative constructions and examine some of the resulting on-screen depictions of mental institutions and individuals with mental illness. The overarching intention of this exploration, however, is to thoroughly

contextualize the various roles that the horror genre — primarily film and television— has played and continues to play in relation to madness and surrounding socio-cultural phenomena.

Social Constructions of Abnormality

A key component in laying the groundwork for this research examination, especially for this chapter and Chapter IV ("The Horror Genre & Disability"), is understanding that most horror content that succeeds by demonizing abnormality does so by capitalizing on assumptions that already exist in society (Dr. Kathryn Church, personal communication, March 30, 2022). Said assumptions are derivative of societal consensus surrounding what defines abnormality, and according to psychology teacher and researcher Dr. Saul McLeod, these definitions are outlined as statistical infrequency, violation of social norms, failure to function adequately, and deviation from "ideal mental health," all of which present limitations ("Abnormal Psychology").

McLeod explains that using statistics to define abnormality doesn't take into account behavioral desirability or lack thereof. For instance, a high IQ is regarded as statistically abnormal but may generate socially desirable results, whereas obesity may be statistically normal yet dissociated with good health or large-scale social desirability, depending on the culture. Furthermore, the parameters for where to start the statistical classifications of abnormality are arbitrary, as there are no widely-accepted standards for who determines what is statistically rare and the processes by which those determinations are made, even within specialized realms like psychiatry; this thereby suggests fallacies within the implemented consensuses. To that point, certain mental disorders are statistically normal in terms of prevalence. Classifications of depression, for instance, are considered among the most common mental disorders, and findings from the Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health (SCMH) indicate that 25% Canadians aged 18 and older screened positive for symptoms of depression, anxiety or posttraumatic stress disorder in the spring of 2021 alone (Gov. Ontario, "Depression"; Statistics Canada, "Survey"). However, if normalcy is deemed a state in which circumstances are "as they should be" (as it often is, across many socio-cultural contexts), abiding by the statistical commonality measure would, for instance, disregard the distress felt by individuals with clinical depression.

Next, the most obvious issue when attempting to use social norms as a metric for defining abnormality is that there is no universal agreement on social norms; they vary across generations and subcultures as well as ethnic, regional, and socio-economic groups (Mcleod, "Abnormal Psychology"). For example, hallucinations and screaming in the street represent normalcy based on the social norms of

the Zulu society in Southern Africa, but these same behaviors contradict the social norms in place within most metropolitan North American societies. Furthermore, behavior that is regarded as abnormal at one point in time can become normalized as time progresses and vice versa; drunk driving and smoking in hospitals were once deemed socially normative activities, but they are seen today as socially inappropriate and abnormal. The opposite phenomenon can be observed through the wide-scale social acceptance (and even celebration [e.g. Pride]) of homosexuality, which was considered a mental disorder by both the American Psychiatry Association and the World Health Organization until 1973 and 1980, respectively (McLeod, "Abnormal Psychology"; Drescher, "Out of DSM"). Social norms also fluctuate based on circumstance — cannibalism, for example, is widely regarded as abnormal and contradictory to social norms, but as was the case with a 1972 rugby team who survived a plane crash in the Andes mountains and found themselves stranded without food for nearly 3 months in sub-freezing temperatures, eating the bodies of those who'd died in the plane crash presents a "normal," socially acceptable course of action, as their survival was dependent upon doing so (McLeod, "Abnormal Psychology").

The "failure to function adequately" paradigm links abnormality with a person's inability to cope with the demands of everyday life and/or feelings of personal distress while attempting to do so; self-care, holding down a job, predictability, meaningful social interactions, and abidance to moral/social codes are all examples of what properly coping with daily life looks like within this framework, whereas maladaptiveness/danger to self, irrationality, and suffering, on the other hand, speak to some of the indicators of abnormality. A primary limitation of this definition of abnormality is the disregard for how seemingly abnormal behavior may actually be beneficial and adaptive for the individual in question. For instance, a person with obsessive-compulsive-disorder who has a hand-washing obsession may find this "irrational" activity comforting, which might then cultivate an emotional state conducive to carrying out daily functions. This paradigm's dismissal of the power of effective, individually-defined coping mechanisms is underscored by psychology researchers Rosenhan and Seligman's statements in the late 1980s, which asserts that a main indicator of "failure to function adequately" is *observer discomfort*, implying that the "abnormal" person's experience or "comfort" is of lesser value when it comes to meaning-making (Rosenhan and Seligman, *Abnormal Psychology*). There are also a variety of maladaptive/harmful behaviors that present dangers to the self, yet are not classified as socially abnormal: adrenaline sports, smoking, drinking, and skipping classes are just a few examples that further illustrate how fluid yet vague the guidelines for abnormality classification can be (McLeod, "Abnormal Psychology").

Lastly, deviation from ideal mental health as a definition for abnormality suggests that any operation outside of the parameters laid out by psychologists and psychiatrists for "normal mental health" is abnormal. However, a limitation of this outlook is that the primary criteria considered necessary for normal mental health — positive view of the self, mastery of environment, "accurate" perception of reality, positive interpersonal relationships, autonomy and independence, and capability for growth and development — is virtually impossible for any individual to constantly possess all at once. A person may lack self-esteem/confidence and live in a town where all of their interpersonal relations are riddled with conflict; still, this individual's lack of a few of the criterion for normal mental health is still hardly a substantial indicator that said individual is suffering from a mental disorder.

McLeod emphasizes that ethnocentrism represents a significant drawback in typical classifications of abnormality as well, as most definitions of psychological and psychiatric abnormality are cultivated and enforced by middle-class white men. This phenomenon will be explored in more depth in later sections, but this prefaces the idea that people from "external" demographics may be diagnosed as abnormal at disproportionate rates.

Language and the Creation of Realities

The degree of arbitrariness that exists in society's defining process of abnormality consequently accentuates the idea that negative stigmas and connotations tied to "abnormal" people are also arbitrarily constructed and, by extension, lacking objectivity (McLeod, "Abnormal Psychology"; Walker 2-6) Cultural rhetoric is used to fortify some of these primary social determinations for abnormality with little collective regard for the shortcomings each construction paradigm presents; the notion of "cultural rhetoric" in this context can be understood as the way that a culture's language use surrounding arguably fallacious models of normalcy dictates how tangible, real-life social dynamics play out (Walker 1), which Chapter I ("The Horror of Structural Inequality") prefaces in a general hegemonic sense. Psychologist Michael T. Walker argues that society's decision to collectively ignore how its techniques for handling mental illness and diagnoses are socially-constructed byproducts of linguistics (namely "deficit-based languageing"), coupled with a wide-scale disregard for postmodernism — the late 20th century philosophical movement promoting an "acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining [socio-]political and economic power" — can foster unfortunate societal consequences (Duignan, "postmodernism"). For mad demographics specifically, this can mean objectification, ineffective and potentially counterproductive healing models, and barriers to gaining a sense of human

empathy within the culture that one operates in — stigmatization constitutes a compounding factor in all of these processes; for society at large, mad populations included, the opportunity to enrich itself is greatly hindered, as an abundance of talent, creativity, and genius is disabled and hidden through hegemonic, deficit-oriented vocabularies and the ensuing social practices (Walker 1-15; Clair 3).

A History of Institutionalization & Its Position In Popular Culture

The social construction of abnormality is an important segway into exploring the constructions of negative connotations and subsequent media representations of the mental institution, which in and of itself, embodies the practice of "spatial segregation and exclusion" (Milaney et al. 96). Some of the first mental hospitals in the world date back to the 9th and 10th centuries in the Middle East and Africa; Ahmad Ibn Tulun is credited with opening a hospital in Cairo that cared for the mad population through an array of treatments, including music therapy (Koenig 29). However, historians will often mark the beginning of the history of psychiatry, in the context of its position as a branch of medicine, by the large-scale societal implementation of custodial asylums, which throughout the 18th century, confined individuals who were socially deemed anything from a danger to a nuisance (Cookson, "History"). Social classifications of "lunacy" shifted over time, but asylums, on the whole, were riddled with unpleasantries; "patients were routinely chained to walls, received poor-quality diets, and were subjected to treatments so barbaric that they were in all probability traumatized by their experiences" (Earle, 261-262). As pop-culture researcher Harriet E. H. Earle explains, the popular image of asylum wardens selling tickets to jeering crowds was not an exaggeration either; most asylums opened their doors to the public as a morbid source of entertainment. As asylums began closing themselves off to the masses around 1770, staff generally felt more empowered to commit gross abuses of power and cruelty behind closed doors. From the late 1880s onward, there were some notable shifts in asylum culture, namely the implementations of medication, surgery, and compassion-oriented guidelines for staff across many facilities (Cookson, "History"; Earle 262). Even more specifically, the first lobotomy took place in 1935, electroconvulsive therapy was introduced in 1937, and the distribution of psychiatric medications started in 1950. While these developments were rooted in the ideas of daily management and, in some cases, the curing of certain conditions, it's heavily debated whether these types of revolutionary treatments were, in practice, less cruel than the previous ones.

Following WWII (1945 and beyond), the asylum system began its fall from grace in the eyes of the medical world; broadscale deinstitutionalism was catalyzed largely by social movements promoting

community-based mental health (Milaney 97). Nonetheless, the image of the asylum maintained a presence in popular imagination (Earle 263-267). Not all asylums were sites of clear-cut abuse and neglect, especially during the institution's humanitarian-reform era, but in the wake of their absence, society was able to hold onto and essentially fetishize the most sensational versions of events, resulting in the asylum becoming a symbolic site for unhinged "lunacy" and danger across the world. A range of more complex sociological factors comes into play when taking a deeper look at how certain societies constructed asylum rhetorics within their own culture-and-history-specific frameworks and how they were translated in media, specifically horror films and television.

One case in point would be how the German horror film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) — one of the first on-screen associations of criminality and danger with psychiatric conditions — is thought to have catalyzed the German expressionism and avant-garde art movements of the Weimar period (1919-1933): a socio-cultural crusade shaped in large part by complex public debates surrounding war and psychiatric confinement (Mancine 17; Heynen 684). For many, the experience of WWI and the postwar social circumstances highlighted the inadequacy of apolitical narratives in the media, which lead to madness and illness becoming progressively more politicized in society. In fact, the notion of confinement in and of itself became wrapped up in oppressive capitalist and militarist social rhetorics during this era. Film director Robert Wiene was able to channel much of this cultural angst into *Caligari* in a way that captivated audiences and influenced arts for generations to come; in fact, many of Tim Burton's popular works in the 21st century were inspired by German Expressionist visuals (Heynen 684-695; Yamout, "The Influence"). On that note, *Caligari*'s aesthetic choices — the off-kilter urban landscape, looming buildings and streets with jagged shapes, etc. — proved an interesting visual interpretation of the cultures of confinement in which the film situates itself, underpinned by an emphasis on the uncanny: a psychological state of unease directed towards creepy, eerie, yet strangely familiar phenomena that is often tied in association with asylums, both historically and contemporarily (Windsor; Earle 265-267). As can be inferred by the film's widely regarded status as a cultural, social, and cinematic pioneer, the psychological sensations amongst audiences that were prompted by an uncanny, violent on-screen madness narrative proved critically and publicly favorable.

Another example of how public associations of asylums and ensuing media depictions were bred through culture-specific circumstances can be analyzed through the framework of the US from the mid 1800s onward. Many of the pitfalls of the US institutionalization system during the mid-to-late 19th century were exacerbated by underfunding and bigoted logistical strategies (e.g. segregation-orienteed

pubic asylum infrastructure, "historical occupation therapy" [using farming, sewing, and other tasks as healing techniques in accordance with one's race, gender, and class], overpatrolling of African-American patients, etc.) (Rondinone 18). As a byproduct of these affairs, patients' circumstances generally did not drastically improve under America's institutionalized care system, so outward society began painting these locations as sites for a disturbing state of ennui (58-59). Not to mention, the US already had a strong sense of familiarity with this style of confinement and the accompanying sociological torment in cultural memory. White Americans — the primary demographic who had indisputable access to mental facilities during the era in question— "transposed well-known slavery horrors into asylum contexts" to reflect their own suffering, with many white authors and thinkers (Elizabeth Stone and Elizabeth Packard just to name two) claiming that the asylum system in the mid-to-late 1800s was even *worse* than the institution of slavery as a whole (59). The emerging science of psychiatry coupled with developments in pseudoscience fosterested yet another mechanism through which oppression could occur in the States; eugenics and neo-Darwinism laid the groundwork for normalizing the idea of "biological inferiority" at the turn of the 20th century — subsequent state laws, academic authorities, and advertisement rhetorics fortified these dehumanizing notions (60). Thus, mental institutions soon became regarded as confinementment spaces for "the living dead" and societal undesirables, which led to a sort of monsterization of both the asylum as a concept and its inhabitants in the American imagination (19-21, 58-66). The role that American horror and psychological films played in constructing public connotations of the asylum within this socio-cultural context was anything but one-note. For instance, *The Snake Pit* (1946), a psychological film within the periphery of the horror genre, is a semi-autobiographical movie set in an asylum that deals with mental illness in a sympathetic manner, drawing attention to many issues plaguing the asylum system such as overcrowding, controversial treatment plans, staff incompetence, and isolation (Tett 136-137). The film was well-received publicly, "was the 29th top grossing film in 1948-1949, and was nominated for several Oscars"; furthermore, publicity releases from 20th Century Fox claimed that 26 of the then 48 states enacted reform legislation in mental health care as a direct result of the film (Tett 139; Clooney 144). However, some 20th-century American horror films such as *Bedlam* (1946) and *The Unearthly* (1957) gained traction in the film industry by affirming the pre-existing narratives about danger and pandemonium existing behind asylum doors, inferrably allowing these ideas to further crystalize to some degree with regard to pop-cultural norms.

The contemporary position of institution-based narratives within visual horror and thriller media makes it easy to gloss over the real human experiences that have given these fantastical interpretations

shape, but the damaging effects of poor treatment, segregation, and ill health fostered by the modern mental health facility's predecessors still prevail today (Rondinone 276). In fact, despite an array of unresolved concerns plaguing today's designated institutions/hospitals for mental health care, Milaney purports that emergency shelters may be an even more historically accurate representation of what the modern-day asylum is, as chronic homelessness in present-day represents one of the most observable byproducts of the original asylum system's failures, with public policy across North America generally failing to address the systemic hurdles forcing many mad people to "remain dependent through continuous institutionalization" (112). Furthermore, as alluded to prior, asylum narratives in the horror genre across film and television are often embellished by an emphasis on the uncanny, regularly focusing on criminality or unconventional, typically dramatized phenomena such as "breast milk obsession[s], compulsive masturbation, [or] coprophilia" (Earle 266). Not only do these types of representations insinuate a link between institutionalism and peculiarity (oftentimes generating shock value), but the focus is shifted away from many of the more commonplace, real-world demographics that vastly populate the landscapes of contemporary mental health facilities and custodial institutions. The narratives of marginalized populations that have existed and still exist within these spaces (BIPOC, non-English speaking migrants, the poor, etc.) are regularly left out of the conversation, as middle-class white experiences dominate the media landscape; this occurs despite the fact that, for instance, as American author and psychiatrist Johnathan M. Mtzl argues, African Americans since the 1960s have been more likely to be labeled as *schizophrenic* than their white counterparts (Rondinone 278). Contemporary institution-based horror, psych-thriller, and other dark sub-genre films like *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987), *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* (1988), *The Exorcist III* (1990), *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), *Don't Say a Word* (2001), *Madhouse* (2004), *Parasomnia* (2008), *The Uninvited* (2009), *The Ward* (2010), *Shutter Island* (2010), *Grave Encounters 2* (2012), *Stonehearst Asylum* (2014), *A Cure for Wellness* (2016), *Cult of Chucky* (2017), and *Unsane* (2018); as well as television series like *The Kingdom* (1994), *American Horror Story: Asylum* (2012-2013), *Legion* (2017), and *Maniac* (2018) represent but a small portion of the content vindicating this white-and-financially-stable-focused narrative phenomenon among many asylum-oriented horror media stories. Though not dissected in this study, there are many additional pop-cultural sources of entertainment beyond just horror films and television shows (e.g. asylum-themed haunted houses and Halloween attractions, sensationalized historical asylum tours, etc.) that aid in cultivating fear-based taboos of institutionalization and madness by means of the stigmatization models laid out in this chapter's introduction (Rondinone 276).

The On-Screen Horrification of Specific Disorders & Surrounding Rhetorics

The discussions over the course of the chapter thus far substantiate that social constructions, stigmatization processes, rhetorical tactics, and media depictions surrounding the mental institution as a site facilitated adjacent social processes with regard to the individuals inhabiting it, thus allowing for the characterizations of those inhabitants (individuals with mental health conditions) to exist in narrative contexts beyond merely the asylum setting. This section will highlight a range of films in efforts to explore condition-specific tropes and plot devices that permeate the horror genre, taking into account certain phenomena that may have further contributed to the formation of those on-screen portrayals as well as some of the potential socio-cultural implications.

"Surprise DID" and The Hyper-Horrification of Dissociative Identity Disorder

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) — formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder — is a condition that has been routinely depicted in cinema since the silent era, despite how relatively rare it is to come across in real life; the condition, which arises as a result of childhood trauma, affects approximately 1.5% of the global population, and the current criteria for diagnosis are "1) the altering presentation of two or more personality states within a distinct person; and 2) amnesia experienced by the "host" personality for periods during which an alternate personality is in control" (Packer 35-36; Mitra and Jain, "Dissociative Identity Disorder"). Despite the longstanding presence of DID portrayals in the genre-spanning visual media realm, the specific connection between DID and horror was made before the medium of film was established. In 1886, Robert Louis Stevenson published *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (a Gothic novella about a respectable Victorian gentleman and a bestial criminal residing within the same body) which, in essence, demonstrated the substructure of an extreme DID case — the novel has gone down in history as an irrefutable literary classic (Rose, "From Split to Psycho"). In *Mental Illness in Popular Culture*, Dr. Sharon Packer further acknowledges the influence held by *Jekyll and Hyde*, as the original novel and its various adaptations familiarized audiences with the notion that an individual body may host two or more separate and distinct personalities; however, Packer offers an even more comprehensive framework for understanding the inception and progression of DID portrayals across horror media by offering a chronological breakdown of the widespread adoption of and socio-psychological constructions behind the "surprise DID plot structure" (SDID) — a frequent trope implemented almost exclusively by horror films (35-36). Focusing on the tribulations of a main character

who, from the beginning, is overtly acknowledged to have DID (or “split/multiple personality” as it was often referred to in past eras) was a common plot structure for most early- to mid-20th-century portrayals of DID both on-stage and on-screen (37). The initial *Jekyll and Hyde* novel did not reveal the true nature of the characters’ dynamic until the end of the story, but this was never the case with the visual adaptations, all of which established the multiple-personality dynamic up front. To that point, the only horror films that tackled DID representation up until the late 1950s were the various iterations of *Jekyll and Hyde* (37). Multiple Personality Disorder wasn’t recognized as a legitimate disorder by the DSM until 1980 (with the formal name change occurring in 1994), yet the mid 1950s yielded a cultural revival of interest in the clinical aspect of the phenomenon, which was paralleled by increased cinematic representations of the condition (Packer 37; Mitra and Jain, “Dissociative Identity Disorder”.). The drama film *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), based on an actual case study, aided in the solidification of the condition’s “scientific” reality in mainstream public consciousness, thus setting the stage for the emergence of alternate cinematic narrative patterns, namely SDID (Packer 37; Tracy, “The Amazing History”). The SDID plot structure necessitates that a major character’s DID condition be carefully concealed from the audience until an ultimate sudden reveal, typically toward the end of the story, representing a shocking plot twist or surprise ending. The most revolutionary horror films that employed the SDID strategy were *The Haunted Strangler* (1958) and its more widely seen successor, *Psycho* (1960) — the ultimate revelation that the main character has an alternate, murderous personality constitutes a narrative formula spearheaded by these two films, which was implemented time and time again until the early 90s, followed by a re-emergence in the early 2000s (Packer 37). An array of philosophers and cognitivists consider this narrative structure to function well for the horror genre because it challenges “traditional” conceptions of selfhood and consistency of control of the mind and body — it also avoids the process of “othering” the primary character until the twist, and given that DID is characterized by fluctuating states of awareness and amnesia, the viewer is forced to confront the unsettling idea that *anybody* (including themself) could be someone radically different and/or more dangerous than whom they imagine themselves to be (38-40). M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2017) represents a contemporary, commercially successful horror film dealing with DID that subverts the SDID plot mold; however, muchlike films that do utilize SDID, *Split* still uses the main antagonist’s diagnosis as the element of horror pivotal to contextualizing the narrative and creating the principal fear factor. Shamalayan realistically roots the villain’s—Kevin’s — DID diagnosis in childhood trauma, and Kevin’s psychiatrist is incoporated into the narrative despite her oblivion to his criminal engagements (kidnapping and torture

to be specific). With that being said, however, psychologists Bethany Brand and Danielle Pasko assert that Kevin "falsely represents people with DID through exaggerated symptoms, extreme violence, and unrealistic physical characteristics," declaring that the journal's senior author – a clinical practitioner and expert in DID — has never encountered a DID patient with even remotely similar tendencies of violence and sadism compared to that of *Split*'s main character in nearly 3 decades of medical practice (1).

Some of the storytelling strategies surrounding DID employed by creatives/filmmakers in the horror space, as touched upon above, may have reasonable psychological bases if the goal is merely to evoke fear amongst audiences. Nonetheless, as the previously explored models for stigma creation would suggest, stigma is often cultivated by perpetual on-screen illustrations of the undesirable stereotype in question, and individuals with DID (who are statistically more likely to be physically harmed than they are to phsyically harm others) represent a primary real-life demographic that would be implicated and subsequently victimized by a "murderous/violent alternate personality" stigma (Clair 1-3; Tyler, "Stigma Machines").

Psychosis, Psychotic Disorders, and On-Screen Representations

Psychosis is a condition in which an individual's cognition shifts beyond what's rooted in physical reality, with outward symptoms including but not limited to delusions; restricted emotional, physical, verbal and expression; difficulty generating thoughts or ideas; hallucinations; and disorganized speech, thought, temperament, and behavior patterns — psychosis represents the most commonly stigmatized mental health struggle in media (CAMH, "Psychosis"; Goodwin 224). Psychosis is not classified as a mental illness in and of itself, but rather as the cognitive phenomenon characterizing a psychotic episode and a symptom of many formal mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and variations of depression. An inference as to why on-screen psychosis depictions are so prevalent in comparison to those of other mental health conditions is because of psychosis' lack of specificity — rather than having to focus on the narrative construction intricacies that a plot surrounding a specific condition might warrant, a content creator can use psychosis as a broad-spectrum vehicle for contextualizing a character's disconnection from reality and/or operation outside of accepted social/moral standards. As mental health lecturer and scholar John Goodwin suggests, the lack of specificity in psychosis narratives can also foster an on-screen ambiguity and/or conflation of distinct mental illnesses, most commonly DID and schizophrenia (225-226). Furthermore, Goodwin conducted an analysis of 55 films linked by certain keywords on IMDb like "psychosis," "mental/psychiatric patient," and

"mental/psychiatric hospital." Amongst the 33 films tied explicitly to the "psychosis" keyword — *Madhouse* (2004), *The Devil's Chair* (2007), *The Roommate* (2011), and *Halloween 2* (2009) to name just a few — the *homicidal maniac* was the common stereotype, appearing in nearly 80% of the films; *pathetic or sad* as a criteria for characterizing the psychotic character appears in 72.7% of of the films (226-227). Goodwin also suggests that wardrobe choices, lighting, and other visual production tactics are often implemented to augment a psychological association of unease and/or repulsion amongst audiences when it comes to psychosis and psychosis-adjacent narratives, with criteria like *flickering lights*; *glass/mirror utilization to imply mental fragility*; *dirty/unhygienic*; and *restraint/straight jackets* appearing in 57.7%; 66.7%; 57.7%; and 64.6% of the examined films, respectively (226-228).

The 2016 horror film *Lights Out* follows the story of a widow named Sophie who deals with clinical depression and grief surrounding her second husband's murder; she is haunted by a physical embodiment of that depression and grief named Diana, and as Sophie slips deeper into an abyssmal emotional state, Diana's presence becomes stronger, tormenting Sophie's children as well. Because horror films routinely employ paranormal elements to augment the fear factor and/or create supernatural analogies for real-world circumstances, it can't accurately be determined whether Diana is a visual representation of symptoms linked to psychotic depression – the classification of depression that includes psychosis — or merely a horrorized symbol of the state of depression, broadly. In either case, *Lights Out* represents a worthy adjacent case study to further explore horror films' rhetorical handling of psychosis-kindred plots. To provide additional context, abjection is a critical theory concept often used to analyze pop-cultural horror narratives, which seeks to transverse the interconnected feelings of tension, attraction, and repulsion that exist when one is confronted by "the abject": the object, character, phenomenon, etc. which does not "respect borders, positions, [or] rules" and disturbs "identity, system, [and] order" (Sheldon 45-47; Kristeva 4). A research journal by media and communications scholar Zachary Sheldon uses framework set out by abject theory to explore how a recent spate of horror media narratives has renewed the longstanding "abject mother" archetype by incorporating mental illness and trauma into the mix (46). Sheldon suggests that Sophie's embodiment of the abject, monstrous mother in *Lights Out* is intimately linked to her depression. Over the course of the story, Sophie's eldest daughter Rebecca begins to pin blame on her mother for the agonizing burdens felt by the rest of family, regularly disparaging Sophie and calling her "crazy." Still, *Lights Out*'s narrative structure frames Rebecca as the film's main protagonist, and the story ultimately resolves when Sophie severs Diana's ties to the physical world by shooting herself in the head. *Lights Out* demonstrates limited instances of human compassion

toward Sophie, but the way the plot concludes suggests that "there is no hope to expel the abject," contextually paralleling the idea that there is no hope to defeat depression nor save an individual dealing with it (46). *The Babadook* (2014), on the other hand, employs an extremely similar construction of the abject mother, severe depression, and grief, with Amelia representing the film's "Sophie" and Mister Babadook constituting Diana (46). Amelia represents an arguably more intensified embodiment of the abject mother than Sophie given Amelia's disavowal of motherhood entirely, illustrated through her tumultuous relationship with her young son and the instances in which she attempts to kill him. However, Amelia's ultimate transcendence of the abject is demonstrated by the film's ending in which she keeps Mister Babadook alive yet confined to her basement, feeding it and allowing her son (with whom she ultimately cultivates a stable relationship) to witness it (46). There are suggestions that Amelia has regained a sense of agency by embracing the monster; despite implications surrounding lingering abjection, many assert that the conclusion purports the notion that mental illness and grief can be successfully coped with, even if not directly "cured" (46). *They Look Like People* (2015) represents yet another horror film that subverts certain thematic undertones apparent in *Lights Out* by showcasing a consistently present social support network as the main character navigates psychosis; medical scholar Ryley Mancine positions both films — *The Babadook* and T*hey Look Like People* — as optimistic indicators for the future landscape of mental illness narratives across the genre (17).

Though primarily oriented around the idea of abject motherhood, Sheldon's research lays a foundation to explore the connection horror makes between abjection and mental illness across the familial network. *The Visit* (2015), for instance, is a "found footage" horror film chronicling two young siblings' trip to spend time with their estranged grandparents. Over the course of the film, the grandparents begin exhibiting behavior that initially seems characteristically in-line with psychosis, but the behaviors become progressively more violence-ridden and visually sensalationized. In a very similar plot structure to that of SDID, *The Visit* ultimately reveals that these individuals are not the children's grandparents, but rather escaped patients from a nearby psychiatric hospital who murdered the kids' real grandparents ahead of their arrival. Many of the behaviors the abject "grandparents" exhibit over the course of the film refer back to the idea set out by Earle in earlier sections regarding asylum narratives' tendency to capitalize on shock value by placing uncanny, unconventional, and largely exaggerated symptoms of mental conditions at the visual forefront. Resources to Recover, a US-based mental health advocacy organization, positions *The Visit* as a fear-mongering depiction of [what the organization suspects to be] schizophrenia, riddled with behavioral inaccuracies and wiles geared toward

impressionable tween audiences such as heavy contemporary slang use, the distinct presence of hip-hop and rap music, and comedic tween protagonists (Hoebeke, "An Open Letter").

Social Constructions of Mental Health

This chapter's "Institutionalization In Popular Culture" section touches on psychiatry's origins through the lens of the asylum, but this section takes a slightly deeper dive into the history of psychiatry as a whole. The goal of this portion of the study is to utilize the underlying rationale set out by the "Social Constructions of Abnormality" section and "The Horror of Structural Inequality" chapter to provide additional context on why mental illness representations in media today manifest as they do, highlighting how developments within a historically-white-pioneered field of study have functioned as the cornerstone for understanding mental health.

As clinicians such as William Battie (St Luke's, 1751), Chiarugi (Florence, 1785) Pinel (Paris, 1795) and church members such as William Tuke (York, 1796) recognized the potential for the asylum to serve a therapeutic purpose, this, as previously alluded to, spawned the emergence of psychiatry as a branch of medicine (Cookson, "History"). It was around this time that the use of restraining chains was eliminated and a group of "curable lunatics" (primarily those dealing with melancholia or mania without hallucinations) was recognized. 18th-century Europe (Britain in particular) was riddled with private madhouses to which physicians had limited access, and the 19th century yielded the concept of "moral therapy" across international borders, which supported the idea of using human compassion to improve the circumstances of the mentally ill. The actual term "psychiatry" was coined in 1808 by Johann Christian Reil, a German professor of medicine who described a good psychiatrist as having "perspicacity, a talent for observation, intelligence, goodwill, persistence, patience, experience, an imposing physique and a countenance that commands respect"; these ideas were hegemonically interpreted as some of the most essential parameters for mental health care staff, with practical applications such as "drawing out nervous irritants" via enemas, purgatives, and blood letting representing the core of physical treatment plans. In 1812, Benjamin Rush exacerbated the advocacy for a humanitarian reform of treatment of the mentally ill and published the first American textbook on psychiatry (NIH, "Diseases of the Mind"). The bulk of advances on the scientific side throughout the 19th and 20th centuries were catalyzed by a division of the discipline, which cultivated a more biologically-rooted branch (Shorter 101). Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum, a German psychiatrist, introduced the idea of disease classification for mental health struggles in the mid-19th century (103). At the turn of the

20th century, Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, pioneered the concept of psychoanalytic theory: the notion of dealing with a patient's conscious mind as well their unconscious mind (i.e. bringing repressed fears to the surface, dream interpretation, etc.), which took hold in the psychiatric world for a bit until the emergence of cognitive psychology (rooted in the study of memory, attention, language use, problem-solving and reasoning) trumped it — by the 1970s, psychoanalytic theory was marginalized (Shorter 145; Micallef-Trigona, "The Origins"). Biological psychiatry was fortified during this era via the development of many new tools (e.g. neuroimaging) (Shorter 270). In the 21st century, genetics (which was once collectively dismissed for its conflation of Nazi racist ideology during the 1920s) resurfaced as a prominent component of psychiatric interpretations of illness (246).

The way Sigmund Freud's exploration of the unconscious mind was eventually dismissed by the collective psychiatric community and replaced by more pragmatic breakdowns of the human mind is thought-provoking. Analogously, it's interesting that the vast majority of pioneers for this branch of medicine, at nearly every point in time since its inception, were European or white American men. It's even more curious that public figures like Benjamin Rush, often called the "father of American psychiatry," paved much of the way for the development of mainstream thought on health while holding the belief that Black skin was a result of leprosy (Cookson, "History"; Warner, "Psychiatry Confronts"). It's an eerie analogy to think that "disease classification" as a development had a similar formula to that of the classification of race— developments both of which were cultivated by European thinkers (Müller-Wille). As stated in the "Institutionalization in Popular Culture" section, the 1960s onward lead to significantly more diagnoses of schizophrenia amongst the Black population than the white one. Today, 68% of psychiatrists are white; 3.9% are Black (Zippia, "Psychiatrist Demographics"). The American Psychiatric Association extensively details the definition of psychiatry on the organization's website, yet there's no mention of the practice itself nor the education and training processes necessitating a degree of awareness of a patient's cultural perceptions and sensitivities, spirituality, and/or orientations of understanding the world.

All of the information laid out serves to demonstrate how the mainstream, widely accepted hegemonic models for understanding a human being's mental health in the Western world is, in actuality, a progression of a system of thought that was in large part spearheaded by people who fell into a collective demographic of global imperalists, colonizers, slave-owners, segregations, racists, etc.; this system of thought is bolstered today by the economic, political, and lobbying power held by the global pharmaceutical industry (Walker 9-11). This isn't to suggest that every individual pioneer named above

was an explicit embodiment of the dehumanizing ideas listed, but I would argue that operating in a society where these concepts permeate the culture to such a ubiquitous degree would foster a worldview that leaves BIPOC thought/belief-systems and best interests almost entirely out of the purview. I recognize that nearly every facet of Western society today could be critically scrutinized through the same lens. However, when the stake is a human being's psyche and internal sense of well-being, I believe a breakdown of this caliber is warranted to underscore how non-Western conceptions of reality and illness are often excluded from mainstream narratives. Nonetheless, these narratives are still reinforced by the media (including horror films deemed anywhere from socially regressive to inclusive on the madness front), as they constitute the widely accepted understanding of human health.

CHAPTER IV: The Horror Genre & Disability

Disability exists within the disciplinary purview of madness, thus this chapter can, for the most part, be interpreted as an extension or sub-schapter of Chapter III. However, this overarching research study's position as an academic understructure for the creative project (see "The Creative Component" section for details) necessitates an extensive exploration of asylum and psychosis narratives in particular, thus the distinction of disability from the larger madness section serves in large part to prevent convolution; it's important to clearly establish that "mental illness" and "disability" are non-interchangeable within the framework of this study. Research set out by Evan DeVries via the Thompson Policy Institute on Disability defines *developmental disabilities* as a term engulfing disabilities that occur during the developmental period (in some cases before birth) and continue throughout a person's life — these may be physical, cognitive, or both; *intellectual disabilities* fall under the realm of developmental disabilities (abbreviated together as IDD's), but they are limited to cognitive processes ("Comparing mental illness"). IDD's can reduce a person's cognitive ability in addition to other processes; mental illnesses, on the other hand, do not impact cognitive ability, but rather they alter an individual's cognitive perception — to that point, mental illness diagnoses allow for the use of psychotropic medications to foster a form of treatment in a way that would have no effect on an IDD.

These critical distinctions aside, the previous chapter's establishment of stigma creation models, discussions of social construction of abnormality and abjection theory, and the explorations of socio-cultural contexts engulfing horror's on-screen portrayals of madness provide the framework for understanding the way the genre's perpetual implementation of physically and/or intellectually abnormal features in villain/monster constructions has the power to cultivate psychological senses of fear, employ sensationalization tactics, and implicate people with physical and cognitive disabilities through the stigmatization of disabled traits.

The information presented above serves to preface the fact that this chapter does not intend to provide a heavy re-emphasis on socio-cultural meaning-making process, but rather seeks to examine certain tropes in which disability is coded as fear-inducing by some metric, and in doing so, highlight an array of contemporary horror media projects that showcase ableist stereotyping. The chapter will culminate in an exploration of potential on-screen world-making strategies that may foster compassion and a revitalization of diasabled characterhood in the horror space.

Contemporary Horror & Ableist Stereotyping

As Paul K. Longmore notes in his influential essay surrounding images of disability in television and cinema, villainous or criminal characters across the horror genre are often given disabilities and/or disabled traits in a way that reinforces three common tropes, all of which reflect prejudices surrounding disabled people and their mindframes: 1) disability is a punishment for evil; 2) disabled people are embittered by their "fate"; and 3) disabled people resent the able-bodied population, and if they could, they would destroy them (134). In many "monster" stories, such as the 1831 horror classic *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which preceded non-horror TV movie remakes in 1939 and 1996, the disabled character is excluded by the fear and contempt held by the able-bodied majority; audiences are urged to pity Quasimodo by representing the character sympathetically as a victim of bigotry, yet both the classic horror ending (Quasimodo's love interest Esmeralda is killed, and he dies of suicide by wasting away at her grave) and the on-screen resolutions (Quasimodo's acceptance of his unrequited love [in the 1996 animated film, Esmeralda and the tritagonist end up together]) imply that severe disability renders complete social integration impossible, "happy ending" or not (135). Furthermore, by often linking corporeal difference with "violent propensities that 'normally' would be kept in check by internal mechanisms of self-control," much horor media visually reinforces the familiar ableist assumption that physical disability "involves the loss [or lack] of an essential part of one's humanity" and "endangers the rest of society" (Olney 294; Longmore 135). The association of disability imagery with moral decay and villainous motivation can further be illustrated through contemporary mainstream film content such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984); the 1977 and 2006 versions of *The Hills Have Eyes;* and the *Friday the 13th* franchise, all of which displayed significant box office success with international grosses of at least twice (and up to as much as 14 times) their original budgets (IMDbPro).

A Nightmare on Elm Street's main villain, Freddy Krueger, represents the spirit conjured by a child killer whose parents burned him to death after evading prison. He is centrally defined in physicality by his disfiguring facial burns, and thus his characterization and backstory speak closely to the first trope outlined by Longmore: disability as a punishment for evil, with the "evil" in this case corresponding to the original child killer's homicidal tendencies. Not to mention, Wes Craven describes the creative construction process behind conjuring Freddy Krueger: he states that "a lot of the killers [in the horror genre] were wearing masks: Leatherface, Michael Myers, Jason. I wanted my villain to have a 'mask,' but be able to talk and taunt and threaten. So I thought of him being burned and scarred" (Marks and Tannenbaum, "Freddy Lives"). Not only does Craven suggest that a disabled attribute can be reduced to a

"mask" (a covering worn as a disguise), but he implies that burns and scars are "threatening" and "taunting." It can be inferred that Craven associated a sense of unease and fear with disabled traits even before the 1984 debut of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, as Craven's 1977 film, *The Hills Have Eyes*, employs a similar tactic. The film chronicles a family whose car breaks down in a secluded area, and they're subsequently targeted by the "Hill People": a group of cannibalist outcasts who've been physically mutated through radiation. The physical depictions of mutation and deformity within the main antagonists, however, are in line with the physical presentations of an array of real disabilities: Big Brain's distended head and enlarged throat (hydrocephalus and goiters); Cyst's reddish body lesions (neurofibromatosis), limp, and large neck brace; Lizard's cleft lip and malformed jaw; and many peripheral characters' incompletely-developed facial features which correspond to an array of developmental disabilities including Goldenhar syndrome (IMDbPro). The premise itself links the gain of a disability (caused by radiation in this case) to a diminishment of humanity and morality (homicidal and cannibalistic impulses). According to an interview with Horror.com, Craven cites the conceptual inspiration for *The Hills* as the story of Sawney Bean: a 16th century Scottsman who was the leader of 45-member cult that murdered and cannibalized over 1,000 people within two decades (Tarlton Law Library, "Sawney Beane"). Though it's debated whether Sawney Bean was a real person or a mythical legend, in either case, the figure is not publicly documented to have been disabled, suggesting that the implementation of physically and intellectually disabled traits in Craven's version was a means to amplify the fear factor, as it was for *Elm Street*. Wes Craven — a successful, world-renowned horror filmmaker — demonstrates how disbabled traits are often implemented and sensationalized across the horror genre solely to augment fear. Alexandre Aja's 2006 remake of *The Hills* takes many cues from the original film in the way that it depicts the cannibals' bodily disfigurement.

Film character Jason Voorheeves is the young boy who drowned at summer camp as a result of inattentive counselors, and he is the son of camp-cook-turned-vengeful-murderer, Mrs. Voorhees; he is also commonly referred to as the main villain/monster within the *Friday the 13th* franchise. The original film's co-creator/writer Victor Miller did not intend for Jason to be an antagonist, and he was initially written as having a mental disability with no physically disabled traits (Bracke 206). Jason's disabled physical features were the concoctions of Tom Savini, the film's makeup and special effects artist who was tasked with creating Jason's appearance; the character design was inspired by someone Savini knew as a child whose "eyes and ears didn't line up straight" as well as the physical traits associated with Hydrocephalus —the choice to make Jason bald was also rooted in the decision to give him a

"hydrocephalic, mongoloid pinhead" (206). The change in the character's appearance prompted the creation of the iconic penultimate scene in which Jason's decomposing body jumps out from the lake to attack the main protagonist Alice, giving way to the ending where Alice wakes up in a hospital and warns that Jason is still out there. This final scene paved the way for the franchise's subsequent content. In a later interview with Miller, he makes the claim that the original film probably wouldn't have been as good if Jason was a "cute [able-bodied] blonde kid that looked like Betsy Palmer at 8 years old," implying that fear and horror can be accelerated by the visual presence of disability. Furthermore, in all of the iterations following the 1980 film, Jason uses a disguise to conceal his face (the pop-culturally iconic hockey mask first appeared in the franchise's third installment, *Friday The 13th Part III* [1982]), which may loosely imply that the character feels shame attached his disabled physical appearance and/or the necessity to outwardly conceal disabled traits. More prominently, however, the character's adoption of the slasher killer persona from *Friday The 13th Part 2* (1981) onward speaks heavily to the "embitterred-disabled-character" cliché as well as the trope that paints disabled characters as bloodthirsty and resentful of the able-bodied population (Longmore 134).

Laying the Groundwork for Positive Disabled Representation in Horror

In the same journal referenced in the Literature Review section, M. Hall asserts that the horror genre has the potential to subvert ableism by acknowledging "social constructions and [cultural products]" during the formation of the story world. By exploring the story configurations exhibited by the works of gothic fantasy/horror filmmaker Tim Burton, one can examine the liberating possibilities that exist in the horror space for new socio-political thought surrounding disability.

Horror theorist Noël Carroll situates the "monster" of many horror narratives as an "extraordinary" character within an "ordinary" world (Carroll 52). In many Tim Burton films, on the other hand, there are extraordinary monsters who exist in extraordinary worlds with ordinary feelings, wherein the realm of the ordinary is depicted as a site for exclusion, unjustifiable cruelty, and/or mundane conventionality (Hall 6-9). In *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), for instance, a gothic setting is juxtaposed with a "candy-coated" suburban setting, and protagonist Edward — a half-human-half-machine hybrid with scissors for hands — is utilized by the suburban residents to fulfill certain needs (e.g. haircutting, shrubbery trimming, etc.). Edward finds himself demonized by the community after he is used by a man to pick a lock. Edward is then startled into a fight by the man who used him, and Edward stabs and kills him in efforts to defend a woman that Edward had befriended. Edward is subsequently ostracized and

casted away by the social collective, inhabiting a gothic castle where the weather and color saturation are distinctly more gloomy. Nonetheless, the narrative positions audiences to identify with Edward and harbor disgust for the social exclusion promoted by the suburban environment. Though not specifically referenced by M. Hall, Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) is a stop-motion animated musical within the dark fantasy subgenre of horror which positions all of the primary protagonists and antagonists within the realm of the extraordinary, namely "Halloween Town." The fictional town is populated by an array of monsters, creatures, and beings associated with the holiday. Doctor Finklestein, who employs an iteration of the "mad scientist" archetype and uses a motorized wheelchair, acts as an overbearing father figure to the protagonist's love interest, Sally (a rag doll); apart from this depiction, a majority of the Halloween Town residents, due to the anthropomorphic nature of the character design, have arguably neutral socio-political connotations, at least within North American framework: a ghost dog, a burlap sack ghost later revealed to be filled with bugs, and a candy corn represent just a few embodiments of the innumerable amount of citizens, and a skeleton named Jack Skellingotn constitutes the film's main protagonist. Despite a lack of inhibition, Jack is characterized as highly charismatic, and he's very popular amongst the Halloween Town residents. Holding the sacred title of "The Pumpkin King," Jack is tasked with annual execution of the Halloween celebration, and in search of new inspiration for activities and concepts to implement, he stumbles across "Christmas Town." Christmas Town represents this film's "realm of the ordinary," populated by able-bodied humans in a festively decorated suburbia. Nonetheless, as audiences have already situated their orientations of the fictional world within the extraordinary, the "normal" setting and the characters within it are rendered two-dimensional and unworthy of fostering a genuine connection to — at least not to the same degree that the audience has already created relationships to the "abnormal" characters in Halloween Town and the unusual, horror-oriented setting.

More recently, a Disability Studies editorial by researcher Dr. Raphael Raphael explores a divergent trend within the horror genre galvanized by *A Quiet Place* (2018) in which audiences are invited to imagine having a particular disability as distinctly advantageous in the film's story world (1). Raphael suggests that horror films that urge viewers to vicariously experience a main character's disability generally do so by depicting the disabilty as a source of terror: *Wait Until Dark* (1967), for instance, follows young Susy, a blind character portrayed by Aundrey Hepburn, and she is faced with an array threats made horrific precisibly by her inability to see (1). *See No Evil* (1971) has an extremely similar framework in which blind protagonist Mia is portrayed as a vulnerable and helpless victim amidst

the murders of her housemates. Honorable mentions that have flipped this basis in recent years include *Hush* (2016) and *Don't Breathe* (2014). In both films, the disabled characters (deaf protagonist Maddie in *Hush* and blind antagonist Norman in *Don't Breathe*) are initially seen by peripheral characters as easy targets due their disabilities; over the course of the stories, those assumptions are revealed to be gross underestimations. The phenomenon Raphel speaks of, however, has an even more distinct world-building process. *A Quiet Place* is situated in a post-apocalyptic world in which alien creatures viscerally attack anything that they hear — "existing without the sense of sound and communicating in sign language" are both crucial to staying alive in this environment, thus "living as if one is deaf" offers a distinct survival instinct (2). *Bird Box* (2018) follows suit, as the narrative is based around survival in a world populated by alien life forms that murder anything that looks at them. In both *A Quiet Place* and *Bird Box*, it proves beneficial to have (or act as though you have) a certain disability, and some fans have picked up on the stark connection between the films, referring to *Bird Box* as "*A Blind Place*" (3). Raphael asserts that these narratives do not depict an authentic experience of disability nor do they adhere to the "nothing about us without us" standard that many activists across all socio-cultural sectors have been demanding for ages; they do, however, point to an opportunity that the horror industry could fully realize where "a wildly popular film [that does] for ableism what *Get Out* did for racism" can exist and thrive commercially (3).

The Creative Component: *On the Other Side*

Project Concept

The creative component I've developed in conjunction with this research examination is entitled, *On the Other Side*. *On the Other Side* is a supernatural/psychological thriller limited series like *Behind Her Eye*s (2021) with the tonal flavor of an anthology like *Black Mirror* (2011—) and pointed sociological messaging like *Get Out*.

After overcoming a bout with clinical depression, Afro-Latina painter Caia is ready to finally live life to the fullest. But on her 18th birthday — May 17th, 2001 — she has an extremely visceral nightmare that she can't seem to let go of. Her family fears that it's her mental health getting the best of her again. But when Caia finds out that she was adopted and they aren't her real parents, she loses all trust in them. Now fighting for answers, Caia can't seem to shake the feeling that she's being followed (or even led) by a ghost in the form of a little girl that eerily looks like her. This represents the main arc of the pilot episode.

On a mirroring journey that will kick off the second episode of the series is Kellan, a twenty-something, pro-Black civil rights activist who understands the beauty of mother Africa. His diverse upbringing in the 1960s has brought him into contact with a lot of different beliefs, including that of Vodun. He uses his knowledge of this culture to try and connect with the lost soul of his mother to the dismay of those around him.

Caia and Kellan both wind up institutionalized by the people who are supposed to love them the most. When all hope seems to be fading away, these two connected souls realize that their destinies are intertwined. A guide from the astral-plane pays them both a visit to help them find their roots in another dimension.

After their trip into their history, Caia and Kellan find that they are more connected than they thought. Now, with this full awareness, they must work together to fulfill a prophecy and break free from the systems that favor Western medicine and demonize their African spirituality in order to heal their family forever.

A completed pilot episode; a pitch presentation; and pre-established potential chronology and beat breakdowns to underscore how the overarching narrative is situated within my research represents this project's current stages as of August, 2022.

Considerations

Although I felt that disability was an important branch of madness to highlight given the subject matter of the research exploration, for the creative component, I did not want to pigeonhole a physically and/or intellectually disabled character into a script for which they were not carefully devised. I say this while acknowledging that much of the work that needs to be done is simply showing disaled characters in a normalized light. Still, I think it's important for that normalcy to be underscored by intentionally-crafted, accessible world- and character-building techniques; if the narrative is underpinned by showcasing the plights of inaccessibility, however, I believe an authentic contextual grip on how that inaccessibility manifests itself is essential for any content creator to possess, whether they're disabled or able-bodied. I do intend for the casting process to be inclusive, and I believe that having secondary characters with physical disabilities would not only be helpful to create a more inclusive film and television industry, but also reflective of the world we live in. However, as my concept deals with multidimensional planes of existence and eras before many social developments and policy shifts for disabled people in North America occurred (the Rehabilitation Act [1973], the Americans with Disabilities Act [1990], and the Accessible Canada Act [2019] just to name a few], I felt as though I was not equipped to undertake the process of explicitly writing a disabled character at present.

Inspiration & Creative Process

At the core of this project and the chosen research topic at large are the experiences leading up up to my younger brother's label as on the schizophrenia spectrum and his subsequent dealings with institutionalization and medication; this, coupled with my own plights surrounding misdiagnoses within the psychiatry realm, represent my primary source of inspiration. Some of the preliminary research for this dissertation, namely that which emphasized taking white psychiatry at face value, prompted an adjacent deep dive surrounding multidimensional notions of reality that exist within an array of different cultures; this led me to fostering an understanding of the *astral realm*, which heavily aided in shaping the series plot.

The Astral Realm, Yoruba Cosmology, and Vodun

Though it may be referred to by other names in different religions and cultures, the astral plane can loosely be defined as the plane of existence where all consciousness is understood to reside — an extensive range of philosophies, religions, and belief systems consider this to be the world of celestial

bodies, the realm that the soul inhabits on its way to being born and/or after death, as well as the higher plane populated by a variety of immaterial beings that exist in the universe, such as angels and spirits. In the first chapter of *Astral Doorways*, “Understanding the Astral,” Brennan explains that the average person may accept and understand themself solely as a body and mind, but recognizing the Self as your “core essence,” so to speak, lays groundwork for understanding how the Self can be seen as somewhat of a dividing line between the physical world and the mental world. On the physical side, you have your immediate surroundings then, progressively, your town, your country, earth, the world, and the universe; on the mental side, you have your personality and the inner mask that exists atop of your essential self then, progressively, your conscious thoughts and feelings, your subconscious, the unconscious mind, and the states of consciousness reached when the brain is disabled (4-5). Brennan explains that the astral realm extends from the Self and touches all parts of the mental world — it’s the fluid mechanism that turns your thoughts into pictures, abstractions into symbols, and your emotions into driving forces for action (5). He claims that the most common type of astral operation is that of the day-dream; your thoughts are translated into images (they may even play out narratively), and you may feel emotions, but your level of conscious control is wavering (5). The viewpoint here is that the deeper you travel into the astral realm, however, the less control you have in the physical realm: unconscious forces begin to shape the imaginary environment and your interpretation of symbols, and the Self starts to lose touch with the physical world. Awareness becomes increasingly limited to the astral realm (5-6). Correspondingly, astral projection (sometimes referred to as “astral travel”) is an intentional out-of-body experience facilitated for a variety of purposes (healing, curiosity, self-care, spiritual practice, etc.) during which one’s soul/nonphysical essence can consciously travel throughout the astral realm (Guerrero 1). This understanding sets the framework for my concept and establishes the rules by which my story world abides.

My astral realm exploration also led me to a conceptually adjacent look into Yoruba cosmology, namely the *Ori*: a notion rooted in the Indigenous Yoruba culture of West Africa. Central to Yoruba cosmology is the idea that everyone was born with a destiny or sense or purpose (*ori*) and was called to earth to discover it; this attainment of purpose can be seen as an achievement of full integration of one’s mind, body, and spirit during their time in the physical world (Adefarakan, “Integrating Body”). The spirit component of this dynamic is eternal and transcendent, and a human is thus considered an infusion of physical matter with spirit; when a person dies, for instance, the core spirit moves back into the spiritual field and merges into what Dr. Adefarakan describes as a communal, universal “Self,” which I

interpret as a collective consciousness — I take this as a semantically variant explanation of the astral plane and how the human psyche is interconnected with it, but with deeper ancestral roots.

All in all, this discovery catalyzed the already-strong desire to incorporate at least some components of African spirituality, tradition, or worldview-construction into my creative component in efforts to underscore global Black empowerment and psychological decolonization efforts. The way that the West African religion of Vodun, commonly referred to as voodoo, has developed miscreant connotations across Western culture then came to mind as a story feature that could underscore my messaging goals on a more profound level.

What initially began as a trope-diverting, Afrofuturism-oriented examination of some of the systemic barriers fostered by North American conceptions of race, class, and varied manifestations of madness — after numerous rewrites, peer review sessions, and research developments — culminated in a story determined to fill certain story-telling gaps within the elevated horror space by means of 1) offering varied depictions of racialized characterhood; 2) exploring bigger questions about the universe and higher consciousness outside of hegemonic standards for mental health; and 3) honing a writing approach that I believe lays a foundation to create visual landscapes promoting highly-stylized, diverse cultural aesthetics.

Diverting Tropes & Oppressive Ideology

Long before embarking on this postgraduate journey, I've had a deep-seated fascination with horror. Growing up, I dealt with parasomnia, which by definition is a sleep disorder that involves unusual and undesirable physical events or experiences that disrupt your sleep. In my case, I dealt with sleep paralysis, which is generally accompanied by often-frightening hallucinations. Nonetheless, I did what I could to turn lemons into lemonade and started writing scary stories based on what I was experiencing, which cemented my interest in dark genres. From age 9 onward, the R-rated horror content I could get my hands on coupled with children's geared horror media (e.g. *Coraline* [2009], *Monster House* [2006], *The Nightmare Before Christmas* [1998], etc.) crystallized horror and most of its substyles as my favorite genre. However, as a proud Black woman, an anthropology and geography enthusiast, a mental health advocate, a constant traveler, and a self-proclaimed global thinker, my passions in life are heavily rooted in promoting global diversity and cross-cultural compassion. Despite my proclivity towards the horror genre, my goal as a content creator is still to reflect those cosmopolitan values, explicitly countering some

of the horror genre's proclivities to subjugate marginalized demographics through on-screen stereotypes and tropes.

In response, I reworked the "magical negro" trope by, for one, emphaszing that the character who vaguely embodies that archetype is not Black, and having this character serve imporant purposes in the plot outside of merely aiding the protagonist's journey. One of the overarching aims of the series, furthermore, is to offer fresh representations of Black characters with an emphasis on cross-culturalism: Caia, who doesn't realize she's adopted at the start of the story, is raised as a proud Torontian with a Black-Canadian mom and a Mexican dad (with whom she speaks fluent Spanish) — however, it's later revealed [at least based on the story's current conception] that her biological parents are African-American and Blasian. Another goal of the story that I deem crucial is the breaking out of hegemonic molds for understanding mental health, at least to some degree; in this case, I position psychiatry and its surrounding institutions primarily as vehicles for fostering legacies of oppression and dismissal of alternative thought – "alternative," in this context, serving as a euphemism for "non-white," while subtly depicting a scant amount of genuine success stories throughout the narrative. As mentioned prior, the Yoruba cosmology and Vodun concepts I examined aided me in orienting the world in which my story takes place, taking inspiration from *His House* for its use of some of the rich narratives spanning across the African continent to create culturally-rooted horror elements.

Project Scope: What's Next?

This series concept and its underlying research foundation is one that I'd like to take to market in one way or another. Over the course of this program, I've developed a foundational pitch deck that I believe has prospects to garner financial production support and/or adjacent resources by certain Canadian media organizations such as eOne, Crave, or Boat Rocker Media. That said, before the end of the year, I plan to initiate negotiations surrounding creative involvement for Canadian artists and writers (e.g. Téa Mutonji and C.L. Polk) whose previous works suggest their ability to provide valuable insight on authentically and stylistically portraying a Torontonian upbringing, which I feel will bolster a sense of security amongst potential Canadian investors. Nevertheless, the perspective of an American-born soon-to-be Canadian creator is not one that is typically explored across Canadian media, yet Canadians on the whole do seem to be culturally engaged by American politics as well as aid in the collective North American box office success of many American-based horror films with explicit contemporary socio-cultural messages (*Get Out* [$176M], *Mother!* [$17.8M], the 2021 iteration of *Candyman* [$61.2],

and *Midsommar* [$27.M]) (IMDbPro). Therefore, the way the critical and public perceptions of explicitly depicted macro-cultural rhetorics on-screen, particularly if a large part of the content is situated in Toronto during the 2000s era (a time period that has resurged in public interest amongst the pop-cultural-landscape-enforcing "Generation Z"), represents an intriguing embarkation for my career.

All of this in mind, as a proponent of borderless collaboration (and a holder of US citizenship), I plan to also press my luck outside the domestic Canadian media sphere if my initial efforts to bring the project to market via Toronto's commercial production channels are not actualized. I intend to do this by re-crafting the pitch deck to cater to platforms like Shudder (AMC), with key advisory input from a connection I've gained and nurtured through cold-emailing networking tactics: Xavier Burgin, who made his directorial debut on the Shudder platform with *Horror Noire* (a critically acclaimed documentary exploring African-Americans' socio-historical positions in Hollywood via their relation to the horror genre), which I heavily cite throughout Chapter II.

What's been laid out in this section does not represent every potential path forward for this project — for instance, both of my parents and, by extension, close family-friends are particularly well-connected across industries, as my dad had a decades-spanning NBA career and my mom attended a top-ranking HBCU (historically Black college/university) in the States. Nonetheless, I haven't developed an explicit plan to harness those resources yet, thus the base plan for *On the Other Side* at present is to further cultivate the pitch and even tweak the screenplay itself as needed in pursuit of the aforementioned dissemination avenues.

Conclusion

Recap & Findings

Media representation and the development thereof can be dissected and analyzed from a variety of angles, and as demonstrated over the course of this assessment, the relationships that the horror genre has to Black communities and mad demographics (the disabled community included) is far from clear-cut, let alone static. With regard to findings from Chapter II, "A History of the Horror Genre & Blackness," the progression of Black participation and representation in the Western world's horror media realm seems to mirror the progression of Black race relations on socio-cultural and -political levels. The way that BIPOC empowerment has conceptually gained (and will ideally continue to gain) hegemonic traction across societal sectors in recent years parallels how Black involvement and agency in the horror media development space has deepened and begun to shift further away from the discriminatory, prejudice-filled, all-white creation landscape it once was. This also lays the groundwork for expecting even higher degrees of ethnic and cultural diversity in narrative and character constructions across the genre in years to come. In both "The Horror Genre & Madness" and "The Horror Genre & Disability," those chapters' primary findings directly underscore the exploration of the first chapter, "The Horror of Structural Inequality" by acknowledging how metrics of abnormality are socially constructed with fluctuating parameters; the resulting consensuses on what constitutes abnormality, regardless of the degree of logical and/or socially-inclusive substantiation, are ultimately capitalized upon to create senses of fear. By using the framework of abject theory — the notion that sensations such as tension, intrigue, and aversion intermingle when one is confronted by an abject character/person/object — one can recognize how institutions based around upholding the ideas of abnormality with the most hegemonic backing (e.g. asylums) as well as the features, traits, behaviors, etc. of those classified as "abnormal" are harnessed by storytellers to create psychologically gripping narratives. Not to mention, visual media is identified as a stigma creation site. Therefore, sustaining on-screen associations between abnormal characteristics and danger, repulsion, and/or shock can yield the stigmatization of said characteristics, ultimately bringing about discrimination against those who embody them. Nonetheless, constructing worlds, settings, and characters in horror content that position abnormality as either tastefully extraordinary or "the standard" may be a foundation upon which the genre can start to dismantle many of the tropes surrounding portrayals of madness it has a tendency to perpetuate.

Intersectional Acknowledgments

Considering Chapter I's breakdown of the white supremacist cultural landscapes in which all of the aforementioned horror content is situated, it should come as no suprise that intersectionality plays an integral role in truly accentuating the research's key takeaways. Intersectionality as a concept can be thought of as an analytical tool often used to dissect and formulate connections between social inequality, power, social context, and relationality in efforts to gauge the complexity of the world, people, and human experience (Collins and Bilge 27-30). An example that is specific to the framework of this paper is the fact there are Black disabled people and Black people who deal with mental health struggles across the world, and as prefaced in the Literature Review via discussions of coded rhetoric in on-screen horror and sci-fi, the intersectionality of racism and madness-based discrimination (e.g. ableism) is virtually impossible to refute as an existing phenomneon. More explicitly though, the overarching connection that unfolded over the course of paper is the inherent and dominant presence of whiteness in the bulk of nearly every meaning-making paradigm discussed, extending beyond horror media itself and into constructions of human value, societal worth, health care systems, and general social codes/norms.

A variety of wiles have been used against disabled and racialized peoples alike in horror, implicating traits and bodies that don't fit within a white, able-bodied framework as evil and fear-inducing. The analysis surrounding stereotyping in the disability chapter as well as certain phenomenons touched upon in the chapter on Blackness (e.g. the "jungle" trend, the comedic buffoon trope, the positioning of "Black horror" to encompass films promoting Black discrimination and violence, etc.) corrrelate in how certain features and behaviours associated with disability and/or Blackness — including those constructed through stereotyping and projection — have often been linked with "ugliness," "primitivity," and "scariness" in the visual horror domain (Onyx, "Ridding Your Monsters"). An example that encapsulates this point in an overt way is the original *Friday the 13th* film creators' description of Jason Voorhees as a "mongoloid [creature]" throughout the character and plot development processes (Bracke 206). Oxford Languages' definitions of the term "mongoloid" are as follows:

> 1. a person belonging to the division of humankind including the indigenous peoples of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Arctic region of North America.
>
> 2. a person with Down syndrome.

Oxford Languages clarifies that the term, in the case of either definition, is considered dated and pejorative. Frankly, it is not clear what the *Friday the 13th* creators meant to express in their usage of the word to characterize Jason back in the mid 1980s, but the racism and ableism underpinned by the term

itself coupled with the international prominence, pop-cultural popularity, and financial success garnered by the film franchise and its developers allow one to gauge the manner in which intersectional prejudices are (at least retrospectively) embedded in mainstream construction processes of horror narratives and characters.

Future of the Research

This research has touched on a wide range of parameters across different disciplines; inequality, white supremacy, human health, socio-politics, cultural meaning-making, and tendencies of on-screen horror content may represent a overarching gist of the topics discussed, but the reality is that each subsection of this paper leaves room to dig deeper. Thus, I believe the ensuing studies and explorations that can be cultivated beyond the framework of this research are virtually limitless.

One avenue that I'm personally considering pursuing to actively take this research a step further is the Fulbright US Scholar Program: an organization that provides US Citizen undergraduate and graduate students, scholars, and recently graduated professionals with grants to carry out fully-funded research projects in a country of their choice (given that the desired country is affiliated with the Fulbright organization and offers grants that speak to the applicant's preferred academic/professional discipline). The deadline to apply for the current year via my alma mater, Syracuse University, is September 15th, 2022. However, my eligibility extends through the year 2029. Although I haven't solidified a country of choice yet, I plan to gear the research study proposal for the application towards a further exploration of the constructions of horror media in socio-cultural contexts across continental borders, establishing innovative and commercially viable paths forward for the genre based upon specific international frameworks. I plan to submit excerpts from this research study as well as the pilot and pitch deck as supplementary application materials. My intention to embark on this journey — whether that happens this September or in September of 2028 — emphasizes my desire to capitalize on as many opportunities as I can in order to develop a strong foundation for achieving my ultimate career goal of forging a unique place in the public media sphere as a leader in the elevated horror media space.

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