

Refusal, Rage, Retribution, and Reconsiderations of Black Motherhood in American Horror
Cinema

by

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Abstract

This study provides a Black feminist analysis of the representation of Black mothers in two contemporary Black American horror films. The project examines how Black filmmakers use contemporary Black maternal horror narratives to disrupt the dominant image of the Black mother as submissive, self-sacrificing, or enduring, setting up Black motherhood instead as a site of redress and reclamation. The project interprets the figure of the Black Mother in contemporary Black horror films through articulations of refusal and rage. Drawing on Black feminist scholarship concerning memory, the afterlife of enslavement, race and gender, this project prioritizes the following frameworks: Patricia Hill Collins' controlling images, Saidiya Hartman's concept of redress, Tina Campt's theory of refusal, Audre Lorde's work on anger, and Nikki M. Taylor's theory on retributive justice. This theoretical synthesis probes Black horror's ability to reimagine the Black mother through affective refusal, anger, and retribution to meaningfully assert Black maternal protagonists' autonomy. Through close narrative and visual analysis of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) and Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny* (2022), this project contends that these films offer narrative redress. They strategically visit the legacies of enslavement by imagining contemporary Black mothers in its afterlife as agents of active refusal to the horrors and precarity entrenched in the haunts of Black motherhood. They deploy the modern lens of Black horror to ensure that the rage of Black mothers is not marginalized in its representation, or depicted as dehumanized monstrosity, but instead is portrayed as restored humanity and affirmed Black maternal subjectivity.

Key Words: Black Motherhood; Black Feminist Thought; Contemporary Black Horror; Refusal; Redress

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Dedication

*This thesis is lovingly dedicated to **Yemi, my mother**, who guides me even from afar.*

Ọmọ ti wa lati inu

Ẹ kú ewu ọmọ

O seun, lyá mi, fún bibi mi

Yika ti yin fun Mama nitori o gan bu awon

Ọmọ Yemi n se daadaa

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Chapter 1: Introduction

American horror films have historically erased the Black female presence. The cinematic horror genre has long functioned as a repository for the America's deepest anxieties, which it historically achieved through willing the "violent erasure of Black womanhood" and cultivating a paradoxical "absent-presence" (hooks, 1992, p. 119). I contend that Black women's absence in the horror genre is most glaring and unnerving in the scarcity of Black women featured as mothers in significant roles. Thus, this study contends that the marginalization of the Black maternal figure is a structural necessity for a genre that draws its power from a racial history it refuses to name. As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues, when Black women's voices are "omitted," it creates false "universal" theories that claim to speak for all women, but are often restricted by the "white, Western, and middle-class" perspectives of those who wrote them (pp. 5–6). In a similar vein, I consider how the historical exclusion of Black women from the America's horror cinematic canon has fundamentally skewed the universal understanding of motherhood, women in distress, centring white, middle-class experiences, while omitting the specificities of Black women in distress, and Black maternal life.

Screen Mammy Construct: A Progenitor of Hollywood's Black Maternal Void

The specific invisibility of Black maternal life in horror is an extension of a much older cinematic tradition of containment. To contextualize this violent erasure, I first consider the broader landscape of Hollywood cinema through the lens of Edward Mapp's (1973) scholarship. In "Black Women in Films," Mapp critiques how a "tragic history of stereotyping and a steady procession of mammies, maids, and miscegenists, matriarchs, madams and assorted 'make-it-for-money' types" was used for over a half-century of screen humiliation for the black woman" (Mapp, 1973, p. 42). Within this white male hegemonic control, the Black maternal figure was bastardized into a "figment of white male fantasy" (p. 42). Her capacity for nurture became

synonymous with the oppressive expectation of perpetual servility, casting her as “mother surrogate, scapegoat, [and] unpaid servant” (p. 42). In the wake of enslavement, Hollywood legitimized the Black maternal figure’s transformation into the “screen mammy,” imposing the expectation that she be “everybody’s rock of Gibraltar” (Mapp, 1973, p. 43). This cinematic construction served a specific sociopolitical function: it transformed the historical realities of enslaved Black maternal figure’s suffering into a mythical, “enigmatic perversion” (Mapp, 1973, p. 42). Black women as mammies on-screen filled the absurdly contradictory role of an “undignified low paying” yet strong, self-reliant worker “relegated to ‘her place’ in the kitchen or pantry” (Mapp, 1973, p. 42). Thus, Hollywood’s portrayals of Black maternal roles reduced Black women’s already harrowed claim to motherhood to serviceable labour, and ultimately dismissed meaningful consideration for Black maternal subjectivity.

However, in his critique of Hollywood’s constraints on Black women’s on-screen roles, Mapp (1973) contemplates a crucial point, which I believe is key to locating Black mothers’ humanity. Mapp states, “The catch here is that mammy’s rage, repressed in over fifty years of Hollywood films, is due for a deliverance” (p. 43). It must be asked: What would happen should the mammy release her rage? How would deliverance manifest? This study seeks to locate that deliverance within the horror genre and interrogate the ways cinema might finally stage a confrontation between a Black maternal figure traditionally forbidden from feeling fury and the centuries of simmering, raging resentment that characterize her historical existence.

Research Question

This thesis asks: *How is the figure of the Black mother in contemporary Black horror films interpreted through articulations of refusal, rage, and retribution?* I interrogate how

modern Black horror films written and directed by Black filmmakers, actively engage with these themes to characterize the Black maternal figure, and reclaim agency long denied to Black women as mothers within both social reality and cinematic representation. I interpret these articulations through distinct analytical registers. Regarding refusal, I draw on Black feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art Tina Campt's (2019) concept to define refusal as a rejection of the anti-Black "status quo" imposed by the white gaze; namely, a resistance to Black mothers being treated as a domestic or reproductive commodity. For rage, I follow Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde's (1981) concepts of anger and rage, treating rage as an informational and generative force used to expose the systemic violences of the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007, p. 6), and not as a pathology. And I define retribution through the lens of African-American historian Nikki M. Taylor's (2023) framework of Black feminist justice, which conceptualizes "lethal resistance" of enslaved women who enacted violence and "calculated" murderous approaches as a deliberate, radical strategy to target those who uphold their subjugation (Taylor, 2023, p. 4).

The Black Mother as the Absent Centre of American Horror

The significance of the Black mother in horror lies in her role as the vital "witness" (Cooper, 1892/1988, p. 4) to the foundational terrors of the American project. As an institution, Atlantic chattel slavery was predicated on what Hortense Spillers (1987) describes as a "theft of the body" (p. 67) a process of ungendering where the enslaved female was stripped and denied of the virtuous protections of womanhood and motherhood afforded to white women. Framing the slave experience as an "embodied phenomenon," allows for an understanding of the violent relationship between embodiment and subjectivity (Bakare-Yusuf, 1999, p. 313). Under the "regime" of the Middle Passage, the Black body was reduced to a "surface" intended for the

infliction of pain, torture, and terror (Bakare-Yusuf, 1999, p. 314). Nigerian Anthropologist, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (1999) argues that the history of American slavery is defined by “endless assaults on bodies,” where Black women were forcibly subjugated to be transformed into both “productive and reproductive bodies” within capitalist modes of production (p. 313). Under this terrifying regime of the Middle Passage, the Black woman’s womb was transformed into a site of capitalist production.

The 1662 Virginia legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, ensured the status of enslavement followed the mother, making the children born to Black women itemized property not akin to subjects (Reece, 2023, p. 29). This dehumanized conditioning treated white women as mothers who birthed heirs to American civilization, but Black women as expendable figures who birthed capital to be exhausted. (Bakare-Yusuf, 1999, p. 313). Consequently, in the 19th-century American imagination, the role of *mother* was a gendered status reserved for the white female, while the Black female was relegated to the status of a producer (Welter, 1966, p. 151). This rupture of kinship and the denial of the right to mother is a central horror of the Black experience in America. In this project, I use the terms *Black mother* and *Black maternal figure* interchangeably to the Black mother characters in the selected horror film case studies. This is done to acknowledge the political tension between the biological act of birthing and the sociopolitical struggle to reclaim a maternal subjectivity that was historically, legally, and socially precluded.

I contend that the imaginative tropes and foundational themes of American cinematic horror such as the loss of bodily autonomy, the violent rupture of kinship, the distortion of the familial, and the fear of encroaching unknown forces, are the constitutive elements of Black

motherhood under the regime of American chattel slavery. Despite the genre frequently presenting a white woman in distress as the ultimate spectacle of terror, these narratives are historically rooted in the systemic harms first visited upon enslaved Black women, whose reproductive capacities served as the economic catalyst for the institution of slavery (Reece, 2023). I consider the Black maternal figure to exist as the absent centre of the American cinematic horror tradition. The marginalization and invisibility of Black mothers in the genre is a requirement of a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist film industry. Thus, granting Black mothers subjectivity within American cinematic horror would mean confronting the literal history of the terrors in a genre that seeks to commodify their pain.

A Brief Genealogy of Black Maternal Visibility in Horror Cinema

The historical dismissal of Black mothers is evidenced in the early “absent-presence” of characters like Malla in *The Leech Woman* (1960). Relegated to the role of an elderly African “Voodoo practicing maid” (Coleman, 2011, p. 39), Malla, a centenarian and presumed formerly enslaved woman, who is never explicitly depicted as having children of her own, yet fulfills the maternal duties of the white leads, is denied familial depth and exists only to provide mystical guidance to white protagonists. It was not until 1992, with Bernard Rose’s *Candyman*, that a commercial American horror film featured a clear depiction of a Black mother in Anne-Marie McCoy. Anne-Marie’s brief introduction reproduces problematic stereotypes of Black motherhood; she is a poor, single mother, hostile toward the white graduate student and protagonist, Helen Lyle. Despite living in the very building where the film’s central murder occurs, and despite being the first one to try alerting authorities with an unheeded call, Anne-Marie’s role as Black mother is peripheral. Her own terror over her kidnapped baby, whose disappearance later propels Helen’s heroic arc, functions primarily to develop the white

protagonist rather than illuminate Anne-Marie's own interiority. *Candyman* grants Anne-Marie little depth or narrative attention, despite her misrepresented hypervigilance being rooted in justified mistrust over historical anti-Blackness dangers and generational horrors of violence. Consequently, the most enduring tropes of the genre – e.g., the mutilated body, forced dispossession, and unjust death – are echoes of an anti-Black racial history that the cinematic American horror gaze transforms into spectacle, while severing it from its origins.

The Anti-Black Social Order of Classic American Horror

A glaring contradiction that haunts the American cinematic horror genre is that despite the historical suffering of the Black maternal figure constituting its narrative understructure, Black female characters, specifically, have been historically relegated to the margins of the frame. When presented, the on-screen characterization of Black people in general were hackneyed and pathologized through anti-Blackness. D. W. Griffith's benchmark film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), America's first non-serial, 12-reel film and the country's proto-horror film, speaks to this cinematic dismissal. He inverted the cruelties perpetrated by colonial white slave owners upon enslaved Black people during Atlantic chattel slavery, presenting antebellum white women as victims threatened by morally reprehensible Black characters. Griffith directed white actors to don blackface and positioned them as aggressive to justify the film's message of anti-Black persecution, thereby immortalizing Black characters' antagonistic arc in the American cinematic imagination. Griffith prioritized his confederate white male viewpoint on slavery and expressly depicted Black people as a menace to the white social order. Through his narrative, Black men were bestial and rapacious due to their malicious desire for and assault on white women, and Black women, when shown, are painted to be libidinous and sexually depraved. These narrative choices actively preserved the imagery of white feminine fragility as a site

deserving of dignity; a prioritization predicated on the symbolic hegemonic order of white supremacist patriarchy.

Griffith's white gaze and anti-Black sexist characterizations of revulsion functioned to prioritize the white damsel in distress narrative and legitimize the discriminatory historical conventions of cinematic American horror. Therefore, the genre's historic constructions of terror are rooted in white patriarchal colonial anxieties about power imbalances and retaliation. It is this racialized anti-Black subtext of enslavement's horrific legacies that were inflicted upon Black women that continues to characterize frightening narratives about the looming "Dark Other" (Thomas, 2019, p. 26). And, as it connects to my inquiry, explains how white women became the standard victims of American horror cinema and Black women were characterized as the disposable ones.

Mainstream American horror cinema produced notable cult classics, such as *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), and *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) concentrated on forced dispossession and bodily defilement for white female protagonists, while Black female presence in mainstream features was either entirely erased or relegated to diminutive roles. Jada Pinkett Smith's character arc as Maureen in Wes Craven's *Scream 2* (1997) highlights this depiction. Maureen is one of only two Black people in the movie and happens to be the first character in the entire ensemble to be killed. Her early death animates horror's unsettling *first to die* trope. Maureen's demise underscores the notion that within American Horror's racialized social order, Black female characters are nonessential figures whose presence can only be of service through the spectacle of death.

Another side to the genre's loaded dice is the low value placed on Black female survival. Kelly Rowland's performance as Kia in Ronny Yu's acclaimed *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003) exemplifies the confined agency and diminutive character arcs of Black women within mainstream horror. As Kia, Rowland fulfills the "best friend trope," another limiting stereotype historically assigned to Black characters who are expected to perform care to propel the white protagonist's tale. Although Kia outlasts the plot's hazards, her storyline principally revolves around abetting and sustaining the white lead's journey. Kia being nothing more than a companion to her complex and white female best friend Lori, flattens Rowland's unique portrayal as a Black female survivor of the plot. The message is clear: even when embodying survival status, Black female characters cannot escape the peripheral position of serving whiteness, albeit silently.

The Emergent Wave of Black Women in American Horror Cinema

The only historically notable exception to Black women's peripheral presence in American horror cinema appeared from the paltry pool of 1970s independent Blaxploitation horror films, which shaped Black women's meaningful presence in the genre. Features like *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973), *Ganja & Hess* (1973), and *Abby* (1974) prove critical for observing Black women in positions of narrative prominence. *Abby* (1974) in particular is the sole classic American horror film to feature a Black woman as the star whose story arc is central to the entire plot (Coleman, 2011, p. 184). However, white male executives and filmmakers' economic control over cinematic production thwarted this progression. But, within the last decade mainstream American Horror has produced a noticeable shift in Black female characters' narrative positionality. Black women are actively claiming the contemporary cinematic horror scene as lead and main characters.

This uptick of present-day films starring Black actresses denotes an emergent wave toward a Black feminist standpoint in mainstream horror, including: Ayo Edebiri, *Opus* (2025); Lupita Nyong'o, *A Quiet Place: Day One* (2024); Naomi Ackie, *Blink Twice* (2024); Halle Berry, *Never Let Go* (2024); Brandy Norwood, *The Front Room* (2024); Andra Day, *The Deliverance* (2024); Laya DeLeon Hayes, *The Angry Black Girl and Her Monster* (2023); Regina Hall, *Master* (2022); Anna Diop, *Nanny* (2022); Janelle Monáe, *Antebellum* (2020); and Lupita Nyong'o, *Us* (2019). This growing visibility for Black female actresses signals the first sustained era of their prominence in American horror cinema since the Blaxploitation period. Black filmmakers such as Jordan Peele, Nikyatu Jusu, Nia DaCosta, Mark Anthony Green, and Ryan Coogler are driving this critical shift and gaining acclaim in the process.

In “Visitation” (2022) Black feminist cinema scholar Jennifer DeClue theorizes how Black avant-garde filmmakers extract from historical archives as a visual form of confronting the terrors suffered by Black women in the United States. She argues “Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers push the cinematic medium to register encounters with those who once lived and who left behind a record of their time on earth” (DeClue, 2022, p. 2). I use this framework to analyze how Black filmmakers portray this new wave of Black female horror protagonists and develop their stories. It’s no coincidence that the narratives of these films feature Black female characters actively confronting the dangers of imposed domesticity, and suppressive situations which mirror the tyrannical legacies of colonialism that threaten Black women’s autonomy. But in many of these new wave depictions, the Black female protagonists’ narrative outcomes defy the tragic expectations set by their cinematic predecessors. This suggests that contemporary Black horror filmmakers are validating DeClue’s claim that “Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers interrupt the force of archival violence that distorts the image of Black women”

(2022, p. 2). Accordingly, I contend that these Black filmmakers are unsettling American cinematic horror's mainstream conventions by edifying the Black horror subgenre's narrative elements, such as prioritizing counternarratives of suffering and terror that reject white imperialist supremacy (hooks, 2004, p. 34).

Why *Us* (2019) and *Nanny* (2022)?

I have specifically selected Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) and Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny* (2022) as my primary case studies for both narrative and theoretical reasons. *Us* (2019) and Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny* (2022) distinguish themselves from the broader emergent wave of Black women-led horror films because they are authored by Black filmmakers who prioritize a Black maternal standpoint as the central engine of their respective plots. While there is existing scholarship that has documented the historical "absent-presence" (hooks, 1992, p. 119) of Black women in horror, I seek to investigate what occurs when the Black maternal figure is no longer on the margins, and is instead granted the narrative opportunity to occupy the centre as a protagonist.

The spotlight Jordan Peele and Nikyatu Jusu place upon Black mothers in their films offers the "deliverance" of the "mammy's rage" that Mapp (1973) forecasted over fifty years ago (p. 43). In doing so, *Us* and *Nanny* provide a unique opportunity to analyze how Black maternal figures are articulated when they are finally self-possessed, vocal, and vengeful against the anti-Black and sexist terrors historically inflicted upon them on-screen. I argue that by centring Black maternal protagonists' rageful expressions, Peele and Jusu mediate the traumas of enslavement that still haunt the genre and provide a cinematic redress that transforms historically absent Black mothers into meaningful subjects. This transformation effectively reclaims a profound sense of humanity and subjectivity for Black maternal characters because it presents them as powerful

agents of their own narratives; and refuses the conventions of the very canon that historically looked to exclude them. These Black horror filmmakers contribute new, subjective layers to the cinematic Black maternal experience and considerably alter the landscape of mainstream American horror. Ultimately, *Us* and *Nanny* serve as avant-garde interventions that disrupt the genre's violent cycle of omission by characterizing Aisha, Adelaide, and Red as agentic Black maternal figures of refusal, rage, and retributive justice.

Definition of Terms

The primary concepts that guide my analysis – refusal, rage, and retribution – are defined in my theory chapter. Other terminology is defined here for ease of reference.

Conjure Work (DeClue, 2022) describes a Black feminist cinematic practice that involves extracting fragments from historical archives and visual records to manifest the presence of Black women who were silenced or erased. DeClue defines this as a radical form of “visitation,” where the filmmaker uses the medium of film to perform a restorative intervention, bringing the “absent” history of Black women to the screen to dismantle traditional tropes of abjection and dehumanization.

Black Racialized Monstrosity (Benshoff, 2000) is a theoretical term describing how mainstream American horror has historically mapped “monstrosity” onto Black bodies. Benshoff argues that within a white supremacist framework, Blackness itself is treated as a site of inherent threat or “Otherness.” This term helps identify how the genre uses racial difference from whiteness to signify horror, effectively making the Black figure the source of fear rather than the subject experiencing it.

Demonized Difference (Benshoff, 2000) refers to the process by which cinematic narratives transform cultural, physical, or social differences into a “demonic” or “evil” trait. In his analysis of Blaxploitation, Benshoff explores whether films reappropriate this difference to empower Black characters or merely “reinscribe” (repeat) the dominant white-supremacist view that frames Blackness as something to be feared or exorcised.

Conformist Horror Theory is a framework developed by Brooks (2017) that identifies how traditional horror narratives reinforce dominant societal hierarchies. Brooks argues that conformist horror relies on the ‘othering’ of marginalized bodies to restore a status quo rooted in white, patriarchal, and heteronormative stability.

Brooks (2017) also writes of the Politics of Literary Respectability to articulate a set of internalized communal standards that prioritize “positive” or “dignified” depictions of Black life to counter negative stereotypes. In Black feminist literature, Brooks suggests this often restricts Black characters from expressing “low” emotions or engaging in the messy, transgressive, or “ugly” behaviors inherent to the genre (p. 42).

Creed (1993) draws on Kristeva to explain the Abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (p. 8). In horror, the abject is often represented by bodily wastes, blood, or the maternal body, which must be expelled to maintain the boundary between the self and the other.

The Monstrous-Feminine is used by Creed (1993) as a theoretical challenge to the Freudian ‘victim’ archetype. Creed argues that horror cinema constructs the female as monstrous not because she is “castrated” or weak, but specifically through her reproductive and biological functions (the womb as a site of terror), which threaten patriarchal order.

Maternal Authority is a psychoanalytic concept Kristeva (1980) uses to refer to the mother's primary role as the first law or authority figure a child encounters. Kristeva posits that the maternal body is the site of the semiotic, a pre-linguistic space of instinct and emotion that exists before the child enters the patriarchal Law of the Father.

The Pre-Oedipal Period, according to Creed (1993), is the developmental stage before the child identifies with the father and the symbolic order. Creed emphasizes this period in horror to illustrate the terrifying power of the 'all-encompassing mother,' whose influence precedes social identity and threatens to 're-absorb' the child.

Melodrama Theory, as described by Arnold (2013), is a framework that examines how film utilizes heightened domesticity, emotional excess, and 'moral polarization' to explore social anxieties. Arnold applies this to horror to show how the white 'maternal melodrama' often uses the suffering of the white mother to highlight systemic failures within the home and state.

Other terminology found in the thesis represents short phrases I use to discuss more complicated phenomena. One such examples, is African Diasporic Spirituality. As applied to Nanny (2022), this term refers to the persistence and adaptation of West African cosmological beliefs (such as Mami Wata and Anansi) within the Americas. It functions as a subversive epistemological tool for Black women to navigate, resist, and survive the Western imperialist structures of domestic labor and displacement.

Likewise, I draw on the phrase Black Maternal Agony to describe the acute, historically-rooted emotional and physical suffering specific to Black mothers. It encompasses the "afterlife" of the grief caused by the systematic theft of children, the state-sanctioned surveillance of Black families, and the ongoing trauma of witnessing the precariousness of Black life.

Black Maternal Precarity is the socio-political condition of permanent instability imposed upon Black mothers. This state is produced by the intersection of anti-Black racism, economic disenfranchisement, and the lack of structural protections, rendering the act of mothering a site of constant risk and vulnerability.

Horrific Fragmentation is a conceptual extension of the “ruptured self” imposed by enslavement. It describes the inability of the Black maternal figure to experience wholeness due to centuries of psychological and physical assaults and mirrors Toni Morrison’s notion of “surviving in part” that she expressed in a conversation with Frank McCourt, moderated by Juan Williams on May 4, 2001. Horrific fragmentation denotes a fractured identity where the mother is perpetually frazzled, prevented from achieving internal stillness by the demands of anti-Blackness and sexism.

Finally, Black Maternal Desire is the yearning for physical, emotional, and sexual autonomy that is systemically denied to Black women. This term critiques the *Strong Black Woman* or *Mammy* tropes which demand perpetual selflessness and sacrificial labor, effectively invisibilizing the Black mother’s right to individual pleasure and self-centered want.

Thesis Overview

In Chapter 2, I review the literature relevant to my research and trace the progression of Black women’s representation in horror. First, I outline American horror’s conventional deployment of anti-Black racialized monstrosity and marginal presence of Black women in horror (Benshoff, 2000; Brooks, 2017). I then transition into feminist and psychoanalytic theories of maternal monstrosity and abjection (Kristeva, 1980; Creed, 1993), and the limited instances of Black maternal prominence in horror, such as in *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme, 1998). I

enlist scholarship on Black female stereotypes, including the Sapphire trope (Pilgrim, 2008), and the Enduring Woman archetype (Coleman, 2011) to identify the critical lack of horror-specific archetypes for the Black as mothers experiencing rage on screen. Ultimately, this chapter serves to highlight the gaps in current horror scholarship regarding articulations of Black maternal anger in horror, positioning my research as a necessary intervention. I position this study as a necessary intervention. In Chapter 3, I detail the theoretical and methodological framework used to analyze three thematic registers of my study on Black maternal responses to imposed conditions such as refusal (Campt, 2019), rage (Lorde, 1981), and retributive justice (Taylor, 2022). Unlike the broader survey in the previous chapter, this section builds more precise conceptual tools used to decode *Us* and *Nanny*. I situate my analysis within Black feminist theory and trace the trajectory from the historical ungendering (Spillers, 1987) of Black women during enslavement to the contemporary controlling images (Collins, 1991) used to characterize Black mothers on screen. I also detail how synthesizing these theoretical concepts with my qualitative narrative methodology (O'Shaughnessy et. al, 2016) enables a close reading of each film's narrative structure. This approach allows me to decode how cinematic grammar transforms Black maternal rage into a manifest practice of Black feminist justice.

Chapter 4 investigates the cinematic construction of the Black mother through a comparative analysis of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) and Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny* (2022). After a brief overview of each film, I begin with an examination of the *Aesthetics of Haunting*, which focuses on the visual and atmospheric cues that prompt Black maternal trauma. I then focus on the theme of *Refusal*, by examining moments where the protagonists, Adelaide/Red and Aisha, renounce the labor and behavioral expectations of white supremacist patriarchy. In the following section, *Rage and Retribution*, I analyze their transition from passive endurance to deliberate and

externalized forms of aggression for the sake of survival. My research demonstrates that as Black horror filmmakers, Jordan Peele and Nikyatu Jusu galvanize refusal, rage, and retribution as narrative strategies to dismantle the containment of Black maternal figures and affirm a distinct Black female subjectivity. I conclude the chapter by assessing the efficacy of the protagonists' *Narrative Resolutions* in relation to the concept of liberation.

Finally, Chapter 5 integrates my key findings and addresses the study's limitations. I suggest future research directions that emphasize the necessity of honoring the humanity and subjectivity of Black mothers in academic scholarship.

Conclusion

Overall, this study underscores the need to redefine the Black maternal figure within American horror cinema by interrogating the historical erasure and marginalization of Black women within the genre. Oppressive laws such as *partus sequitur ventrem*, alongside reductive cinematic tropes like the mammy archetype, have historically disenfranchised Black women. These legal and cultural frameworks commodified their reproductive labor and repressed their interiority; obfuscating their rights to an autonomous motherhood, dignified representation, and freedom to express grievances about their conditions. Even so, the recent wave of contemporary, Black-led horror signals a pivotal shift, and moves beyond the “first to die” and “peripheral best friend” tropes to call in an unprecedented landscape of complex agency for Black women as mothers. Through a Black feminist reading of Jordan Peele's *Us* and Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny*, this thesis illustrates how the systemically stifled rage of Black maternal figures finally finds narrative deliverance through cinematic articulations of refusal, rage, and retribution. In essence, I argue that the maternal figures in *Us* and *Nanny* are characterized by a reckoning with historical trauma for the Black mother in horror.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter highlights pivotal academic research on the topic of contemporary Black maternal horror cinema. It surveys the academic landscape of Black women's representation in film to contextualize the emergence of contemporary Black maternal horror. The scholars featured here represent the intellectual genealogy that inspired my line of inquiry; they provide the historical backdrop of research that has come before and illuminate the gaps that my study seeks to fill.

I weave together a composition of horror scholarship, and Black feminist theory, focusing on the ways in which traditional American horror has interpreted Black motherhood and ultimately Black womanhood as a departure from typical depictions of white motherhood in horror which is characterized as normal motherhood. This chapter pursues the development of Black women's representation within horror cinema by drawing on formative studies of how the genre conventions converge with monstrosity racialized as Black (Benshoff, 2000), discourses of Black women's absence due to anti-Black sexism and racism (Brooks, 2017), and white feminist analyses on white maternal monstrosity and Black maternal subjectivity (Creed, 1993; Griffith, 2024).

This review also enlists Black feminist knowledge on stereotypes and controlling images within media (hooks, 1981; Collins, 1991) to contextualize the ways in which the consequences of enslavement perpetuate social anxieties regarding race, gender, sexuality, and control which saturate the Black women's modern characterization in American horror cinema. By synthesizing these fields, this literature review pinpoints the lack of detailed inquiry into the portrayal of Black motherhood and the articulation of Black maternal anger within twenty-first-century horror cinema. These are noticeable gaps within existing horror cinema and Black feminist sociological scholarship. My research aims to address this lacuna by interrogating

modern Black maternal protagonists' affective expressions of anger and refusal in the texts *Us* (2019) and *Nanny* (2022).

Scholarship on Black Women and the American Horror Genre

Blaxploitation Horror and Early Visibility

Blaxploitation horror was the first American horror subgenre to feature Black female protagonists. The term Blaxploitation was developed in 1972 by Junius Griffin—who was the leader of the Los Angeles chapter of the (NAACP)—to denote this early to mid-1970s subgenre of exploitation films that often starred Black actors (Anderson, 2018). The influx of Blaxploitation films in the 1970s allowed for an overall increase in Black female representation on-screen, while the horror subgenre produced films that enabled the Black filmmakers to challenge the anti-Blackness entrenched within traditional horror tropes and construct racially cognizant concepts of terror. Film critic and media arts professor, Harry M. Benshoff's 2000 article, "Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?" lays the scholarly foundation for assaying these portrayals of Black racialized monstrosity, and the incorporation of gender and sexuality within the subgenre.

Benshoff contributes three main ideas to the discussion of Blaxploitation horror and Black female characterization within it: a) cinematic creation of characters in traditional American horror is predicated on demonized difference in order to preserve hegemonic power structures; b) Black filmmakers maneuvered Blaxploitation horror as a site of subversion to intentionally disrupt conventional racist depictions of monstrosity; c) despite the subgenre's agitational efforts, it replicated problematical conceptions of terror due to its failure to offer textured characterization of Black female protagonists' gender, sexual, and spiritual expressions. These focal points, particularly the final one, are foundational to the predicaments still

surrounding Black feminine subjectivity within horror cinema and ultimately gives way to the challenges of race and gender impeding the nuanced articulation of Black women as mothers facing terror in contemporary horror.

Benshoff argues that mainstream American cinematic horror historically functioned for the purpose of preserving hegemonic systems of social domination through the genre's unrelenting demonization of difference within its character construction. Benshoff notes that the horror genre's potential to cinematically communicate what is considered to be scary to its audience depends in large part on "the constructed fear of the Other—an Otherness both drawn from and constitutive of any given era's cultural history" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 31). He asserts that the demonization of difference is carried out through filmic figurations of "normal," mostly representing "the white, middle-class heterosexuality of the films' heroes and heroines, and the 'monstrous', frequently colored by racial, sexual, class, or other ideological markers" (p.31). These social markers of normality and monstrosity mirror the power structures and social dynamics engendered by the "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist [patriarchal]" political system. (hooks, 2004, p. 34). In effect, white male American filmmakers wielded their industrial influence within Hollywood to commandeer the horror genre as a meaningful vehicle to drive home their dominant "social body's assumptions about white superiority" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 31).

White male directors' pervasive and systemic use of this narrative manipulation reinforces the "white racial frame," which is a "dominant frame...overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate" (Feagin, 2020, p. 11). White male directors' application of this

frame ultimately biases audience feelings despite the reality that these white supremacist terrors are rooted in the historical atrocities of enslavement. Ergo, the monstrous-Other is a deputized presence for non-white people whose brutalized fate is reflective in the historical context of anti-Black trauma. This denigration of race is secured through viewers' unconscious conditioning and participation; for decades, mainstream horror audiences were primed to root for the survival of the white heroes and heroines and thirst for the demise of the devils that bore the traits of non-white people. Benshoff claims that this symbiotic connection between the narrative manipulation that shaped the model for identity-construction within the genre on behalf of white supremacy, and its affected viewership, proves the incessant political power of the cinematic gaze.

Blaxploitation horror films were calculated avenues of social opposition designed to disturb anti-Black cinematic customs. The filmmakers understood how their choice to focus their gaze on those systemically relegated to the margins was an oppositional strategy against the violence of white supremacist cinematic standard. Benshoff posits that Blaxploitation horror brokered African American agency within the structure of horror through intentional disruption of dominant depictions of terror, and a queering of racialized monstrosity. These films functioned as key sites of social critique of racist tropes of terror; Benshoff lauds the subgenre's specificity in exploring "race and race consciousness as core structuring principles" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 32). This disruptive potential aligns with Cathy J. Cohen's (1997) foundational conceptualization of queerness as a site of "multi-sited resistance" to dominant systems of race and gender (p. 440). Cohen posits that queerness offers a radical potential for those whose identities are not served by traditional politics, acting as a label for anyone whose existence and everyday survival challenges normalizing structures (1997, p. 440). This precedes and informs

bell hooks' (2014) later definition of the “queer” self as one that is “at odds with everything around it” (The New School, 2014, np) and must therefore invent their own narrative territory.

Benshoff indicates that “queers (broadly defined as anyone who rejects the essential superiority of a straight white male identity) are drawn to the genre because of its many intriguing ‘not normal’ representations” (Benshoff, 2000, p. 32). Therefore, by prioritizing the marginalized perspectives, Blaxploitation horror filmmakers sought to engage in a queer political mission to oppose the violent hegemony of white supremacist cinematic standards. Black horror filmmakers of the 1970s deliberately undertook the defiant process of reclamation via narrative juxtaposition of their characters. They reclaimed the canonized metaphors of monstrosity, re-engraved them with affirmative displays of Afrocentric culture, and recontextualized their narrative arcs for audience approval.

William Crain’s commercially successful feature *Blacula* (1972) speaks to this tilt toward ostracized perspectives and re-inscription. The film follows the story of Mamuwalde, an African prince from the 18th-century played by William Marshall, who was transformed into a vampire by the notable Count Dracula in 1780 after Dracula refused to help him retaliate against the slave trade. Mamuwalde in his vampiric form becomes Blacula and receives a complex narrative arc that stimulates the audience to empathize with his plight and even identify with his injurious resolution, despite his positionality as the monster. In this sense, Blaxploitation triumphed in its subversive aim; Black filmmakers foregrounded their racial awareness to purposely reconfigure the monsters’ Black racialized identity and masculine traits. Instead of being dreaded for his rugged metamorphosis into a bestial creature, Blacula’s macho virality and savagery are depicted as pivotal aspects of his identity as a “black avenger who justifiably fights against the dominant order-which is often explicitly coded as racist” (Benshoff, 2000, p. 37). Blaxploitation horror

successfully redirected audiences' sympathies towards the Black monster by reorienting traditionally maligned traits of Black masculinity embedded within Black male characters. Benshoff critiques the subgenre's attempts at narrative provocation as only moderately gainful, because it did not provide a similar level of refinement towards its Black female characters due to its adherence to androcentrism.

Notwithstanding Black women's increased opportunities for worthwhile appearances in Blaxploitation horror movies in the 1970s, their materialization was afflicted with a demonization of difference etched into Hollywood and conventional horror's approach to Black representation. Black filmmakers control of Blaxploitation horror's content, and even their purposeful positioning of Black women as protagonists, did little to interrupt the mischaracterization of Black womanhood on-screen because they relied on reappropriation rather than reformation. Benshoff contends that the subgenre upheld "male-dominated (hetero)sexuality and participation in the [mainstream] genre's usual demonization of women and nonpatriarchal sexualities" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 40). Conventional horror's *fear of the Other* weaponizes sexist-racism, an interlocking system of oppression that subjugates Black women, upholds the white racial frame, and sustains white male social control. While Black horror scholar Kinitra D. Brooks mainly concentrates on contemporary depictions of Black womanhood, I believe her study offers vital support for Benshoff's discussion. She contends that "even as the horror genre subverts and perverts classic hegemonic tenets, it remains dangerously staid in its supplication to weary racial and gender dynamics that constricts its revolutionary potential for cultural repudiation" (Brooks, 2017, p. 4). Therefore, even when Black filmmakers reappropriate conventional *horror's fear of the Other* within Blaxploitation, they are still deploying the same

systems of subjugation and cannot advance Black female representation through such a dubiously tethered legacy.

Benshoff follows a Black lesbian feminist, Audre Lorde's notion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," (Lorde, 1984, p. 110) with his argument that Blaxploitation horror films' repurposing of the *fear of the Other trope* whereby audiences are encouraged to root for the monsters, is radically at odds with Black female cinematic liberation. The subgenre's reliance on androcentrism to improve Black racialized depictions while reproducing anti-Black sexist stereotypes for Black women stand as proof. Calling on Michele Wallace's 1979 interrogation of chauvinistic preferences in Black politics, Benshoff engages her Black Macho-Black Superwoman Myth framework to expose gender disparities of Black female monstrosity in Blaxploitation horror. Black male characters are routinely celebrated and romanticized as avengers, even when their roles were monstrous, thus generating an "ethic of Black machoism" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 41). Whereas the materialization of monstrosity for the titular characters—Abby Williams, played by Carol Speed, in *Abby* (1974) and Sugar, played by Marki Bey, in *Sugar Hill* (1974), both marking the first instances in Blaxploitation horror to foreground Black women as central protagonists—is classified as grotesquely excessive to the point of requiring eradication. Benshoff calls attention to the incongruous approach towards the discourse of Negro bestiality legible in the makeup codes and characters' motivation for vengeance, particularly in comparison to their male counterparts. Audiences were conditioned to cheer for Blacula's bloodlust and how his animalistic "hairy face and brow" stood for a stark departure from classic "debonair white vampires" in 1972, yet in 1974 viewers were primed to read Abby Williams' facial and deepened voice while in her possessed state as repulsively terrifying (Benshoff, 2000, p. 42). The formulaic recontextualization of Black masculine traits as

empowering and not horrific in the face of narrative obstacles, fails woefully here due to Abby's gender identity as a woman. Abby's gender unsettled Blaxploitation's redefined scope of Black monstrosity because her affective expressions of difference drew on "gender-bending queer fears as well as bestial/racial ones" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 42). Ergo, even with Blaxploitation's apparent progressive gaze, Black female monstrosity was orchestrated as a dilemma to be solved by the plots' end, not saluted.

Benshoff's interpretation converges with Barabara Creed's turning point argument that the constitution of female abjection in cult classic American cinematic horror films from the 1970s reflected cultural anxieties and fears about femininity. Creed argues that the figure of the monstrous feminine in horror films represents a threat to patriarchal society and is often used as a means of controlling and containing white women's power; "the abject is placed on the side of the feminine: it exists in opposition to the paternal symbolic, which is governed by rules and laws. The abject represents that which 'disturbs identity, system, order'" (Creed, 1993, p. 37). Hence, her study reveals that historical representations of white women in horror often display them as being punished within the narrative for merely existing outside of the hegemonic male norm. In a similar vein, Black female monstrosity during the blaxploitation era involved sexist restrictions to appease the dominant system. However, Black female leads' quandary was uniquely reflected in their reductive motivations for revenge; the sexual objectification they face in their pursuit for retribution, and how their race and gender compounded the sexual exploitation of their appearance. Of the two Black horror films foregrounding Black femininity, the character Diana "Sugar" Hill from *Sugar Hill* best embodies these narrative stumbling blocks. Sugar was constructed as a "smart, strong, and independent [woman who]...has her own career" as a direct response to the overwhelming criticism that Blaxploitation was indeed sexist

(Benshoff, 2000, p. 41). Yet her entire narrative of enacting retaliation to injustice is driven exclusively by the death of her boyfriend, not by her genuine desire to dismantle the systemic structures sponsoring her oppressed state. In this sense, her rage is not righteous but rooted in the expectation that she protects the legacy of men. This compromises the dignity of her anger as a Black woman because it tethers her expression of this threatening emotion to an external service aimed at validating a man. Therefore, Benshoff's claim that spectators derived pleasure and a sense of agency from "identifying with monsters out to topple dominant social institutions (that oppress both movie monsters and real- life minorities)" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 32), cannot fully be applied here because Sugar's narrative motivation was designed to preserve patriarchal parameters, not destroy them.

Hence, the filmmakers sexually objectified Sugar, particularly in her vengeful pursuit, as a means for the audience to derive pleasure in her journey. This suggests the only way Black women could be understood on screen, especially in their expression of monstrosity, was if they were oversexualized. Benshoff notes how traditional horror's established racist trope of hypersexualizing Blackness as evil is willfully employed through the bedeviling of Sugar's physical appearance in her monstrous state. He observes photos highlighting a side-by-side transformational shift of Sugar's aesthetics: "The "monstrous" Sugar (Marki Bey) is hypersexual and wears an Afro, whereas the "normal" Sugar is demure and has straightened hair" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 42). Sugar's Blackness is coded as barbaric because of its association with criminality; and whenever she's depicted committing violent acts such as "murdering her enemies" she wears her hair in full afro, but it reverts to "straightened hair in her 'normal life'" (p. 42). Her inherently insatiable personality exists in a stark contrast with white women's demure disposition. Therefore, the unfettered expression of self, reclamation of agency, and noble desire

for narrative resolution within Sugar's self performance is ultimately flattened into a racist-sexist mischaracterization for the sake of the white male hegemonic gaze.

Likewise, Blaxploitation horror frames Black women's spiritual practices through racist logics of deviance and fear. In *Abby* (1974), Abby Williams' horrific experiences only begin after she "becomes possessed by the spirit of Eshu, the African trickster god of sexuality. [And soon] Abby is masturbating in the shower, coming on to her clients, and tricking at local nightclubs" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 40). Granted, *Abby* is a Black remake of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). Akin to *The Exorcist*'s anti-Arabic sentiments used toward the adulation of Catholicism, Blaxploitation filmmakers William Girdler, Mike Henry, and G. Cornell Layne deified Black Christianity for the intentional repudiation of "women, sexuality, and the Yoruba god Eshu, [whose depiction was incessantly] steeped in a Western, sex-negative Christian ideology" (p.40). Even in *Sugar Hill*, Sugar's engagement with practices of voodoo is treated as the catalyst for her brutish and violent behaviour rather than a source of empowered connection to her African roots as an expression of her Afrocentrism.

In essence, and inadvertently similar to the traditional Hollywood horror films before them, Blaxploitation horror movies were an antagonistic site for Black women's comprehensive articulation. Benshoff insists that even though the 1970s subgenre of Black horror films was groundbreaking with its noticeable inclusion of Black characters, Black women's agency was heavily compromised through skewed representation. The Blaxploitation subgenre reanimated white-male hegemonic formulaic standards of hyper-sexualization, objectification, and vilification of Black women's existence. Films cultivated for the Black gaze, such as *Abby* and *Sugar Hill*, also secured the systemic on-screen reduction of Black female subjectivity and interiority within Black horror cinema. The genre denied Black women's nuanced self-

expression and resorted to reductive stereotypes, mischaracterizing their actions and bodies as inherently monstrous, and extending this defamation to their spiritual practices in such a manner that coded their African legacies as evil. Each of these predicaments pedestalized the plight of Black women within the American horror lexicon, which is still relevant to the contemporary cinematic considerations of Black female horror.

Benshoff exposes that Black female existence within horror is simultaneously misrepresented to the margins of myth and painstakingly framed as deviant to the preservation of white hegemony. Benshoff's study offers topical grounding for my examination of how gender, sexuality, and African diasporic spirituality operate as historical hauntings that the protagonists of *Us* and *Nanny* must navigate as they express refusal, rage, and retribution. Despite the significance of Benshoff's work, the scope of his inquiry is limited partly due to the finite textual information of the blaxploitation horror film genre, and within the specific decade of the 1970s. However, Black feminist Kinitra D. Brooks centres the unique role of Black women as both subjects and creators in contemporary horror. Brooks' racially gendered analysis reinforces Benshoff's claim of problematic representation, while offering an extended chronological examination that stretches across multiple contemporary eras.

Absent-Presence and Anti-Black Racism and Sexism in Horror

In "Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror" (2017), Brooks critiques how horror cinema frameworks and conformist horror theory have resulted in the exclusion and erasure of Black women within the genre. Brooks's assertion that the patriarchal and Eurocentric substructure of the genre indulge "multiracial representations of men while perpetuating monoracial representations of women" (Brooks, 2017, p. 6) profoundly resonates with the underlying Black feminist hypothesis that "all the women are white, all the

blacks are men” (Hull et al., 1982, p. 225). Brooks draws on Black feminist literature to challenge why brave Black women are routinely unseen yet essential within contemporary horror. She leans on bell hooks’ notion that cinematic contexts historically construct the presence of Black femininity through absence (hooks, 1992: 119), to develop her own theory of this absent-presence and how the sidelining of Black female subjectivity takes shape within horror. To theorize Black women’s marginalization and compounded agency in horror, Brooks summons Sycorax—the suppressed, unseen mother from William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—as an allegory for Black female erasure. However, Brooks champions Sycorax—the witch-mother historically silenced in the margins of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—as an incidental figure of resistance due to her refusal to be excluded. She lauds the transformational of Sycorax’s narrative arc, where her physical (corporeal) death does not result in erasure; instead, it magnifies her subversive presence. By Sycorax remaining a spiritually and psychologically powerful force that haunts the island, she refuses to be excluded from the story, even in her absence (Brooks, 2017: 8). Brooks reads Sycorax’s narrative haunting as defiant and re-constitutional, which guides her critique of how horror criticism and Black feminist theory have been insufficient for assessing the complex articulations of Black women within horror. Sycorax’s yearning for resistance also inspires Brooks’ production of a comprehensive horror framework capable of rendering complex characterizations of Black womanhood.

In her critical commentary on the representation of Black women in contemporary films, Brooks highlights the zombie-apocalypse subgenre of horror and focuses on the characterization of Black female survival. Using the character Selena, played by Naomie Harris, from the 2002 movie *28 Days Later*, Brooks critiques how her character is denied vulnerability and problematizes her masculinization as a relentlessly strong protector. As Black feminist scholars

such as Hortense Spillers (1987) argue, the conditions of chattel slavery rendered African women “ungendered,” stripping them of the social protections and symbolic status designated to white womanhood (p. 67). Within this framework, Black women were not considered to be women in the cultural sense, but were instead positioned outside of gender, which made them available for both white supremacist exploitation and masculinization. Similarly, bell hooks (1981) notes the historical expectations of labour that white enslavers placed upon Black female workers to toil in the fields “as well if not better than their male counterparts” (p. 23). Thus, hooks also critiques the dominant cultural depiction of Black women as inherently strong and self-sacrificing figures as a problematic representational strategy designed to refuse Black women from accessing softness and care. It is within this historical and theoretical context that Brooks asserts Selena’s characterization can be read as a contemporary iteration of this enduring logic. Selena does not receive the privilege of rescue that is often bestowed upon white female characters in horror.

On the contrary, her narrative resolution as a survivor—the only female survivor within her apocalyptic world—uniquely situates her within the trope of the ‘final girl’ coined by Carol J. Clover (1987). The final girl trope describes the lone surviving woman, traditionally devoid of feminine attributes, who triumphs in killing the movie’s killer (Sweet, 2016, p. 5). The traditional expendability of Black women in horror films has resulted in them rarely being depicted as final girls in horror movies. But regardless of Selena’s rare position, Brooks still notes how the social implications of her race and gender as a Black woman complicates this status. Brooks takes issue with how the masculinization of final girls perpetuates the cinematic tendency to virilize Black womanhood to the point of reinforcing the negative Black Superwoman trope: “Her blackness heightens her masculinity, demonstrating the ‘perceived inherent masculinity of blackness’” (Brooks, 2017, p. 20). Owing to a history of enslavement

that prioritized labor over domesticity, Black women have been systematically hyper-masculinized by the American white gaze. This defeminization occurs because the patriarchal social order operates on a multitude of exclusionary defaults; including positioning the Black man as the sole representative of the *Black experience*, and the white woman as the representative of the *feminine*. As a result, Black women are effectively stranded in a conceptual gap where they are consistently compared to men and denied the fragility and compassion of womanhood, simply because they do not fit the white, heteropatriarchal mold of the 19th century American ideal woman (Welter, 1966, 151). Thus, Selena's masculinized character traits (she's hyper-competence, and positioned in the role of a protector), serve as a reflection of a long-standing anti-Black racialized gender formation that continues to shape how Black women are imagined within horror media.

Therefore, even though *28 Days Later* evolves the final girl trope to extend it towards a final surviving group in which there is an emphasis on collaborative efforts geared towards surviving as a community, Brooks asserts this expanded construct fails to dismantle the representation of Black women being designated as the toiler of the group in their pursuit for survival (Brooks, 2017, p. xii). Brooks argues that while the final group construct may offer Black women a moment of sentimental catharsis, it stops short of granting them true heroism. While Black women might now be permitted to survive the horror, and to feel emotions, they are denied full recognition as heroes within a broader, multi-racial sphere of heroic action.

In her search for nuanced characterizations of Black womanhood, Brooks implicates the tenets of Black feminist theory and horror studies as generative sources for solutions, only to critique both frameworks for their exclusions. She specifically interrogates the "politics of literary respectability" that dominated Black feminist scholarship in the late 20th century

(Brooks, 2017, p. 42). Brooks suggests that in the struggle for academic acceptance, the field became “surprisingly conservative,” creating a “detrimental” gap that failed to recognize the complexities of Black women creators working within genre fiction (p. 42). Black feminist literature’s ironic lack of consideration for speculative fiction is more than a casual oversight for Brooks; rather, she interprets it as a glaring systemic failure that prevents the “recognition of the complexities of Black women creators” (Brooks 2017, p. 41). Therefore, drawing on the ways in which Black horror scholars, Sandra Jackson, Susana Morris, and Gina Wisker have provided strong Black feminist readings, and have broken ground within speculative fiction, Brooks asserts that a more formalized vigorous method is still necessary to oppose the rigidity and prioritized “respectable” values (Brooks, 2017, p. 42).

Instead of prolonging anti-Black and respectability-centric genre models for assessing the creation of horror and its interpretation, Brooks offers new concepts—such as “fluid fiction” (Brooks, 2017, p. 7) and “folkloric horror” (Brooks, 2017, p. 98)—to assess speculative genre texts such as films that depart from reality, including fantasy, science fiction, horror, and dystopia; in ways that obscure dividing lines of genre and rely on African diasporic traditions. Brooks describes her racially gendered fluid fiction framework as purposefully functioning to interrogate oppressive structures of the Western hegemony in science fiction, fantasy, and horror akin to how Black women’s existence unnerve the confines of race, gender, and class (Brooks, 2017, p. 102). She cites bell hooks’ concept of a “literary homeplace” to assert that her frame of fluid fiction is rooted in a radical Black feminist subjectivity that defiantly refuses the historical restrictions placed on racially gendered characters (Brooks, 2017, p. 71). Brooks concludes that it is a political act of literary resistance to recognize the disjunctures—a concept developed by Patricia Hills Collins to articulate the in-between moments and spaces wherein Black mothers

perform their “motherwork” (Collins, 2000, p. 209)— within the fictive texts and address them by revising and erasing essentialist notions of identity (Brooks, 2017, p. 76). Therefore, fluid fiction stands as an ontological space to enable Black feminine self-actualization in horror, because it refuses fixed boundaries between the supernatural and the social, allowing Black women’s experiences to move across material, spiritual, and historical registers at once.

Similarly, Brooks spotlights African-folklore’s impact and aesthetic influence on Black women creatives’ construction of identity within Westernized genres of speculative fiction. She defines folkloric horror as “a theoretical framework that attempts to fill a critical lacuna in the reading of black women horror writers” (Brooks, 2017, p. 102). Brooks’ frame concentrates on the improved possibilities that emerge from Africanizing speculative fiction’s concept of subversion. Whereas Benshoff argues that Afrocentric-aesthetic elements in Blaxploitation horror were weaponized against Black women to code them as demonic and deviant, Brooks reads the act of Africanizing the Black-adopted subversive tradition as a method that advances Black women’s narrative intricacy and enhances their complex subjectivity. Through folkloric horror, she pushes for a purposeful act of destabilizing mainstream horror by accentuating “knowledge systems grounded in the cosmologies of natal African religions such as Vodou, Obeah, and Santería” (p.102). This specific revision looks to “center itself on the realization and celebration of the black spiritual feminine” to ensure that Black female characters do not continue to suffer their canonized narrative fate of demonization through reductive imagery and condemned cliched predispositions (Brooks, 2017, p. 103). Brooks’ promotion of a horror framework that shows deference to Black women’s sense of cultural survival and engagement with African spirituality equips Black horror scholars to not just examine but also adjudicate mainstream contemporary depictions of these elements. Do modern horror films still

mythologize and demonize Black women's demonstration of ancestral memory? Or are their religious practices shown to be a complex source of their endurance?

Despite the relevance of Harry Benshoff's and Kinitra Brooks' scholarship to the characterization of Black femininity in horror, there are still critical gaps in their studies. Benshoff's research is limited due to his analysis centring on Black Horror films in the 1970s, and his scope not exceeding this decade. He does not consider the change in Black women's characterization that accompanies the emergence of horror cinema in the 21st century. Likewise, Brooks provides a thorough exploration of Black female characterization in speculative fiction and potential for constructing complex subjectivities in horror films, but her chronological scope concludes around 2017. Brooks also deviates from purely cinematic observation toward a wider inspection of speculative fiction and literary methodologies. Additionally, neither Brooks nor Benshoff's work speaks to the specific themes of Black motherhood within Black horror films of the late 2010s and 2020s. Hence, my study intercedes in this gap as I look to analyze the intricacies of on-screen Black maternal figures and their relationship to terror. I engage interrogate the characterizations of Black maternal refusal and anger as affective responses to the terrifying narrative conditions portrayed in modern Black horror cinema.

Maternal Horror Cinema: Foundational and Contemporary Scholarship

Academic Influences on White Maternal Horror Cinema

Academic scholarship on maternal horror cinema has been heavily shaped by a distinguished group of white feminist film theorists from the tail end of the 20th century and later elaborated on in the first half of the 21st century. Laura Mulvey (1975), Julia Kristeva (1980), Carol J. Clover (1987), Barbara Creed (1993), Rhona J. Berenstein (1995), Lucy Fischer (1996), Joan Hawkins (2000), Sara Arnold (2013) and others are often cited as major contributors to the

conceptual vocabulary through which themes of feminine abjection, maternal monstrosity, and opposition to traditional motherhood roles have been established in horror. When Laura Mulvey coined the concept of the male gaze in her 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” she insisted that in “a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 808). She thus asserted the existence of a gendered hierarchical influence in cinema. Carol J. Clover’s pivotal “Final Girl” trope (1987) captured white women’s survival and feminine spectatorship, which then fostered scholastic consideration of female agency within violent cinematic worlds.

Julia Kristeva’s *Power of Horror* (1980) essay on abjection offered the psychoanalytical feminist theoretical grounding for Barbara Creed’s seminal work on the monstrous-feminine, which placed the transgressive framing of reproductive excess and white maternal bodies as crucial to horror’s affective power. And more contemporary film theorists such as Sara Arnold (2013) later built upon these frameworks by investigating horror’s dualistic moral coding of mothers as ‘good’ versus ‘bad,’ exposing the ways mother figures are punished or rescued based on their responses to the expectations placed on mothers to be nurturing towards their children and families. However, many of these foundational cinematic maternal terror studies have been noticeably inattentive to Black women’s representation as both mothers and central figures in horror. Nevertheless, naming these canonical contributions is necessary, as they set up the theoretical terrain in which my project on the Black maternal experience both intervenes but from which it ultimately departs.

White Maternal Adversity in Cinematic Horror

This segment of my literature review serves to foreground the existing canon and established scholarly discourse surrounding the archetypes of white motherhood within the horror genre. This section is strictly to establish the known landscape of white maternal horror. To avoid inadvertently centring the white maternal experience as a universal archetype, this section provides a targeted overview of the foundational scholarship by Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed. While acknowledging that there is density and theoretical nuance to the work of these scholars, my project deliberately prioritizes the under-theorized dimensions of Black women in horror. Therefore, to engage in an exhaustive deconstruction of these white-centric theories would not only exceed the scope of this study but would risk further marginalizing scholarship of Black mothers in horror, which is the focus of my project's intervention. Consequently, I cite these white feminist film theorists here to provide historical context for the cinematic horror genre's development but wish to emphasize that the analytical weight of my thesis remains centered on specificities of Black motherhood. Understanding this allows for a clearer delineation of the profound scarcity of research and primary texts concerning Black maternal figures in horror.

It is meaningful to acknowledge the influence of Julia Kristeva's 1980 psychoanalytical theory of abjection and maternal authority on Barbara Creed's work because it shaped Creed's seminal critique of horror films. According to Creed, Kristeva classified concepts of impurity into two categories: "excremental, which threatens identity from the outside; and menstrual, which threatens from within," and linked both varieties to the mother figure (Creed, 1993, p. 14). For Kristeva, themes of wretchedness and abasement bore a matriarchal influence because a "subject's first contact with 'authority' is with the maternal authority when the child learns, through interaction with the mother, about its body: the shape of the body, the clean and the

unclean, the proper and improper areas of the body” (p.14). Kristeva posits there is a “split between the world of the mother (a universe without shame) and the world of the father (a universe of shame)” that produces social contexts of psychosis in people (Creed, 1993, p. 15). This symbolic delineation between matriarchal and patriarchal responsibility toward the body implies that the maternal authority’s focus on the mapping a self’s clean body, “is characterized by the exercise of ‘authority without guilt’, a time when there is a ‘fusion between mother and nature’” whereas the characterization of the symbolic paternal order “ushers in a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire” (Creed, 1993, pp. 14, 15). Through this framing, Creed interrogates how gore, which connotes that which is uncontrollable and repulsive, alongside terrifying imagery of the abject, are also coded as maternal in cult classic horror cinema.

Barbara Creed's 1993 research, *The Monstrous-Feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, argues that the genre inherently characterizes white femininity as depraved subservience. Aspects of the feminine are positioned in direct opposition to the rational system of order, i.e., patriarchy. Creed writes of the seven “faces” of the monstrous-feminine, which portray white women as “archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, witch, possessed body, monstrous mother and castrator” (Creed, 1993, p. 1). This typology influenced later feminist readings of maternal horror, moving analysis past the Freudian notion of sexual difference that positions mothers as castrators and instead underscores the theoretical relations of power in the cinematic gaze.

Using the 1973 film *The Exorcist*, directed by William Friedkin, as a prime site of examination, Creed contends that the characterization of white women, from the onset, is portrayed as demure and innocent for the purposes of reducing its value and showing

subservience to the hegemonic patriarchal symbolic order. Advancing Kristeva's theory of maternal authority, Creed develops her own concept of "corporeal mapping" (Creed, 1993, p. 38) to theorize that the ways the "maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's 'clean and proper body' [and how this] mapping of the body is 'semiotic' because the way in which the mother teaches the infant about its body is similar to the learning language" (p. 38). Thus, Creed suggests notions of white femininity, such as established propriety in horror films, is the responsibility of the white maternal characters to uphold decorum. Equally, through her reading of the main character Regan from *The Exorcist* as the manifestation of her maternal figure's failure to contain infant impurity, Creed references the existence of a "pre-Oedipal period" and "the marking out of the child's 'clean and proper body'" (p. 38). Therefore, signifying the socially expected behaviour in keeping with good taste and propriety is consciously developed by women for the sake of safeguarding "the symbolic order and the seeming stability of the rational subject" (p. 38). This leads to her proposition that white women tend to be punished through horrific events of possession or tragedy when they are unable to fulfill the expectations of that patriarchal order, which prescribes that they be unassuming, submissive, and orderly.

Creed observes the contradictory aspects of the concept of monstrosity itself, particularly with how it is characterized as feminine in its rejection of what is considered normal. Once again employing *The Exorcist* as her focus, Creed notes that in "films depicting invasion by the devil, the victim is almost always a young girl, the invader the male devil. One of the major boundaries traversed is between innocence and corruption, purity, and impurity. *The Exorcist* is usually seen as involving a case of possession by the male devil. However, I will argue that the devil, in this case, may well be female" (Creed, 1993, p. 32). This is a pivotal contribution to horror scholarship, as Creed shifts the focus from an externalized religious evil to an internalized,

psychoanalytic one. She contends that the devil in the film is actually a manifestation of the monstrous-feminine, where the horror is located in the impurity of the changing female body, specifically Regan's transition into puberty and the looming, uncontained power of the pre-Oedipal mother. Creed's reading of the devil as female suggests that the film's terror is rooted in a patriarchal fear of maternal and biological abjection.

Harkening back to Kristeva's theory that the physical female form is displayed as a site of contention, Creed examines how the performance of abjection in *The Exorcist* offers a "graphic display of bodily excretions—bile, blood, spit, urine, vomit" most of which represent ungovernable behaviour, and are all showcased in Reagan's possession (p. 32). This highlights the horror's ideological tendency to frame monstrosity as a disruption to the traditional heteropatriarchal family structure, caused by the father figure's failure to enforce a psychological distance between the mother and her offspring. Thereby the subgenre of white maternal horror pathologizes a sustained connection between mother and child (Creed, 1993, p. 32).

In essence, mainstream horror frames female monstrosity as a transgression of propriety, which is a coded projection of the patriarchal symbolic order designed to elicit audience revulsion toward any expression of femininity that remains unrefined. Creed (1993, p. 32) writes, "Woman is constructed as possessed when she attacks the symbolic order, highlights its weaknesses, plays on its vulnerabilities; specifically, she demonstrates that the symbolic order is a sham built on sexual repression and sacrifice of the mother". In turn, audiences are conditioned to rebuke these female characters and classify their horrific fate as cautionary. Hence, maternal protagonists in horror—even by extension of their afflicted offspring—are not lauded for their transgressions or given the gift of a complex monstrosity. Instead, their mutations are framed as a form of divine retribution for their unruly articulations of self and failure to preserve

hegemonic social standards. Therefore, Creed's scholarship is a key contribution to the intellectual inquiry of maternal horror cinema due to its critical feminist analysis of how horror narratives are designed to defile and punish maternal figures for appearing to be unruly and unsuccessfully adhering to the patriarchal order of composure.

In her 2013 study, "Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood," Sara Arnold challenges Barbara Creed's assertion that the monstrous mother is constructed simply due to the patriarchal belief in the characteristics of white femininity as an inherent biological certainty. She claims Creed falls short of considering historical representations of monstrous maternity in her theory; instead, Arnold draws on a traditional methodological approach to horror films—melodrama theory—to assert that cultural understandings of motherhood are what informs both cinematic representation and horror iconography's production of deviant mothers (Arnold, 2013, p. 36). Arnold interrogates America's cultural and historical notions of the "good mother" versus the "bad mother," while contextualizing how these anxieties about polarizing imagery of monstrous and self-sacrificial mothers govern horror cinema (Arnold, 2013: 2). Her definition of the "good" mother is not a rigid construct; rather, it refers to the "discourse of motherhood that valorises self-sacrifice, selflessness and nurturance" (Arnold, 2013, p. 37). To an extent, this benevolent depiction of motherhood remains consistent with Kristeva's and Creed's argument of maternal authority in juxtaposition to paternal law. Arnold posits that maternal horror films seldom present the archetype of the good mother as a powerful force within the patriarchal family because she is consistently characterized in correlation to the paternal figure (p. 37).

However, Arnold suggests that the "bad mother" archetype transcends any consolidated depiction of nefarious motherhood; instead, she defines it as a "multifaceted and contradictory construct" (Arnold, 2013, p. 68), characterized as "not only a product of the patriarchal

imaginary, or a representative of the nightmare unconscious, but also a transgressive figure who resists conformity and assimilation. Her very transgressions often indicate the slipperiness of patriarchy” (Arnold, 2013, p. 69). By highlighting the bad mother’s reflection of “dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the psychosocial structures of the family,” Arnold rejects Creed and Kristeva’s simplistic conceptualization of the monstrous mother as an encompassing metaphor for abjection (p. 69). Kristeva and Creed view maternal monstrosity as biological and patriarchal horrors that must be deposed to restore narrative order. In contrast, Arnold suggests the bad mother does possess agency in her transgressive acts, proven by her potent refusal to conform to the narrow confines of the patriarchal family unit (p. 69). Therefore, through her use of a melodramatic lens to reframe the bad mother as a subversive archetype of resistance to assimilation rather than an object for narrative retribution, Arnold improves the theoretical push towards maternal subjectivity in horror. Although Arnold does not explicitly address the topic of Black mothers, her mutable definition of bad mothers and her theory that their characters find power through transgression serve as crucial touchstones for my investigation into the portrayals of Black mothers who do not comply with expectations of docility or servility within the genre.

The Bad Mother Archetype and Gothic Horror

The bad mother archetype is a staple feature of the haunted house or ghost story subgenre of horror cinema known as gothic horror (Arnold, 2013, p. 91). The gothic traditions set films in domestic settings with a revisiting of a supernatural presence; the confined domestic backdrop permits themes of dark familial secrets that resettle the ghosts whose presence must then provide a narrative reappraisal of a traumatic history (p. 91). Motifs of paranoia, mental precarity, and speculative persecution, akin to themes of social oppression or victimization, are conventional to the subgenre of female gothic horror films, and function to produce maternal subjectivity (p. 91).

Whereas traditional maternal horror films suggest what constitutes monstrosity in mothers is their threat to social order and the well-being of their children, and they communicate this through a child's perspective (in the style of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1960] or Brian De Palma's *Carrie* [1976]). Arnold argues that gothic horror films empathize with the bad mother herself by identifying with her paranoia. In this sense, the bad mother is rarely representative of evil, though she may show violence and anger; she instead invokes the abject as a means of demonstrating the agony of oppression (Arnold, 2013, p. 98). In gothic horror the bad mother is not simply bad for monstrosity's sake, her lack of self-sacrificial nurturance towards her child and family reveals her discontent with the family structure and the haunting elements provide a narrative confrontation of past traumas that have been repressed (p. 98). What makes the bad mother fascinating is not that she defies the selfless qualities imposed onto the good mother; rather, the bad mother is intriguing because she responds to the haunting legacies of tyranny that shape her condition of psychosis and precarity. When I refer to the *haunting legacies of tyranny*, I am pointing to the patriarchal and colonial structures that historically restricted women to the domestic sphere and stripped them of bodily autonomy. In the Gothic tradition, the white mother's *condition of psychosis* is a psychological fracture caused by imposed dangers. These horrors create a state of being denied the social, economic, and legal protections afforded to 'virtuous' (white) mothers. Thus, the haunted gothic horror mother's defiance of self-sacrifice is an articulation of a mind pushed to the brink by the very structures that demand her silence. Ultimately, Arnold's view of gothic horror as a subgenre that gives voice to maternal subjectivity is critical due to how they contextualize the concept of maternal deviance through historical realities embedded within ghost stories.

Arnold affirms Gothic horror is the most fitting subgenre to illuminate the feminine interiority of the bad mother archetype due to the ways in which it privileges ghost stories as a means of contextualizing historical traumas from which the deviant maternal subjectivity appears. Although Arnold's research mirrors Kristeva and Creed's, lacking consideration of race as a factor of maternal horror studies, I contend her perspective offers a crucial viewpoint for understanding how Black maternal horror, in the rare instances that it does appear, is captured within the American cinematic landscape.

This is exemplified by Jonathan Demme's *Beloved* (1998), a film adaptation of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning African American Southern Gothic novel, which is a ghost story that carries themes of chattel slavery, generational trauma, and strained mother-daughter dynamics. American cultural scholar Ellen Scott argues that director Jonathan Demme specifically chose Gothic as the mode of horror to present *Beloved* (1998) because the Gothic genre renders horror as the product of mood and environment, making horror spatial and the sense of terror transferrable instead of confined to the body of a single monster (Scott, 2004). *Beloved's* articulation and marketing as a ghost story enabled the motifs of repression, familial curses, and the subversive presence of racial terror to be the context through which Black maternal precarity and moral deviancy are explored (Scott, 2004, np).

Black Maternal Adversity in Cinematic Horror

There is not a plethora of films that occupy the Black maternal horror cinema category. *Beloved* (1998) holds a weighty and arguably foundational position that classifies it as a proto-Black maternal horror film text. Through *Beloved*, Black women are afforded a more noticeable place within the mainstream horror genre, particularly as mothers, and audiences are offered a glimpse of historical horrors of Black motherhood. (Griffith, 2024, p. 11). The film's narrative

and horror aesthetics are primarily derived from the traumas that materialized from enslavement and its aftermath as opposed to a monstrous external villain of the sort often seen in mainstream horror films. Based on Toni Morrison's 1987 book of the same name, the film's plot centres Sethe (played by Oprah Winfrey), an African American woman living in Cincinnati, whose home is haunted by the ghost of her dead unnamed daughter, known as Beloved, and the lingering violent consequences of slavery (Brooks 2017, p. 138).

The film is far from representative of conventional American horror; however, it does mobilize notable themes of possession, repetition of trauma, bodily return, and maternal agony as a means of negotiating the ways in which historical traumas are articulated through the normalized spectacle of fear. Brooks (2017) illustrates how the institution of slavery permeates the lives of the film's characters even after they are free; these terrors manifest as a collective haunting that destabilizes both the domestic sphere and the broader community. The arrival of Beloved serves as a catalyst for displacement, driving Sethe's children away, while Sethe herself remains trapped in a cycle of appeasement rooted in maternal guilt. Her devotion stems from Sethe's past decision to murder her own baby in order to prevent being returned to chattel slavery. Sethe's choice was a desperate act of agency that ultimately grants the spirit of Beloved, her murdered baby, a parasitic power. It is only through the collective intervention of the community's women that Sethe's oppressive haunting from her dead baby's spirit is broken; this community support and connection allow Sethe to finally confront the weight of her traumatic history (Brooks, 2017, p. 138). The plot is predicated on the real-life tragedy of fugitive enslaved Kentucky mother Margaret Garner who killed her infant daughter in 1856 in resistance to her recaptured oppression (Nichols, 2007, np).

In Abby Griffith's 2024 comprehensive study, "The Horrors of Motherhood: An Examination of Mothers in the Modern Horror Film," she argues that the *Beloved* (1998) narrative treats Sethe—based on Margaret Garner—sympathetically, which speaks to the acknowledgement of the cultural differential between the Black and white motherhood and how these horror narratives are affected by Black women's lived experiences (Griffith, 2024, p. 11). Griffith actively recognizes *Beloved* (1998) as a landmark for Black maternal horror subcategory because of the way it tethers Black maternal representation to the historical terrors of enslavement. Although *Beloved* affirms white feminism's perspective of motherhood as restrictive and injurious to women, it diverges through its spotlight on a white-controlled society and systems of slavery as the quintessential horrors that torment Sethe's motherhood (Griffith, 2024, p. 13). Scott corroborates that much of what constitutes Sethe's oppression—seen through Demme's atmospheric crafting of hauntings, suspense, contention with the living dead, exorcism, and dreadful violence—is purposefully internalized to reinforce the repressive motifs of the plot (Scott, 2004, np).

A core aspect of the film's central narrative handles the theme of *re-memory*, a term coined by Morrison to describe an intergenerational recollection of historical trauma that transcends an individual's internal memory of events (Morrison, 2007, p. 36). Demme's depiction of Sethe and the plot's key points are neither tidy nor chronological. Instead, the historical terrors such as Sethe killing her baby, and her assault, are revealed through contracted memories, and in fitful phases, not smooth flashbacks that pull the past forward (Scott, 2004, np). This achronological structure represents the atypical nature of this horror film, and the narrative repression immersed within Black motherhood in America. I contend that Demme's technical choice of non-linear narrative, in addition to the movie's motifs of repression, offers a

blueprint for a more textured reading of Black motherhood within the Gothic horror and maternal horror subgenres. This perspective is relevant to my own research because nuanced portrayal of Black mothers within the genre is so rare that their profound emotional interiority and the disciplined navigation of their maternal adversity can often be misread as simply underdeveloped.

By centring critical considerations of how Blackness compounds the maternal horror subgenre, Griffith's analysis also meaningfully expands upon Creed and Arnold's premise that cinematic motherhood in horror reflects broader social conditions. She places the portrayal of Sethe's motherhood in *Beloved* in discussion with how 1990s welfare policies percolated at the time of the film's production. She observes that during "Reagan's presidency in the 1980s and later in 1996, America underwent massive restructuring of welfare policies which reduced public aid drastically. These reforms, though not mentioning race specifically, were targeted at reforming the (racist) stereotype of Black women as 'welfare queens'" (Griffith, 2024, p. 12). This cultural context highlights the fear of the bad Black mother, who appears to threaten the traditional ideals of the white-American suburban family by being a non-white, unwed mother who is dependent upon the state for support (p. 12). Granted, *Beloved* (1998) does not explicitly address the issue of the welfare queen, but Griffith suggests the cultural anxieties during the era of the film's release also shaped Sethe's characterization as a Black maternal protagonist. Sethe's existence symbolizes the embodiment and response to America's longstanding fears of the deviant Black mother who is "husbandless, unable to keep her family together, unable to protect her children, standing with her dead and bloodied child in her defiant grasp" (Griffith, 2024, p. 12).

However, Griffith frames Sethe's narrative resolution as a conscious disruption to the racist stereotypes of the bad Black mother through the way it offers her a sense of respite via the exorcism and vanishing of her reincarnated daughter, Beloved. She notes how at "the end of the film, Paul D., Sethe's lover, comes to her bedside and reassures Sethe that he and Denver will take care of her, and that she is her own best thing, not Beloved" (Griffith, 2024, p. 11). This display of tenderness towards a Black mother in a film riddled with historical terrors of racial violence speaks to an important privileging of the Black female gaze. Sethe's ability to confront the sins of slavery without being consumed by them in her own home encourages audiences to look beyond the mischaracterizations of Black mothers rooted in white society's punitive interpretations of Black female liberation. This shift allows audiences to approach pain laden within the narrative Poltergeist of Margaret Garner in search of Black women's humanity, and Black women's humanity as mothers. I contend that Griffith's framework is useful to my analysis of Black maternal precarity, particularly as I interrogate the rage and refusal embodied by Aisha in *Nanny* (2022) and Adelaide in *Us* (2019). Although these characters are set in modern times, I argue that their characterizations and their actions are also constructed in response to the enduring legacies of enslavement that continue to haunt contemporary life.

Stereotypes and Archetypes about Black Women

Since mainstream American horror cinema has traditionally ignored Black women's interiority, there is a marked absence of genre-specific archetypes designed for depicting Black maternal experiences. In my attempt to address this omission, I look toward the broader "systemic devaluation of black womanhood," which bell hooks argues "led to a downgrading of any activity black women did" (hooks, 1981, p. 70). Before the Black maternal figure could even step into the cinematic frame as caricatured versions of themselves, the white imagination

enacted against them a process of mythmaking rooted in American chattel slavery to strip them of their humanity (hooks, 1981, p. 71). In “Ain’t I A Woman,” hooks insists these perceptions were intentional as, “many of the anti-black woman stereotypes originated during slavery... [and] white male slave-owners created a body of myths to discredit the contributions of black females” (hooks, 1981, p. 71). She asserts that despite Black women’s hard-working and self-sacrificing efforts, the American public mythologized them in a negative light, rebranding them as “Aunt Jemimas, Sapphire, [and] Amazons” (p. 70). Therefore, the virtues of Black women’s maternal care and resilience were transformed into “negative images that were based upon existing sexist stereotypes of womanhood” through these labels (hooks, 1981, p. 70).

To understand how modern Black horror legitimizes maternal rage, I must first deconstruct the Sapphire caricature; a white supremacist narrative tool designed to invalidate Black women’s grievances with oppression as irrational and threatening. According to David Pilgrim (2008, np), the Sapphire is portrayed as a “rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing” figure. Akin to the Black Matriarch, the Sapphire is a “shrill nagger with irrational states of anger” whose principal purpose is to “emasculate” those around her (Pilgrim, 2008, np). The label is a social control mechanism designed to punish Black women who “violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen” (Pilgrim, 2008, np). He makes note of the Sapphire caricature evolution in cinema, particularly through Blaxploitation era of the 1970s. He points out the way the Sapphire merged with the Jezebel to create a hybrid of the “angry ‘whore’ fighting injustice” (Pilgrim, 2008, np). He observes that although actresses like Pam Grier portrayed “physically attractive and aggressive rebels” seeking revenge, the underlying racism and sexism of the Sapphire framework continued to pathologize their passion (Pilgrim, 2008, np). The framework essentially contributes to the myth of the

Angry Black Woman (ABW) stereotype. Characterizing Black women as Sapphires or angry diminishes their humanity because it ensures that their explicit reaction to injustice is viewed as “hyper-sensitive” and over the top (Pilgrim, 2008). Instead, Black women viewed through this lens are framed as “unendingly bitter,” which strips their expressions of rage of any moral legitimacy (Pilgrim, 2008, np).

For my study’s inquiry into Black maternal rage, I contend that the Sapphire/Angry Black Woman (ABW) stereotype is a narrative barrier to Black mothers’ expressions of dissent. Pilgrim’s work helps me conceptualize how if Black women who “express any dissatisfaction... especially if they express the discontentment with passion, are seen and treated as Sapphires,” then their presence as Black mothers will problematize the heightened emotionality inherent to maternal horror cinema (Pilgrim, 2008, np). Through the Sapphire caricature, Black maternal figure’s cry for her child and her rage against her circumstances will be viewed as “malicious and mean-spirited” unless she is articulated through subversion (Pilgrim, 2008, np). In essence, the Black mother is denied the justified reactions to injustice that are standard for white maternal figures in the genre, as her passion is preemptively dashed as a social pathology rather than a righteous protection of her life.

According to Robin R. Means Coleman’s (2011) research, “Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present,” Black women in horror (particularly in Blaxploitation) are not featured in films in which they are expected to oppose and defeat supernaturally monstrous beings or beasts. Coleman asserts that, unlike their Black female horror leads, white female horror protagonists embody canonical archetypes such as The Final Girl. Through The Final Girl archetype, white female characters can obtain victory via displays of

masculine attributes, project self-confidence when holding gender-neutral names, and brandish phallic weaponry to defeat the beast beyond. On the contrary, Black women in horror are not expected to oppose and defeat supernaturally monstrous beings, beasts, or boogeyman (Coleman, 2011, p. 184). Black women protagonists face social tribulations such as racism and corruption as their horrifying challenges; their canonical monsters are often amorphously coded as “Whitey’s oppressions [which] are here to stay” (Coleman, 2011, p. 184). Hence, there is no going to sleep for Black women even when supernatural antagonistic forces are defeated.

Coleman (2011) identifies a specific narrative archetype that emerges from this structural reality of these representations: the Enduring Woman. Diverging from the Final Girl archetype, who often achieves a definitive, individualistic victory over her pursuer, the Enduring Woman exists within a landscape where “total victory is elusive” (Coleman, 2011, p. 184). This framework is poignant for my inquiry through its implication that even when a Black mother is determined to save her child or preserve her communal connections, she must understand the social crises that engendered her perils. However, although Coleman posits that the Enduring Woman does not find catharsis in the destruction of a singular villain; and instead, her survival is a testament to an exhausted resilience in the face of a community-wide crisis incapable of being resolved by the narrative, my study seeks to complicate this. I seek to explore the ways contemporary Black horror filmmakers compound the narrative resolutions of the Black maternal figure.

In sum, studies of the horror genre have historically framed both maternal monstrosity and Black womanhood through the restrictive lenses of the patriarchal symbolic order and the white racial frame. Formative scholars Harry Benshoff and Kinitra Brooks highlighted how

Black female representation was often relegated to the margins, either through the hyper-sexualized and objectified tropes of the Blaxploitation era, or characterizations via an absent-presence, even in recent horror cinema. Simultaneously, white feminist film theorists such as Barbara Creed and Sara Arnold established that white maternal figures in horror are also characterized through abjection and habitually punished for their failure to adhere to the good mother archetype of self-sacrificial nurturance.

However, there is still a significant gap in the portrayals of Black motherhood and the articulation of Black maternal rage within twenty-first-century Black horror. Although there is existing scholarship which offers a bedrock for understanding racialized monstrosity, white feminine abjection, and controlling images of Black women within non-horror specific cinema, it is yet to account for the nuanced portrayals of Black maternal protagonists who express refusal and rage in response to contemporary narrative conditions. The coalescence of research reviewed such as Brooks' fluid Black feminist horror framework and Arnold's framing of maternal transgression, provides the lens through which I examine *Us* and *Nanny*. Overall, the theories in this chapter illuminate how both films navigate historical trauma to reach a unique Black maternal catharsis.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Introduction

This section details the theoretical and methodological framework I engage to analyze themes of resistance and subversive portrayals of motherhood in contemporary Black maternal horror. I construct a multidisciplinary framework that prioritizes Black female subjectivity and is grounded in Black Feminist Theory. I situate the theme of refusal (Campt, 2019) as a critical analytic through which Black maternal subjectivity can be read as both constrained and generative. I develop an approach attentive to how controlling images (Collins, 1991) and the afterlives of slavery (Hartman, 2007) dictate representations of Black womanhood on screen.

Methodologically, this project employs close textual analysis of key scenes, performance, *mise-en-scène*, and narrative structure to trace how filmmakers aesthetically and narratively achieve refusal, rage and retribution in horror. I treat the genre as a formal strategy that materializes Black interiority, fragmentation, and subversive haunting. Through this interdisciplinary framework, I show how Black horror cinema enacts Black maternal agency through the grammar of the genre.

Black Feminist Theory

The Combahee River Collective was a foundational group of Black feminist lesbian and queer women whose perspectives were theoretically vital to critiquing the heteropatriarchal structures within both the Black liberation and white feminist movements, and putting forward a truly radical Black feminism. For them, Black Feminist Theory offers a robust genealogy of thought and activism centred on “interlocking systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1983, p. 264). This framework finds its canonical roots in the Combahee River Collective’s seminal 1977 Statement, which asserted that Black women’s liberation requires an

integrated struggle against simultaneous racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppressions (1983, p. 264). The Combahee River Collective's attention to this simultaneity actively moved beyond the single-axis frameworks of mainstream feminism and anti-racism that historically marginalized Black women's experiences.

Crucially, the Combahee River Collective also identified capitalism and imperialism as core determinants of Black women's lives, which is a political intervention that directly informs sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) "matrix of domination." Collins' concept describes the organization of hierarchical power through both an "arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression" (such as race, class, and gender) and the "organization of its domains of power," including the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal (Collins, 2000, pp. 18, 299). As for the Collective, they framed Black women's liberation as a revolutionary necessity because it demands the dismantling of these totalizing structures: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective, 1983, p. 270).

As it relates to my inquiry into the Black maternal figure, I consider the ways the Combahee River Collective's lineage of Black queer labour, which was spearheaded by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, emphasizes that Black women cannot be understood through race or gender alone. Contributors to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Smith, 1983) argue instead for an analysis that accounts for the "multilayered texture" (p. 268) of Black women's lives. This requires recognizing their specific economic position within a capitalist labour force, where their liberation is not a niche concern but a revolutionary necessity for the destruction of all oppressive systems (Combahee River Collective, 1983, p. 266).

As Collins (2000) later articulated, the historical “suppression of Black women’s ideas from the academic canon has fundamentally skewed feminist theory toward white, middle-class experiences” (pp.5-6). Acknowledging the “interlocking systems” framework, enables this project to address the “misogynoir,” or contempt for Black women (Bailey, & Trudy, 2018, p. 762), embedded in contemporary horror. This approach is particularly pertinent when analyzing films like *Nanny* (2022), where the figure of the Black mother, Aisha, is subjected to a “racial-sexual oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1983, p. 264) by her employers, that is inextricably tied to her exploitation under capitalism. Thus, I recognize that centring the knowledge produced by Black feminists, from the radical queer roots of the 1970s to the structural critiques of the 1990s, is essential to challenging the hegemonic patriarchal and capitalist orders of society.

In a similar vein and pertinent to cinematic viewing practices, Black feminist and visual cultural historian, Nicole R. Fleetwood’s “Troubling Vision” (2011) addresses the major themes of representation in black visual art. Fleetwood argues “the productive possibilities of black subjects [is] to trouble the field of vision precisely by presenting the black body as a troubling figuration of visual discourse” (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 29). She suggests that the mere existence of Black bodies in any art form—be it in photography, paintings, plays, films, or audio-visuals—has always been met with discord and controversy from most members of society, including the dominant group as well as from Black people. Leaning on Fleetwood’s notion that Blackness exists to trouble the scope of vision, I contend it is worth examining how the on-screen presentation of Black women, particularly fashioned by Black filmmakers, contributes and/or disrupts the notions of orthodox narratives of motherhood in American cinematic horror.

In essence, Black Feminist Theory offers a crucial framework for examining the narrative perspectives of Black female characters in a genre that has historically marginalized them. Leaning on Collins' point that Black Feminist Theory intentionally challenges simultaneous oppressions through broad social justice principles focused on empowering the position of Black women in the United States (Collins, 2000, p. 22), I ground my considerations of Black motherhood in contemporary Black horror in frameworks presented by theorists who share this oppositional response.

Oppositional Viewing Theories

In her 1992 feminist film theory book, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks describes the oppositional gaze as a kind of looking relation rooted in political resistance against racialized oppression (hooks, 1992). To maintain textual fidelity and avoid oversimplifying the hooks' positioning, the following section is quoted in its entirety. hooks theorizes that the oppositional gaze is

a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (hooks, 1992, p. 116)

Ergo, for Black people who have historically been dominated under white supremacist structures and forced to occupy the position of the "Other," the gaze is a politicized space of agency that enables them to resist and look (hooks, 1992, p. 116). I deploy the oppositional gaze framework to assess the ways in which resistive narrative elements emerge and situate Black female lead characters in contemporary American horror films. This critical interrogation framework offers

me a viewing practice to perceive the representational aspects of contemporary Black motherhood on screen, and to consider whether they appear as more holistic and evolved as opposed to limiting hackneyed and derogatory depictions.

Similarly, I employ Black feminist theorist, Tina Campt's (2021) theory of the Black gaze as presented in "A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See," to understand the complex layers embedded within contemporary depictions of Black women in American cinematic horror. This passage is quoted at length to ensure Campt's analytical context is preserved. She elucidates that a more:

capacious idea of a gaze opens up a different set of possibilities for understanding other potentialities of a Black gaze. It unleashes some of the multiple meanings of the gaze that are impossible to imagine when it is understood as always already tethered to a prior injury or a structure of dominance. Rather than trying to invent a new term for the transformative practices of witnessing and implication created by the artists engaged in these pages, rather than reducing them to alternative forms of looking, I choose instead to embrace the radical power of their work as constituting a Black gaze. (Campt, 2021, p. 22)

In conversation with Ethel-Ruth Tawe (2021), Tina Campt redefines the Black Gaze as a disruption of traditional, top-down power dynamics. She argues that Black visibility is not an invitation for the white viewer to "see through Black eyes," but rather a confrontation that strips the outsider of their presumed narrative mastery. Therefore, by presenting images that may intentionally alienate or challenge a white audience, the oppositional Black gaze makes specific demands upon viewers, and forces an encounter with a perspective that refuses to be consumed, or governed by a dominant, external logic (Campt, as cited in Tawe, 2021).

Campt's lens insists on a fresh understanding of Blackness, urging audiences to perceive Black portrayals in a new and transformative way. Therefore, I believe Campt's theory has a richness to offer my narrative study because it analyzes the creations of present-day Black creatives who are deconstructing the perspective of the white gaze, which I adapt to critique the dominant narrative practices of mainstream horror cinema.

The Configuration of the Black Mother

Before I can recognize the ways in which refusal, rage and retribution as emotions and behaviours are developed in the portrayals of the Black maternal figures Adelaide, Red, and Eartha in *Us* (2019), and Aisha and Kathleen in *Nanny* (2022), I must first consider how the vicious realities from the forced kidnappings and enslavement of African people shaped popular cultural renderings of Black female subjects in America. From a Black feminist perspective that reflects on the vantage point of the enslaved, slavery is itself a horror story. Hartman (2022) pens "the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved" (p. 6). American chattel slavery as an institution was designed for the enrichment of the white, and predominantly male, enslaver population through the holistic reduction of African people via exploitative processes that demanded destruction of their human dignity and heritage (hooks, 1981, p. 19). Spillers (1987) writes that this domination was ensured through acts of "actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile" (p. 67). It cannot be denied that subsequent identity formations of the Black female, along with contemporary cultural renderings of Black womanhood in America, are historically rooted in a hegemonic order validated by systematic violence against African female subjects. And to grasp the legacy of this anti-Black brutality

within contemporary horror, I draw from theoretical concepts that examine the starting point where the Black female subject was disrobed of her personhood and socially reduced to property.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), Hortense Spillers offers an analysis on how the cruelties of the Middle Passage and physical and psychological woundings of slavery constructed the Black female identity through disruption and contextualized the narrative of Black women in American culture and society (p. 67). Of particular importance to my investigation is Spillers’ (1987) theoretical distinction between the African subject’s *body* versus their *flesh*, and her concept of ungendering. Specifically, Spillers offers:

I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.... Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. (Spillers, 1987, pp. 66, 67)

During the Middle Passage, white enslavers captured and then inflicted a bloodthirsty metamorphosis upon African people that dispossessed them of their bodies. From the shores of the continent and in the hold of the ships, white enslavers physically and metaphorically “seared, divided, and ripped-apart” African peoples’ social identities, to deplete and commodify them into

raw flesh for domination (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). The distinction of this reduction announces the Black female subject's first rupture in social identity.

Captors viewed enslaved Black female subjects not as women but as property with flesh upon which they could externalize acts of torture and whom they could deploy as machines to labour for white male hegemony (p. 67). As a demographic, white male enslavers conceived an existence of pure powerlessness for the Black captive body, and designated it as a site of:

1) ...irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduce[d] to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide[d] a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translate[d] into a potential for pornotroping.” (Spillers, 1987, p. 66)

Consequently, these four factors formed the blueprint of the white enslavers' invention of the Black figure as a purely expendable object.

The white enslaver imagination fissured the African female subject's identity further through an intentional erasure of their gender that legitimized their degradation as mere commodities for their captors' absolute material domination. White colonizers institutionalized an American social structure founded on the convergence of anti-Black racist-sexism, brutal labour, and sexual and reproductive exploitation of enslaved African women, which remained integral to the system (hooks, 1981, p.15). And the Black female subject was redefined as “de mule uh de world” (Hurston, 1937/2006, p. 14) in service of white male hegemony. However, as commodified and unprotected flesh, the African female subject was also uniquely positioned for violation as an object of white male sexual assault” (hooks, 1981, p. 22). The historical exclusion of Black women from Western protections of white femininity is rooted in this structural erasure

of ungendering. Spillers (1987) argues that within the context of chattel slavery, the gendered distinctions of “male” and “female” were effectively lost, as the captive body became a “territory of cultural and political maneuver” rather than a gendered subject (p. 67). This process denied Black women the security of being viewed and treated as women that Western society has historically bestowed upon white women; it also stripped Black women of the very status of “personhood” required to possess a gender in the first place.

Spillers coined the term “ungendering” to describe this reductive process that stripped enslaved Black women of traditional gender markers and forced them into a state of social disequilibrium as unprotected female flesh (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). To substantiate their own status as patriarchal rulers, white male colonizers disrupted Black female subjects’ identity by positioning them as surrogate men, making them perform the same grueling tasks as Black men on the plantation, yet also systemically raping them due to their vulnerability as under subjugation (hooks, 1981, p. 23). Saidiya Hartman (2016) further develops this concept by examining the logistics of the slave ship, where captive Africans were stripped of individuality and reclassified as “quantities of greater and lesser mass” (p. 167). On these vessels, the language of the human subject was entirely eclipsed by the language of “units” and “complete cargo” (Hartman, 2016, p.166). Under the calculations of the Middle Passage, the Black body was neither male nor female; it was a numerical value in a capitalist ledger (Hartman, 2008, p.2). Thus, it is Black women’s historical transformation into a “unit” of mass that is meaningful to understanding my conception of Black mothers as the absent centre of American horror. I posit that if the inaugural experience of Black women in America, whose reproductive labor was co-opted to fuel racial capitalism under imperialist, white supremacist hegemony, was one of being “accounted for” (Hartman, 2016, p.166) as a quantity rather than a person, or a person who could

be considered to be a mother, then the cinematic horror genre's historical refusal to grant the Black maternal figure subjectivity is a direct continuation of this "ledger-book" logic (Hartman, 2008, p.1). The ungended body of the enslaved Black woman, viewed as a toiling, reproductive unit rather than a vulnerable feminine subject, provides the raw material for a genre that commodifies bodily terror while remaining indifferent to the humanity of the body being terrorized. In essence, Spillers (1987) argues that Black womanhood was historically constructed through colonial conceptions of the captive body and maintained through physical and metaphoric violence. Within this violent hegemony, I consider the American horror genre to be a cinematic frame that relies on Black mothers' terror, pain, and absent presence for narrative labor, but it refuses to recognize their humanity.

In relation to the framing of Black womanhood within my own investigation, I apply Spillers' concept of ungendering to examine the construction and deconstruction of Black maternal figures within the horror genre. My argument aligns with Spillers' perspective on the systemic rupture of Black identities that branded Black female figuration with social "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean" (Spillers, 1987, p. 65). Systemic racism has plastered Black womanhood with 'mythical' labels and caricatures so dense that they function as a type of burial. These social markers are so over-determined that the actual individuals trapped beneath them struggle to be seen or heard as their true selves. The praxis of ungendering (Spillers, 1987, p. 68), particularly Spillers' notion of rupture, allows me to trace how the strategic dehumanization and physical torture historically inflicted upon Black women have ossified into the social expectations that they face contemporarily. The brutal dispossession of the Atlantic slave trade and persistent sexual terrorism of plantation life radically altered African female subjects' kinship structures.

Crushed under the conditioning of the New World, enslaved African women were violently reconfigured through the severing of their ancestral ties, which made their kinship structures “undecipherable” from their precolonial connections (Spillers, 1987, pp. 67, 67). Hence, to frame the Black maternal narrative, I must first consider Black motherhood as inherently queer due to the weight of these “loaded mythical prepossessions” (Cohen, 1997; Spillers, 1987, p. 65) imposed on Black women, who must exist in a world that is both unnatural to them as beings and hostile to expressions of humanity that do not serve whiteness.

Thus, the project of motherhood, as Theresa Hice-Fromille (2021) suggests, required Black women as ungendered subjects to be structurally available for invasive ruptures, contortion, and grief (Hice-Fromille, 2021, p. 548). Ergo, portrayals of the nuclear family are unorthodox to the colonial origins of Black women in America because their realities are built on the destruction of these very structures. Subsequently, Black women have been forced to maneuver and live in a world historically that is socially designed for their fracture, alienation, and subservience to white hegemonic interests. I consider how critiques of Black women’s placement in relation to the nuclear family structure are secondary to their colonial displacement. This subjection to such a life-altering trauma constitutes a literal horror story. Therefore, I apply Spillers’ (1987) notion of rupture through imposed ungendering to my investigation of Aisha (*Nanny*) and Adelaide (*Us*), as I analyze their contemporary emotional adaptations and angry responses to the racist and sexist degradation directed at Black women innate to Black motherhood.

I build on the concept of foundational rupture within Black motherhood by actively considering the ways Black women have remained culturally legible, both on and off-screen, through a limited repertoire of racialized gender stereotypes. I draw on Black feminist sociologist

Patricia Hill Collins' theory on *Controlling Images* (1991) to decode the historical scripts imposed on Black maternal figures within American cinema, and horror narratives specifically. Collins (1991) theorizes that controlling images such as the Mammy which represents the asexual, self-sacrificing caregiver (p. 266); the Matriarch which represents the 'bad' mother shown to be overly aggressive and enervating (p. 268); and the Jezebel which represents the hyper-sexualized jezebel crafted to deny Black women's ethical authority and dignity (p. 271). I consider how the "nexus of elite white male interpretations" worked to define Black female existence in the white imagination by distorting Black women's visibility through negative tropes, in order to sanction their "racial oppression, the politics of gender subordination, and economic exploitation" (Collins, 1991, p. 271). All of these images were developed as ideological justifications designed to restrict Black women's autonomy in service of white patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial interests (Collins, 1991, p. 271).

Collins asserts that these stereotypes were invented to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear "natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" to sustain Black women's systemic subjugation (Collins, 1991, p. 272). They also serve as the representational blueprints for masking Black women's complexity within the horror genre. I believe to thoroughly untangle the conduct that is being refused in modern horror narratives, it is important to review these impositions on Black maternal figures within American cinema. I am particularly interested in the ways the Mammy and Matriarch stereotypes are established to shape the conditions of maternal horror and then subverted in *Nanny* (2022) and *Us* (2019).

Collins defines the Mammy figure as the "faithful, obedient domestic servant" designed to justify the economic exploitation of Black women's labour and cement their subservience within the white domestic household (Collins, 1991, p. 266). She is the "normative yardstick" of

acceptable Black femininity, because of her overwhelming devotion and willingness to nurture white families better than her own” (p. 266). This makes her a symbol for the idealized relationship between Black women and elite white male (p. 267). According to Collins, although the Mammy is “magnificently physical” in her appearance, she is “asexual,” which enables her to serve as a “surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female” (p. 267). The Mammy’s construction intentionally separates Black women’s sexuality from their motherhood to deny their agency and personal desires, making them “harmless” figures of service within white domestic spheres (p. 267). This dehumanizing separation resolves racist and psychological contradictions of Black mothers as wet nurses by making them biological machines whose maternal functions are sanitized for white consumption, precisely because they are denied any reproductive and sexual interiority connecting them to their own lineage. For my inquiry into the horror genre, the Mammy figure allows me to consider how the Black mother is expected to remain a static and safe background character that is denied any transformative power or protective agency traditionally bestowed to the maternal heroine. My analysis focuses on how Aisha’s actions in *Nanny* reject the Mammy archetype, and replace the self-sacrificial expectations with a complex, self-regarding agency.

Table 1: The Mammy Image (*Collins, 1991*)

Controlling Image: The Mammy (Collins, 1991)	
Role Definition:	
1.	She is the typified Black mother figure within the white domestic sphere. (p. 268)
2.	She is a “faithful, obedient domestic servant” and defined by her service and submission. (p. 266)
3.	She serves as the standard or “normative yardstick” by which all Black women’s behavior is evaluated. (p. 266)
4.	She is objectified to justify economic exploitation and the historical restriction of Black women to service roles. (p. 266)
5.	She prioritizes the love, nurturing, and care of her white family” and their children above the needs of her own family. (p. 266)

6. She wields a sense of “authority” in the white household, but her power is conditional and confined to her position as a servant. (p. 266)
7. She symbolizes the “ideal” relationship between Black women and elite white male power. (p. 266)
8. She accepts her subordination and “knows her place” in the social hierarchy. (p. 266-267)
9. She represents the "Other," distinguishing Black women as “oppositional difference” from traditional standards of "true womanhood" assigned to white women. (p. 267)
10. She is perceived as “harmless” in her position of servitude because of her “all-giving nature”. (p. 267)
11. She is an asexual woman, and a “surrogate mother in blackface” who is wholly devoted to the white family's development. (p. 267)
12. She is a domestic worker who accepts a life of poverty and economic exploitation, despite being told she is “loved” by her white employers. (p. 267)
13. She denies her own household the benefits of her wages and her presence, representing the forced removal of Black women's labor from their own families. (p. 267)
14. She is the source of crucial “cheap labor” that fuels the domestic economy and allows white families to maintain and elevate their own class position. (p. 268)
15. She serves as a diversion to obscure the harsh truth of her economic disenfranchisement; because of her the “image” as a happy and devoted Mammy. (p. 268)

If the Mammy represents the ‘good’ Black mother in white spaces, then the Matriarch controlling image represents the ‘bad’ mother within Black domesticity (Collins, 1991, p. 268). Collins argues the Matriarch is essentially a “failed mammy” and an “overly aggressive, unfeminine woman who emasculates” the Black men in her home and those around her (p. 268). The Matriarch stereotype was codified in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s (1965) report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” The Moynihan report pathologized the prevalence of female-headed households in Black communities to frame poverty within the Black community as a consequence of this “matriarchal” family structure and shift blame away from structural racism. As noted by Christina Sharpe (2014), Black mothers are perpetually blamed for the failures of their children, even by their own children who lay both the fault of need knowledge

of/for survival and the acquisition of that knowledge of survival squarely at their mothers' feet (Sharpe, p. 65).

Thus, by angling the “vision away from structural sources of poverty,” the dominant ideology blames the Black mother for her own victimization (Collins, 1991, pp. 269, 271). If the horror genre often centres on the sanctity of the home, then I consider that the Black Matriarch trope is designed to disrupt this by framing the Black home as a site of “cultural disadvantage” (p. 271) and evidence of the Black mother’s failure to conform to normative gender roles. I look to see the ways Black filmmakers tackle these negative impositions. My analysis explores how Adelaide in *Us* subverts the Black Matriarch archetype by rejecting the respectability and cautious compliance that is typically demanded of Black mothers.

Table 2: The Matriarch Image (*Collins, 1991*)

Controlling Image – The Matriarch (Collins, 1991)	
Role Definition:	
1.	She symbolizes the Black mother figure specifically within the Black home. (p. 268)
2.	She is the bad Black mother who does not conform to submissive roles. (p. 268)
3.	She is a “failed mammy” image because she dares to violate the expectation of being a submissive, hard-working servant for whiteness. (p. 268)
4.	She is “overly aggressive,” “unfeminine,” and (allegedly) emasculates the Black men in her life. (p. 268)
5.	She fails to fulfill her “traditional womanly duties” according to the modern Black matriarchy expectations. (p. 268)
6.	She is a working mother, and because of this she spends too much time away from home. (p. 268)
7.	She is blamed for her children's lack of supervision and school failure. (p. 268)
8.	She is perceived as the “source” of her family instability. (p. 268)
9.	She is strong, but her strength is framed as a deficiency that intimidates and causes men to desert her household. (p. 268)
10.	She is a cautionary symbol of the consequences that occur when white patriarchal power is challenged. (p. 268)
11.	She is a warning to both Black and white women of the social and economic “penalties” for being assertive. (p. 269)
12.	She fails to model appropriate gender behavior imposed by the dominant group. (p.269)

13. She is stigmatized for being “unfeminine”; she is abandoned to face poverty as a direct result of her aggressive and assertive nature. (p. 269)
14. She must accept the imposed burden of being the “source of failure” for the entire Black family structure. (p. 269)

Collins (1991) also names the Jezebel trope, which is another controlling image, as the one that underpins both the Mammy and the Matriarch by providing the ideological “nexus” through which Black female sexuality and fertility are controlled (p. 271). The Jezebel trope is the “sexually aggressive woman” whose stigmatized image is used to “relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive wet nurses” (Collins, 1991, p. 271). Jezebel’s hypersexualization was historically imposed on Black women to justify sexual violence and the economic exploitation of Black reproductive labour. Since American horror traditionally narrativizes female sexuality punitively, and lacks any archetype for Black maternal desire, I engage the Jezebel trope as an interpretive engine, reading against its history of pathologization to interrogate how contemporary Black horror makes maternal desire legible as an act of agency.

Given that American horror narrativizes female sexuality through punishment, and there are no existing genre-specific archetypes that speak to Black maternal sexuality, I mobilize the Jezebel image against which I can read the way contemporary Black horror makes sexual desire for Black maternal figures legible. Specifically, I examine the ways in which Aisha’s embodied subjectivity in *Nanny* disrupts inherited hypersexualizing fantasies and carves a path toward radical self-definition within the landscape of Black maternal horror.

Black Horror Cinema as “Visitation”

My project argues that anti-Black racism haunts the American cinematic horror genre. I synthesize Saidiya Hartman’s (2007) theory of the afterlife of slavery and Viviane Saleh-

Hanna's (2015) Black feminist hauntology to ground my analysis of horror in an understanding of how racist restraints of chattel slavery continue influencing the modern social conditions of Black women, both in real life and on screen. African American studies scholar Saidiya Hartman introduces the term the "afterlife of slavery" in her 2007 historiographical memoir, *Lose Your Mother*. Hartman (2007) defines the afterlife of slavery as an issue of political life for Black Americans that constitutes "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," thus linking contemporary social injustices to the punitive practices of the institution (p. 6). She connects the current social encroachment on Black Americans' freedoms to an economic phenomenon designed to expunge Black lives, suggesting that slavery simply mutated into new forms of political and social confinement.

Her conceptualization of the hereafter of enslavement aims to "engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance" (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). She intentionally considers the ways in which tumultuous historical elements of African subjugation continue shaping the livelihoods of those descended from the Middle Passage, including herself. As a Black woman, Hartman specifically attaches her identity as an African American woman to the conceptual construction of this legacy bequeathed by institutionalized bondage. Through her declaration that "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007, p. 6), Hartman cements the historical traumas of the enslaved Black people to the modern material realities of their descendants. I consider Hartman's insistence that the conditions of the past are indeed present, and her framing of the collapsed distance between the enslaved dead and their living descendants, to be a purposeful act of archival retrieval.

In essence, Hartman's (2007) theory posits that the terrors from plantation life limited the agency of Black people two-fold via a haunting. Hartman argues that despite the 1865

abolishment of slavery in America, its institutional atrocities endured within the nation's systemic structures. She pens that “black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (Hartman, 2007, p. 6), noting the social constraints on Black people’s political and daily lives. Here, “*racial calculus*” (p. 6) refers to the hegemonic, white supremacist, hierarchized racial system that has been enforced on American society for centuries. Such an anti-Black system conditions its members to racially calibrate the worth of individuals by safeguarding the interests of white supremacy via the efficient social and material degradation of Black lives. Thus, Hartman’s framework appropriately conveys how structural racist barbarities of Atlantic chattel slavery directly inform the pervasive racism in modern institutional policies. These legacies orchestrate a cycle of socio-economic disenfranchisement that continues to restrict the Black human experience today.

I draw on the methodologies of Viviane Saleh-Hanna’s “Black Feminist Hauntology” (2015) to explore how contemporary Black horror cinema positions the haunting anti-Black structures of slavery in its modern definitions of trepidation. In keeping with Toni Morrison's 1987 concept of “rememory,” which speaks to recollecting and reassembling the population of the past (Morrison, 2019, p. 323), Saleh-Hanna describes Black Feminist Hauntology as “an anti-colonial analysis of time that captures the expanding and repetitive nature of structural violence, a process whereby we begin to locate a language to speak about the actual, not just symbolic or theorized violence that is racial colonialism” (Saleh-Hanna, 2015, p. 9). The purpose of Saleh-Hanna’s framework is to call forth and make visible the silent sociological ghosts that are representative of the enduring realities of colonialism (p. 9). She considers the language and conceptualization of hauntings to be integral aspects of the analytical approach she employs to dissect penal colonialism and racial oppression. Drawing on Walter R. Jacobs (2007), Saleh-

Hanna suggests that haunting is a transformative way of knowing; it is an affective experience that draws the subject into a “structure of feeling” where the past is not encountered as “cold knowledge,” but as a persistent force that refuses to be ignored (Jacobs 2007, as cited in Saleh-Hanna, 2015, p. 7). Haunting, therefore, is the process by which we recognize the forces we try to forget as the historical terrors that never truly leave us alone (Jacobs 2007, as cited in Saleh-Hanna, 2015, p. 7).

This hauntological lens is particularly effective for exposing how systemic violence is frequently repackaged as reform. Saleh-Hanna (2015) argues that throughout history, colonial structures have not been dismantled but have instead evolved into more civilized or reformed iterations, such as the transition from chattel slavery to the modern penal system. Engaging in the language of ghosts, makes the spirit of the auction block that continues to haunt the prison cell and the courtroom more visible to be understood. These reforms often serve as a disguise, masking the continuity of racialized subjugation under the banner of progress. In the context of American horror narratives, this haunting manifests as a narrative tension where the reformed present is constantly pierced by the violent, unaddressed ghosts of the past.

What draws me to Saleh-Hanna’s lens is the liberatory potential presented in her exorcizing framework and how it guides my project’s focus on narrative construction and theme of refusal. Through Black feminist hauntology, Saleh-Hanna introduces shape-shifting methodologies to establish the concept of “metamorphic liberation” (Saleh-Hanna, 2015, p. 4), which speaks to inner transformation. She envisions this analytical practice as a transformative process applied to readings of “colonized and enslaved bodies” to liberate them from colonial labels imposed by white institutional fantasies (p. 4). Saleh-Hanna's aim is to encourage the

emergence of independent selfhood for the colonized and enslaved subjects of history. I connect this liberation work to the concept of “redress” (p. 129) presented by Saidiya Hartman (2022).

My research contends that contemporary Black horror films operate as vehicles for what I consider to be narrative redress, as seen through the articulation of Black mothers through refusal, anger, and retributive justice I draw on Saidiya Hartman’s (2022) concept of redress which does not focus on restoration, remedy, or redemption, but rather the process centres a shift in perspective that acknowledges the tragedies produced by enslavement and explores how to soothe areas of harm (Hartman, 2022, pp. 129, 130). In the interest of keeping accuracy of interpretation I have included this section in its entirety to prevent potential distortion. Harman offers:

First, redress is a re-membering of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation, captivity, and enslavement. The re-membering of the violated body must be considered in relation to the dis-membered body of the slave—that is, its segmentation and organization for purposes of work, reproduction, enjoyment, and punishment. This re-membering takes the form of attending to the body as a site of pleasure, eros, sociality, and articulating its violated condition. Second, redress is a limited form of action aimed at relieving the broken body through alternative configurations of the self or self-abandonment, and the redemption of the body as human flesh. Third, redress concerns the articulation of needs and desires and the endeavor to meet them. (Hartman, 2022, p. 130)

Hence, redress is the crucial aspect for “making and doing” that settles the “history that hurts” (Hartman, 2022, p. 130). I contend that in approaching contemporary Black horror, Black

filmmakers produce a synthesized practice of Hartman's redress and Saleh-Hanna's metamorphic liberation, which offers a narrative redress. The plots of *Us* and *Nanny* offer a "remembrance of breach" that then allows the respective Black maternal figures opportunities for a metamorphic shift from a stereotypical and ungended "creature" back to a "human" with agency (Hartman, 2022, p. 130).

Furthermore, I engage with Jennifer DeClue's (2022) framework of "Visitation" to conceptualize viewing practices of *Us* and *Nanny* as "conjure work" (DeClue, 2022, p. 2) a methodology that intentionally summons the repressed historical realities of Black women into the cinematic present. In this context, conjure work functions as a creative intervention where Black women's subjectivities are used to dismantle the genre's traditional absent-presence. These films serve as a site for Peele and Jusu as filmmakers to engage in conjure work by performing narrative redress and addressing historical traumas of Black maternal characters. DeClue's (2022) theory offers a "methodology of tenderness" for interrupting the "archival violence" within narratives that distort Black women (p. 2). The tender intervention of this visitation aligns with Hartman's definition of "redressive action" as a heightened attention to crisis that acts as "bridge between the living and the dead" (Hartman, 2022, p. 130).

I contend that Peele (*Us*) and Jusu (*Nanny*) approach their respective plots as mediums for Black maternal "secrets from the past" (DeClue, 2022, p. 2) to be unleashed and heal the "crisis" of the present. Ergo, these filmmakers intentionally construct the characters of Adalaide and Aisha to actively confront the archival violence imposed upon the Black maternal body. DeClue's method of conjure work allows me to consider the cinematic strategies Black horror filmmakers deploy to transfigure Black maternal characters into "vessels of communication" and

“flesh to be loved” (Hartman, 2022, p. 130) through formulations of narrative restitution as seen through themes of nonacceptance and expression of fury.

Articulations of Refusal, Rage, and Retribution

I contend that *Us* (2019) and *Nanny* (2022) deploy the theme of refusal as a retaliatory narrative strategy through which Black motherhood is articulated and the horrors inflicted upon Black women are confronted. My conceptualization of Black maternal refusal is anchored Tina M. Campt’s (2019) definition of the term, which serves as the vital framework for my interpretation of these characters’ acts of agency:

refusal: a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise. (Campt, 2019, p. 83)

Refusal is a multifaceted concept that informs how artists and audiences alike “write, think, perform, practice, visualize, engage, theorize, story, or enact” this practice of resistance (Campt, 2019, p. 79). For Campt, the practice of refusal is synonymous with refusing to perform, which itself is a critical framework for theorizing intonations of emergent Black visibility because it compels viewers to urgently reconsider the time and space under which artists are expected to produce, and what they are expected to produce (Campt, 2019, p. 80). Campt primarily charts the practice of refusal through the ways Black contemporary artists embody it to create radical modalities of witnessing, which is to say more expansive and open-minded ways of looking at things, that actively challenge authoritative forms of visibility historically designed to rebuff assertions of Blackness itself (p. 80). She characterizes the practice of refusal as “neither utopic

nor autonomous, and neither pessimistic nor futuristic. It functions instead through relationality and adjacency, and its power lies in its ability to engage negation as generative” (Campt, 2019, p. 80). My project specifically focuses on the quotidian elements of refusal within Black maternal characterizations in horror; particularly, how the practice enables Black female subjectivity by enriching character development, reshaping their narrative resolutions, and facilitating narrative redress within the protagonists' final arcs.

I zero in upon Campt’s (2019) interpretation of refusal as a “generative and capacious rubric for theorizing everyday struggle” (p. 80) to examine how Adelaide (*Us*) and Aisha (*Nanny*) engage in gradual yet decisive acts of insurgency that disrupt the restrictive gendered expectations imposed upon them as Black maternal figures in horror. I return to Collins’ (1991) framework of controlling images to guide my theorization of what it might look like if the Mammy and Matriarch archetypes were subverted through intentional commonplace acts of refusal. The table below maps potential means through which these figures might reclaim agency.

Table 3: Subverting Controlling Images: Reimagining the Mammy & Matriarch in Black Horror

Controlling Image	Stereotypical Expectations	Displays of Refusal
The Mammy	Self-sacrificing; nurtures white interests	Prioritizes her own family; engages with confrontation for her survival
The Matriarch	Overly aggressive; exists as a scapegoat/ reason for her family’s failures	Reclaims agency of self; proactively protects her family from threats via acts of violence

To enhance my framing of the articulation of Black maternal refusal, I adapt Campt’s (2019) notion of negation as a “generative and creative source of disorderly power” (p. 83). Subsequently, to secure my interpretation of Black maternal characters’ contemporary strategies

of insurgency, I place Campt's theory in conversation with Angela Y. Davis's (1971) foundational framing of Black women's antebellum-era resistance. Davis' framework offers "a rigorous reinvestigation" of the ways Black women interacted with their oppressive environments during slavery by pushing back against the normative historical narratives that reduced Black enslaved women to submissive houseslaves and infallible matriarchs (Davis, 1971, p. 1). She rebuffs the Moynihan Report's consecrated myth of the Black matriarch as a propagandistic mission of the state, and a cruel mischaracterization of the Black women that ignores their lack of autonomy, such as their child-bearing traumas endured under predatory economic interests (Davis, 1971, p. 3). Davis shifts from the perspective of victimhood and applies a refusal-based analysis that foregrounds the myriad ways that Black women defied their subjugation. She asserts that the reality of life under enslavement was defined by a continuous open rebellion that mainstream, "ruling class" historians have historically suppressed. Beyond these open slave revolts that could not be ignored, Davis posits that there was a pervasive culture of defiance expressed through both "grand modes" (p. 4) and subtle, everyday tactics. Davis states that by re-examining "seemingly trivial" (p.4) acts of non-compliance, it becomes clear that resistance by enslaved women was a crucial element of their enslaved experience instead of an occasional eruption. It is within these "seemingly trivial" (p. 4) modes of defiance, that I examine the quotidian refusal of the Black maternal figure and how their horrific domestic backdrops transform into sites of their insurgent potential against historical dehumanization.

Davis (1971) conveys that enslaved Black women defined themselves through their acts of resistance (p. 10). They engaged in resistive acts of sabotage, such as feigning illness to decelerate the work process and other destructive actions designed to intentionally diminish crop yields (Davis, 1971, p. 10). Her analysis expands on the notion of Black maternal insurgency by

highlighting how enslaved Black women weaponized their positions as domestic workers and staged lethal attacks against their enslavers. She notes Black enslaved women “often poisoned the food and set fire to the houses of their masters” as well as practiced overt forms of resistance including killing and wounding slaveholders with guns, clubs and knives (Davis, 1971, p. 8). Therefore, enslaved women approached everyday acts of refusal as calculated countermeasures to the structural violences against them, akin to an earlier form of retributive justice. My interests lie in these explicitly confrontational methods, as they directly inform how I define and examine maternal rage and retribution within the Black horror genre.

I conceptualize Black maternal rage and retribution as a multi-layered exercise that weaves together the transformative notion of Lordean rage expressed in Black lesbian feminist, Audre Lorde’s (1981) “Uses of Anger” and the framework of retaliatory justice theorized by Nikki M. Taylor (2023) as a core tenet of Black feminist justice. I further extend my definitions of rage and retribution through June Jordan’s (1976) radical philosophy of Black women becoming a “menace” to their enemies. Ergo, I frame articulations of Black maternal rage and revenge in horror as a deliberate and generative practice wielded for Black mothers for retributive purposes and to achieve liberatory outcomes.

I draw upon Audre Lorde’s (1981) transformational understanding of anger because she characterizes it as a refusal of the oppressive status quo imposed upon Black women that is rooted in white supremacist beliefs in the “inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (p. 7). As a Black woman, Lorde theorizes anger as politicized responsive tactic against racism. Lorde brandishes anger to refute the structural violences of racism, such as “exclusion, unquestioned privilege, racial distortions, silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and coopting racist attitudes” (Lorde, 1981, p.

7). In contemporary Black horror, I position this Black female anger as a refusal of the racist distortions of controlling images and expectation of silence typically inflicted upon Black mothers.

Lorde (1981) identifies anger as a serviceable emotion for Black women that is “loaded with information and energy” and thus must be handled with focused precision to enact progressive social change (Lorde, 1981, p. 8). In this regard, Black women’s expression of anger is not considered to be reckless or unnecessary. Rather, anger functions as a fortifying “act of clarification” that empowers them to recognize harmful individuals, systems designed for their oppression, and strategize solutions with their allies (Lorde, 1981, p. 8).

Lorde posits Black women’s anger as a generative tool of liberatory change; “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future” is liberating (Lorde, 1981, p. 8). Philosopher Myisha Cherry (2021) typifies this expression of transformative anger as “Lordean Rage,” which is a form of “metabolized anger” that virtuously channels power by respecting the reality of one’s fury without being destroyed by it (Cherry 2021, p. 24). Lorde (1981) encourages Black women to embrace the utilitarian and generative energy of their anger as a vital form of protection (p. 8). She argues that Black women embracing their expressions of rage is a grounding practice that functions as a key guard against external accusations that their anger is recklessly destructive (Lorde, 1981, p. 8). I view the metamorphic capacity of Lordean Rage as crucial for Black maternal figures’ defense against pathologizing social narratives of Black motherhood.

However, despite my adoption of Lorde’s framework of anger, my conceptualization diverges from the distinction she makes between anger and the concept of hatred. Lorde asserts that the hatred of the oppressors and Black women’s “anger are very different. Hatred is the fury

of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction” (Lorde, 1981, p. 8), while the purpose of rage is change. As it relates to Black maternal figures’ rageful responses to navigating the racist monstrosities of structural violence in Black horror, my approach does not solely follow Lorde’s theoretical distinction between generative anger and lethal hatred. For this, I turn to Nikki M. Taylor’s (2023) conceptualization of retaliatory justice.

In “Brooding over Bloody Revenge: Enslaved Women's Lethal Resistance” (2023), Nikki M. Taylor further attends to the phenomenon of mortal defiance deployed by enslaved Black women, which she frames as a significant method of insurgency against their oppressors. Taylor (2023) argues that enslaved Black women were decisive in their pursuits to “use murder as the ultimate form of resistance to slavery,” which was remarkable given their constant surveillance and impairing repression (Taylor, 2023, p. 2). Historians have often presumed Black enslaved women participated in non-confrontational acts of “everyday resistance,” but Taylor’s research specifically pushes back against this narrative, noting a focus on the quotidian practices were pursued to “undermine or challenge the social and racial order the way a slave revolt would” (Taylor, 2023, p. 4). She argues that Black women were calculated in their murderous approaches and specifically targeted their enslavers or the families of their overseers but were less inclined to harm other African Americans (Taylor, 2023, p. 4).

Taylor (2023) cites Glenn McNair to acknowledge the discrepancy and motivational difference between enslaved men and women who killed; there was a higher percentage of enslaved women than enslaved men who murdered their owners, with enslaved men acting out of impulse or momentary anger, while women used a higher degree of premeditation (Taylor, 2023, p. 3). To further deconstruct the assumption that Black women’s embodying nonthreatening displays of dissent during the antebellum era, Taylor highlights evidence of Black women’s

volatile insurgency within historical judicial archives, “According to David V. Baker, nearly 200 enslaved women were executed in the United States from 1681 to 1865. Most of those were executed for murder, attempted murder, and conspiracy to murder, whites” (Taylor, 2023, p. 2). Thus, there is historical precedent highlighting Black women’s intentional deployment of confrontational violence as a strategic response to systemic oppression, even in the face of punishment measures.

Taylor (2023) categorizes enslaved women’s lethal acts of insurgency as retaliatory justice, framing it as a radical ideology that operates beyond the scope of any moral principles fabricated by white jurisprudence (p. 7). She examines enslaved women’s lethal resistance within a framework that she terms a Black feminist practice of justice (Taylor, 2023, p. 9). Black feminist justice as practice demands the safeguarding of Black women’s humanity by prioritizing their fair and humane treatment and seeks retaliatory actions as redressive responses to the systemic abuses of anti-Black racism and sexism which they face (Taylor, 2023, p. 9). Under this framework, Taylor positions the macro-violence of institutionalized chattel slavery as one of the biggest acts of injustice to Black women’s humanity; but she also considers other subsequent and smaller acts of inhumanity such as, “sexual assault, denying people adequate food as a form of punishment or disrespectful name-calling of women in front of their children” as valid reasons for Black women’s retributive action (Taylor, 2023, p. 9).

Taylor's (2023) Black feminist practice of justice and its retributive philosophy offer the ideal paradigm for my conceptualization of Black maternal rage because it “insists that the proportionality of revenge is best determined by the victims of the unjust acts” (p. 12). Through this vengeful framework, I interpret the ways Black maternal characters approach their agential responses to horrific scenarios. Under this frame Taylor (2023) asserts it was not wrong for

Black women to do harm to evil people who had hurt them or their families” (p. 10). I contend that when Black maternal figures deliberately embody the powerful affects of rage they enact survival by opposing the state's monopoly on violence standardized by the social, religious, and legal systems (Taylor, 2023, p. 10). This characterization of survival aligns with the June Jordan’s (1977) retributive conviction that “I will no longer lightly walk behind a one of you who fear me: Be afraid. I plan to give you reasons for your jumpy fits and facial tics... I must become a menace to my enemies” (Jordan, 1977, pp. 145, 146). Jordan’s abstraction informs my theoretical interpretation that Black maternal characters’ rage transforms them into agents of menace who are mobilized toward their narrative unshackling via the destruction of their oppressive adversaries.

Methodology

The main purpose of my study is to investigate contemporary constructions of Black maternal figures in Black horror films by exploring how interlocking identities of race and gender compound portrayals of terror, survival, agency, and retribution. To pursue my research question, *how is the figure of the Black mother in contemporary Black horror films interpreted through articulations of refusal, rage, and retribution?*, I utilized a qualitative approach that positioned the American horror films Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019) and Nikyatu Jusu’s *Nanny* (2022) as my central case studies. Media and communications scholar, Lothar Mikos’ asserts that films are reflective of the conditions and structures of society, which is why the analysis of films should involve a systematic investigation of the structures of film texts, their conditions of production, and their societal contexts (Mikos, 2018, p. 409). I employ narrative analysis informed by a Black feminist epistemological framework to lay bare the social and historical terrors submerged within these contemporary cinematic horror narratives.

To select the films for my analysis, I utilized purposive criterion sampling (Sternad & Power, 2023, p. 137), which “...is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 533). Prior to beginning this project, I recognized a noticeable dearth of mainstream contemporary horror films that centralize the Black maternal experience as the main subject matter. This scarcity of films was the catalyst for my research inquiry. Palinkas et al. (2015) argue that although there are several different purposeful sampling strategies, criterion sampling appears to be used most in implementation research to evaluate the efficacy of specific systems (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 533). I adapted this method for qualitative media analysis, using criterion sampling to identify the films most relevant to my inquiry, and to address this significant academic lacuna. My selection relies on criteria that ensure the films prioritize the cinematic perspective of Black mothers and align with modern Black feminist theory.

It was essential that each selected film meets five specific criteria—time frame, production context, racial and gender representation, genre classification, and cinematic authorship—to satisfy the requirements of my project.

1. **Time Frame:** Each selected film had to have a release date between the years of 2018 and 2025. I intentionally limited the scope of my analysis to the last eight years to define the “contemporary” aspect of my research. This time limit corresponds with the after effect of Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), which was a cultural phenomenon that helped usher in a renaissance for mainstream Black horror films (Babineau, 2021).
2. **Production Context:** Each film selected had to be feature-length and American-produced. This requirement ensured that my analysis stayed within the sociohistorical

context of America's racialized and gendered constructions of Black womanhood and motherhood. It also focused my analysis on American cinematic traditions.

3. **Racial and Gender Representation:** Each film selected had to star a Black woman actor in the role of a mother, and as central protagonist. This guaranteed my analysis of the plot would highlight Black female emotional internality, assess Black female decision-making in relation to their horrific stakes, and scrutinize the portrayal of Black female subjective experience.
4. **Genre Classification:** Each film selected had to be considered a contemporary Black horror film. The films must operate within the one or more of the following subgenre classifications: American psychological horror film, American Possession horror film, or American Survival horror film. These subgenre classifications prioritize narratives of agency and bear the subtext of anti-Black racist and sexist terror.
5. **Authorship:** Each film selected had to be written by a Black screenwriter and directed by a Black director. By prioritizing mainstream horror films created by Black filmmakers, I ensured that the cultural and political perspective of each film aligned with the Black gaze, rather than external racialized standpoint.

I conducted an organized scan using the IMDb database to build my data sample. I applied the pertinent genre filters to ensure that my five criteria were met. My survey for case studies confirmed the small pool of the Black maternal horror subgenre; there were fewer than five contemporary American Black horror feature films starring Black women as lead characters who were mothers. From the few titles that I identified based on my research criteria, I chose *Us* (2019) and *Nanny* (2022) as the primary texts for my analysis. *Us* (2019) is written and directed by Jordan Peele, an African American filmmaker and *Nanny* (2022) is directed and written by

Nikyatu Jusu, an American independent filmmaker of Sierra Leonean descent. The narratives of both films centre the precarity of Black motherhood, following the ways contemporary Black maternal figures negotiate horrors of anti-Black racism and sexism through themes of confrontation and retribution. Based on my review, the selected cinematic texts offered the most extensive narrative material for a rigorous Black feminist inquiry into Black maternal subjectivity within horror.

Analytical Techniques

The scope of this study is inherently cross-functional because it bridges the sociological study of power and social agency with Black feminist theoretical examinations of resistance and converging racial and gender identities, while also investigating the narrative tropes of film studies. For this reason, I utilized qualitative analytical techniques such as narrative/textual analysis and a language of film strategy. This multidisciplinary approach enabled me to engage in the language of the films as my sociological data sets and consider how the Black gaze influences the ways audiences perceive the agency of Black mothers.

Narrative Analysis.

Narrative analysis functions from a structuralist model that looks to reveal the organizational logic of a text to expose the deep-seated influencing patterns of storytelling. According to Erol (2015), much of our empirical evidence is in narrative form so sociologists should be concerned with narrative (Erol, 2015, p. 106). My narrative analysis carefully assessed how Black maternal characters' development, actions, and language constructed their subjectivities and the ways in which they performed retaliation. I closely analyzed the dialogue, pacing, and narrative styles for both screenplays and selected notable scenes. I used narrative analysis to close-read key scenes by identifying how sequences were mainly linked through

cause and effect (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016, p. 234). This technique enabled me to systematically chart how character decisions offset subsequent plot developments in Black maternal protagonists' agential arcs.

O'Shaughnessy et al. (2016) suggested the following narrative questions for close reading:

1. Who and/or what makes things happen in the narrative (social and psychological determination)?
2. Whose point of view do we see and hear things from, and in what sequential order are events presented to us?
3. What structural roles do people have in the narrative?
4. What is the dominant discourse or the hierarchy of discourses?
5. Are women positioned differently from men in the narrative?
6. What does the ending tell you about the ideology of the film? (239)

I adapted O'Shaughnessy et al.'s (2016) structuralist position to scrutinize how Black maternal characters are positioned within scenes of heightened precarity:

- How is the Black maternal figure positioned within the narrative structure (as a protector, threat, Black matriarch, mammy) and what social meanings are attached to her positioning?
- What (social, psychological, racial, or supernatural) forces are present to influence or restrict the Black mother's actions?
- From whose perspective is a scene primarily told?
- How does narrative focalization shape audience alignment with or distance from the Black maternal figure?

- What are the social expectations for the Black maternal figure, and how are they framed?
- How are motherhood, nurturing, and maternal protection framed in relation to violence and/or survival depicted in the scene?
- How are violence and terror depicted in the scene?
- In what ways do the Black maternal figures enact refusal of containment/silencing, and fungibility?
- How is this refusal narratively coded in the scene?
- How is rage expressed, justified, or condemned within the narrative?
- What are the cultural meanings attached to Black female rage?
- How do the films' resolutions address or sustain the tensions surrounding Black motherhood, autonomy, and survival?
- What ideological positions do these resolutions imply for the Black maternal figures and modern Black horror? (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016, p. 239)

I did not follow these adapted questions in a linear fashion; instead, I allowed them to inform my overall analysis of Black motherhood in *Us* and *Nanny*. And through this narrative lens, I considered *what* happened in each respective film's plot, how systemic forces of race and gender dictated the narrative stakes, as well as how these Black mothers are presented.

Language of Film.

I also conducted a language of film analysis when reviewing dramatic moments of retribution, rage, or refusal, and other heightened scenes that directly addressed my research question. I analyzed the mise-en-scène to understand how the visual environment communicated sociological themes of identity and cultural capital. I paid particular attention to the staging of

domestic spaces and the symbolic function of props and costumes. For instance, I examined clothing not merely as a functional requirement of production, but as a semiotic tool. I examined how specific props, such as the handcuffs fixed on Adelaide in *Us*, functioned as crucial pieces of mise-en-scène that represented the historical obstacles to Black feminine existence and social mobility.

Sound serves as a key narrative instrument that produces its own distinct emotional affect in cinema. In my auditory analysis, I approached sound as an ideological tool that works in tandem with visuals to evolve the narrative (Gianetti and Leach 2005, p. 214). I paid close attention to how the transition of sound was used to communicate political registers of the story and climactic scenes. I identified the differences between diegetic and non-diegetic soundscapes and the subversive lifecycles of musical motifs; particularly the way filmmakers distort sounds to re-contextualize their meaning. For instance, in *Us*, Jordan Peele transitioned the song “Got 5 on It,” which is first played in a scene where the Black maternal protagonist bonds with her family through a performance of collective identity, into a distorted, non-diegetic theme that signals danger. I interpreted this “sullied” repetition as a deliberate strategy to create alarm and an uncanny echo. Furthermore, I investigated the use of sonic allusion, analyzing how lyrics and scoring functioned as a “direct call” to the spectator. I noted how these auditory cues established meta-tones or motifs prior to the onset of physical horror, effectively preparing the audience for a specific socio-political critique.

Data Organization

Throughout my study, I used digital organizational tools to manage the bulk of my notes and narrative content. I kept analytical consistency by storing all my generated outlines within word-processing systems. In terms of my iterative viewings of the films, I ensured that I digitally

logged notes on the dialogue, visual observations, and time stamps for each film in the sample, into standardized spreadsheets saved in cloud-based systems. I used Microsoft OneNote to categorize codes and visualize mind maps for the emerging connections between themes. Similarly, I employed Adobe Acrobat to aid in organizing screenplay PDFs. Therefore, I sustained my methodological transparency through this streamlined process.

Limitations

A limitation to my research is the restrictive sample size of Black maternal horror films, which led me to narrow the scope of my study to two primary texts: *Us* and *Nanny*. This affects my ability as a researcher to make wider generalizations about the comprehensive state of Black horror cinema. However, I registered this as an opportunity to conduct a deeper analysis of the narrative themes, visual composition, and sociological discourse within my case studies. The delimitation of my study's focus to mainstream American productions also excluded consideration of the framing of Black motherhood in independent and international horror films. Therefore, my findings will be representative of a distinctive cultural phenomenon and snapshot in time, as opposed to fundamental principles of American or international horror.

I also intentionally hinged my analysis on narrative and film analysis and Black feminist theory. Although both frameworks are objectively analytical in their critiques of structural realities, they are also subjective in their methodology. For example, because I situate my investigation of maternal rage in Black feminist theory, I regard Adelaide (*Us*, 2019) and Aisha (*Nanny*, 2022) as maternal figures who deploy acts of refusal and violence as survival techniques to retrieve their sense of agency and humanity. Subsequently, my character readings are subjective because of this chosen interpretive framework. Were this study to be conducted using another methodology such as a formalist approach which would examine the films a whole rather

than focusing on specific characters and how they function within the narrative, it may produce a different framing of the characters' behaviours and monstrosity. I do not purport my research to be objectively neutral. Its arguments are theoretically rooted in Black feminine standpoint epistemology. Therefore, I accept this subjectivity as an indispensable element of my qualitative film analysis.

Reflexivity

I approached this research with my own standpoint as a Black woman, an immigrant born in Nigeria who previously lived in the United States of America for eight years. As a Black woman researcher, I entered this sociological study on Black female on-screen depictions and social representation knowing that I am not a neutral party. I intentionally centred Black feminist scholarship as the standpoint through which I queried how interlocking systems of race, gender, and power influence Black female characters' subjectivity, narrative arcs, and survival outcomes in horror. I am attuned to the anti-Black stereotype of Black women as 'angry,' and historical outlooks that framed expressions of Black female dissent as baseless yet dangerous. For this reason, I adopted an analytic framework that blatantly counters deficit-based readings of Black feminine resistance. I approached themes of refusal, rage, and retribution as political and maternal tactics of Black feminine survival. And I rigorously conducted active viewings of my case studies. I viewed these films and read their screenplays to conduct scene-level coding, and thorough analysis of the film language. This allowed me to organically uncover narrative tensions and recurring conflicts in each film, instead of imposing preestablished interpretations on the characters.

My analysis of Black maternal horror was also informed by my lived experience as a caregiver and advocate for my late mother during her battle with cancer within a racially biased

American medical system. My epistemic curiosity with challenging the reductive imagery and marginal presence of Black women within the American horror genre preceded my personal position as a medical proxy. However, I must acknowledge that my sensitivities toward the themes of identity rupture, threats to bodily autonomy, systemic neglect, and Black female rage against institutionalized harm—all of which narratively coincide with Black maternal horror as a subject—intensified after I witnessed my African immigrant mother navigate the compounding forces of medical racism and sexism in America. Notwithstanding, I am reflexively aware of my ethical responsibility as a sociological researcher to evaluate the data on Black maternal cinematic representations with professional rigor and integrity, albeit with a commitment to a Black feminist standpoint.

In summary, this chapter establishes a multifaceted theoretical and methodological approach to examining the complexities of Black motherhood within contemporary horror cinema. I adopt a qualitative approach informed by Black feminist theory and focus on narrative analysis to decode how cinematic grammar is used to perform a Black feminist practice of retributive justice (Taylor, 2022) on screen. I highlight concepts such as *controlling images* (Collins, 1991) and conduct scene-level coding and mise-en-scène interrogations, to methodologically trace how protagonists in *Us* (2019) and *Nanny* (2022) navigate systemic erasure. This interlaced lens frames Black maternal rage and retribution as a legitimate ‘use of anger,’ (Lorde, 1981) and a potent tool for refusing the hauntings of anti-Black racism. Overall, this synthesis of theory and method provides a rigorous framework for investigating how horror cinema reclaims Black feminine interiority and creates critical groundwork for the case studies that follow.

Chapter 4: Analysis

In this chapter, I investigate the cinematic construction of the Black mother within the landscape of American contemporary Black horror. I explore the way protagonists Adelaide/Red and Aisha confront the controlling imagery of the “Black Matriarch” and the “Mammy” (Collins, 2000). My analysis is guided by the primary research question: How is the figure of the Black mother in contemporary Black horror films interpreted through articulations of refusal, rage, and retribution? My inquiry posits that Black horror filmmakers mobilize affective expressions of refusal, rage, and retribution as narrative strategies to oppose the racial and gendered containment of the Black maternal figure; and to ultimately assert a distinct Black female subjectivity within American horror.

After a brief overview of each film, I begin the chapter with an examination of the *Aesthetics of Haunting*, focusing on the visual and atmospheric cues that signal Black maternal trauma. In this section, I analyze the eerie manifestations of the doppelgänger in *Us* and the West African folkloric spirits in *Nanny*. Following the aesthetic groundwork, I focus on the themes of *Refusal*. This section identifies the moments where the protagonists actively reject the labour and behavioural expectations imposed upon them by white supremacy and patriarchal structures. In the next section, *Rage and Retribution*, I analyze the transition from the protagonists’ passive endurance to their intentional, externalized aggression. I position Black maternal anger as a permissible reaction to systemic subjugation and a vital tool for survival. Finally, I conclude this chapter with an evaluation of the protagonists’ *Narrative Resolution*, assessing their outcomes post-conflict to consider the efficacy of their refusal, rage and retribution. I question whether Peele and Jusu’ resolutions offer a more complex commentary on the presentation of Black mothers in horror and their relations to the concept of liberation.

Case Study Overviews: *Us* (2019) and *Nanny* (2022)

It is important that I contextualize the following analysis by first outlining the narratives of Jordan Peele's *Us* and Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny*. I must note that both films operate within the American Black horror genre and noticeably anchor their sociopolitical weight in the casting of dark-skinned Black women as protagonists. I assert that by placing Lupita Nyong'o and Anna Diop, both of whom are dark-skinned Black actresses, in roles that grapple with motherhood and domesticity, both Peele and Jusu engage in an intentional redressive action against long-standing historical stereotypes (Collins, 2000). Specifically, the filmmakers' casting choices challenge the "Mammy" and "Black Matriarch" caricatures that were historically constructed using pejorative projections of dark-skinned Black women to justify economic and social subjugation of white supremacy.

Case Study I: Us (2019) Directed and Written by Jordan Peele

Monkeypaw Productions, the company founded by Jordan Peel and that produced *Us*, offers the following synopsis:

Adelaide Wilson (Lupita Nyong'o), her husband Gabe, and their two children, Zora and Jason, return to Adelaide's beachside childhood home on the Northern California coast for an idyllic summer getaway. Haunted by an unexplainable and unresolved trauma from her past and compounded by a string of eerie coincidences, Adelaide soon feels her paranoia elevate to high-alert as she grows increasingly certain that something bad is going to befall her family. After spending a tense beach day with their friends, the Tylers, Adelaide and her family return to their vacation home to discover the silhouettes of four figures standing in their driveway. *Us* pits an ordinary American family against a terrifying and uncanny opponent: doppelgängers of themselves. (Monkeypaw Productions, 2019)

I maintain that the central tension of the film relies on its final plot twist: the “Adelaide” we follow is actually the doppelgänger (Red), who swapped places with the original Adelaide in 1986. This subverts the “Black Matriarch” archetype by revealing that the “protector” of the nuclear family is actually the “invader” from the margins.

Case Study II: Nanny (2022) Directed and Written by Nikyatu Jusu

Criterion summarize the plot of *Nanny* as such:

The film follows Aisha (Anna Diop) who has left her son in Senegal to come to America, in hopes of establishing a new life for her family. There, she finds work as a nanny for the Havs, a wealthy white family in New York City’s Upper East Side. Over the course of the film, we see racial power structures play out in the dynamic between her and the family. We also see the long hours and hard work she puts into her job, all while diligently trying to stay connected to her son back in Senegal. Importantly, Jusu also doesn’t let the implications of gender and economic status go unnoticed either. (Criterion, 2022)

I consider that central to Aisha’s vulnerability and the “Mammy” subversion is her status as an undocumented Senegalese immigrant. Her West African origin places her at the intersection of Black racialized domestic labour and the othering inherent in the American immigrant experience.

The Aesthetics of Haunting

As contemporary Black horror filmmakers, Jordan Peele and Nikyatu Jusu subvert traditional American tropes to reframe the conditions of Black maternal horror as byproducts of systemic oppression. Both filmmakers employ the “oppositional gaze” (hooks, 1992) in their respective cinematic compositions of terror to expose the hegemonic structures sponsoring the

fractured state of Black motherhood. Through this shift in framing, Peele and Jusu reposition their Black maternal characters as the subjects of horror, which is notably different from the orthodox objectification of Black women within the genre. I contend that these Black contemporary filmmakers effectively transport perspectives of terror to restore humanity to Black maternal figures and deepen their narrative subjectivity. This is most clear through Peele and Jusu's respective aesthetics of haunting.

Borrowing aspects from Saleh-Hanna's description of Black Feminist Hauntology as an “anti-colonial analysis of time that captures the expanding and repetitive nature of structural violence” (Saleh-Hanna, 2015, p. 9), I argue that Peele and Jusu operate the concept of haunting as a catalyst to expose the ruptures of Black maternal experiences by tactically returning their gaze on the infrastructures of state and social harm facilitating Black women's horrific fragmentation. In *Us* (2019), Peele anchors the notion of haunting in structural divisions and dualistic motifs to reflect the persistent systemic oppression imposed upon Black mothers in the wake of enslavement. Whereas in *Nanny* (2022), Jusu evokes atmospheric haunting by subverting aspects of African spirituality to expose psychological and physical displacement inflicted upon Black diasporic mothers in the United States.

Us (2019): The Aesthetics of Haunting

In *Us*, Jordan Peele deploys allegorical visual grammar in the form of dualistic imagery, mirrored symbols, and shadows to generate foreboding atmospheric tension that reflects the traumas of subjugation. He establishes the concept of dualism as the central and recurring haunting motif and consistently connects the eerie feelings of duality to the social formations that engender them. The scene where young Adelaide wanders away from her parents at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk (Peele, 2019, 0:04:20) introduces the audience to this aesthetic of

haunting and demonstrates Peele's method of grounding horror in the structural conditions of catastrophe. Adelaide comes across the mirrored numbers 11:11 in the form of the bible verse Jeremiah 11:11 on a cardboard sign held by a disheveled white man standing on Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. This verse states "Therefore thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry unto me, I will not hearken unto them" (Jeremiah 11:11, KJV). It can be suggested that the scripture associates the notion of evil with the supernatural presence of god, rendering horror as something mystical and beyond the scope of humanity, which is a conventional trope in American horror; however, I disagree with this interpretation.

Instead, I argue that Peele's storytelling subverts this tradition through "conjure work" (DeClue, 2022: 2). Peele's selection of this verse frames the concept of terror as targeted harm exerted by a potent power structure and inflicted upon the vulnerable, not as a purely metaphysical occurrence. In this way, Peele subverts the mainstream American horror convention of using Christian scripture as a remedy for supernatural evil; his use of Jeremiah 11:11 highlights the capacity of scripture to facilitate destruction. This reframes the divinity associated with Christian text as an organized political instrument of terror. Peele's recontextualization mirrors the historical ways that religion was weaponized during colonialism to enforce the subordination of non-white people. The bible verse functions as a prophetic warning of cyclical violence for young Adelaide who sees the sign but continues wandering away from the safety of her family. Equally, the disheveled white man—who reappears decades later—presents an ominous figure to young Adelaide. Following Peele's aesthetics of haunting, I interpret him as a symbolic overseer of systemic violence given his role in holding up the scripture signaling impending reckoning.

Peele effectively situates the source of terror within a system that engineers division and traumatizes the lives it produces through abandonment and “soul-murder” (Taylor, 2016, p. 18). This is most conspicuous in the Tethereds. Peele manifests the Tethereds’ aesthetics of haunting through their origin story and social status; their uniforms, and the subterranean infrastructures that confine them. Similar to his method of highlighting the organized structures of harm embedded within religion, Peele shifts the site of horror from the supernatural other to the state as a primary architect of ontological terror. I contend that Peele’s narrative shift doubles as a social critique that strategically returns the gaze onto the systemic exploitation and labour-based traumas experienced by Black people in the wake of enslavement.

I maintain that the Tethered origin story, as articulated by Red the antagonist, functions as a cinematic contextualization of the historical and psychological rupture that has characterized Black women’s narrative construction since their arrival in the New World. Through her testimony, Red recounts a life of “shared souls” and abandonment in the proverbial dark (Peele, 2019: 0:44:30). Red details her experience of beings ironically connected through violent division; “So whatever happened to the girl happened to the shadow... When the girl ate, her food was given to her, warm and tasty, but when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbits, raw and bloody” (Peele, 2019: 0:44:45). I argue that Red’s account and choice to frame the narrative from her disenfranchised perspective, highlights brutality, and parallels the “social irreparability” and “crimes against the flesh” theorized by Spillers (1987, p. 67). This fractured state is a literalization of Du Bois’s (1903) theory of double consciousness, wherein the Tethered existence is defined by a “two-ness” (p. 8) that prevents the subject from ever feeling whole. In this framework, I argue that Peele’s deployment of the Tethereds as doppelgängers is a metaphor

for the ramifications of a hegemonic power structure that requires a ruptured state of existence to maintain its own stability.

I posit that Peele further complicates the traditional American “fear of the other” trope by utilizing doppelgängers who represent a suppressed population and a vivid historical memory of enslavement. Through this lens, the Tethered function as what Toni Morrison (1992) terms the “Africanist Presence,” which is a “fabricated brew of darkness” that is designed to allay the internal fears of the privileged while rationalizing their external exploitation (Morrison, 1992, p. 38). It could be argued that Peele’s decision to have the Tethereds rise to the surface to carry out their goal of untethering is evocative of the concerns expressed in Renaud Camus’ debunked “great replacement theory,” which is “is an ethno-nationalist concept suggesting that Western nations with predominantly white populations are experiencing a deliberate demographic shift due to immigration and multiculturalism, resulting in the ‘replacement’ of their original populations with people of color”(Mohn, 2024, p. 1). But this misses the mark. Through the Tethereds defiantly making their existence known, Peele dismantles the “insistent innocence” (Morrison, 1992, p. 38) of a society that believes itself exempt from intergenerational trauma. This move also forces the audience to confront a terror that mirrors their own form. Hence, the aesthetics of Peele’s haunting reside in the painful realization that there is a racist and classist system that sustains “absolute power” through the facade of normalcy above and the control of a “bound and unfree” (Morrison, 1992, p. 45) population below.

Peele articulates this horror through a deliberate spatiality, connecting his aesthetics of haunting to physical infrastructures that facilitate division. For example, Peele frames division as an act of design through the placement of the “Vision Quest” hall at the threshold between land

and sea (Peele, 2019, 0:05:53). The “Vision Quest” hall of mirrors serves as a site of hyper-perception that destabilizes Adelaide’s interiority, mirroring the historical trauma of enslaved people forced to confront a hegemonic gaze that shattered their sense of self. This visual fracturing is a manifestation of the “seared, divided, ripped-apartness” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) inherent to the Middle Passage. This is also exemplified through Peele’s diegetic inclusion of the Hopi creation story, which posits division as a fundamental requirement for world-building and renders the invisible labor of those who live underground visible. Prior to young Adelaide wandering into the Vision Quest hall, a diegetic narration of the Hopi creation story is heard over speakers: “These, the earth and water, he divided into places from which life could spring, the mountains and valleys. And the waters were all where they should be. Then Sotuknag went to Taiowa and said ‘I want you to see what I have done. And I have done well’” (Peele, 2019, 0:05:53). In the context of Peele’s film, this particular Indigenous narrative foregrounds separation as a generative principle. It suggests that the act of fragmentation is a deliberate precondition for Black women’s arrival and existence in the Americana.

The film’s opening title card’s reference to vast underground tunnels sets up haunting as a condition embedded within national infrastructure: “There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States... Abandoned subway systems, unused service routes, and deserted mine shafts... Many have no known purpose at all” (Peele, 2019, 0:01:12). It is notable that of all the transportation systems detailed, the “abandoned subway systems” and “deserted mine shafts,” signify sites of extraction with concealment inherent to their design. This cryptic title card sets out the theme of the film by establishing the concept of haunting as a byproduct of structural desertion. These subterranean spaces are hidden archives of labour, echoing the afterlife of enslavement (Hartman, 2007, p. 6), where the contributions of the dehumanized are

erased to serve white supremacist interests. This spatial erasure aligns with Joe Feagin's (2020) theory of "collective forgetting":

What the dominant racial framing ignores or suppresses is critical to the continuation of oppression. Collective forgetting is as important as collective remembering, especially in regard to the prevailing narratives of this country's developmental history. Historical events may stay accurately in the collective records of memory, or they may be allowed to deteriorate, slowly or rapidly, through the overt choices of the powerful. (p. 28)

I suggest that the tunnels represent the sanitized and suppressed racial memories that the dominant white racial frame seeks to eliminate. By placing the Tethered in these forgotten infrastructures, Peele forces a confrontation with the "bloody history" (Feagin, 2020, p. 27) of American developmentalism, ensuring that the labour of the invisible can no longer be ignored.

Akin to the abandoned tunnels, the Tethereds' attire, namely their red jumpsuits and shears, function as a visual index of the labour they have been conditioned to perform. Their uniforms connote a state of perpetual "serviceability," echoing Morrison's assertion that the enslaved population "offered itself up as surrogate selves" for the meditation on white freedom and terror. The red jumpsuit is not merely a costume but a mark of the "rebellious but serviceable" (Morrison, 1992, p. 38) population that enables the privileged to be able to measure their own status. The shears that appear in the film also speak to serviceability, but they are more: they are tools of both domestic labour and violent severance. Through a flashback of Red's plan, the audience sees that this is a weapon that she selected, and due to her status as subjugated Black maternal figure, one can interpret the shears as a symbol of the "invasive ruptures" (Hice-Fromille, 2021, p. 549) inherent to Black maternal existence. The Tethereds weaponization of the shears, in particular against the surface dwellers, is a subversive act.

Consequently, the Tethered aesthetic reveals that the savagery the privileged originals believe is external to them is actually a manufactured byproduct of the very systems they inhabit, a manifestation of a social design built for fracture and alienation.

In essence, the aesthetics of haunting presented in *Us* suggest Peele's reliance on a more tangible focus on subterranean themes and architecture to help the audience visualize the afterlife of enslavement. Peele maps the "socially designed fractures" (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) onto the physical landscape and the characters' industrial uniforms. He renders the historical extraction of Black labour as an inescapable, material presence that is foundational to the stability of the American populace. This structural form of haunting attempts to dismantle the "collective forgetting" (Feagin, 2020, p. 28) that characterizes the white racial frame that has, for decades, consistently plagued the American horror genre through its anti-Blackness that haunt the narratives. In this Peeleian framework, the construct of Black maternal horror is found in the permanence of the archive (Hartman, 2007, p. 6); the reality that the systems of the past are literally built into the foundations of the present.

However, the aesthetics of haunting within the Black maternal experience are not exclusively tethered to physical infrastructure. Where Peele utilizes the rigid dualism of the doppelgänger and the tunnel to reflect systemic oppression Nikyatu Jusu's *Nanny* (2022) shifts the site of haunting to atmospheric and ancestral manifestations. In *Nanny*, the concept of haunting is fluid and pervasive, manifesting through a subversion of West African spirituality to highlight Aisha's displacement in America. Hence, Jordan Peele's investigation into the restriction of Black maternal condition as seen spatially is advanced by Jusu's exploration of its psychological osmosis, which is the fluid, and often invisible process through which the Black

maternal protagonist absorbs the emotional weight of a space marked by structural violence and/or a situation haunted by historical trauma, into her own consciousness. In *Nanny*, Jusu challenges the macabre aspects of anti-Black sexism and racism (Bailey, & Trudy, 2018, p. 762) prevalent in the American domestic sphere by the apparitions of Mami Wata and Anansi. Consequently, I move my analysis from Peele's concrete labyrinths of the Santa Monica Pier to Jusu's watery thresholds of the diasporic imagination, where the aesthetics of haunting focus on what the Black maternal figure carries across the Atlantic.

Nanny (2022): The Aesthetics of Haunting

In *Nanny* (2022), Nikyatu Jusu shifts the site of haunting from the subterranean architecture of structural oppression shown in *Us*, to an atmospheric and ancestral plane. Jusu characterizes haunting as a fluid, pervasive displacement that manifests through the subversion of West African spirituality through the figures of Mami Wata and Anansi. Mami Wata, a ubiquitous West African water deity, is often depicted as a beautiful yet dangerous mermaid-like figure from the depths of the ocean who governs fertility and wealth. In the context of the Black diaspora, Mami Wata functions as a literal and figurative bridge for enslaved Africans across the Atlantic; her presence represented the trauma of the Middle Passage and the alterable power of a divine feminine entity. Parallel to Mami Wata's depiction, Jusu explores Anansi, the spider-trickster spirit of Akan folklore. Anansi is renowned for his ability to use wit and subversion to overcome physically superior opponents. Jusu presents both Anansi and Mami Wata as "figures of and resistance for oppressed people," (Jusu, 2022, 1:02:14). I contend that Jusu's aesthetics of haunting weaves these African entities into white domestic spaces, such as the Havs' elite apartment, to create a friction between the sterility of the American domestic space in the Global North and the vibrant presence of African culture in the Global South.

Jusu's subversion of West African spirituality aligns with Audre Lorde's (1978) theory of the erotic, which posits that the erotic is a "resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (p. 3). Jusu's invocation of these spirits constitutes a radical departure from "male models of power" (Lorde, 1978, p. 3). Within the context of American cinema, and particularly Blaxploitation horror, African spirituality has historically been demonized through hypersexualization to uphold "male-dominated (hetero)sexuality" and "the genre's usual demonization of women and non-patriarchal sexualities" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 40). Jusu refuses this legacy; she presents Mami Wata and Anansi not as demonic antagonists, but as guiding, agential presences. Hence, Jusu uses this atmospheric haunting as a call to refusal, which compels the Black maternal figure to reject the state of dispossession historically imposed upon her through "the destruction of kinship relations" (Hice-Fromille, 2021, p. 549). For Aisha, haunting is only violent in the way it interrupts her compliance with a labour system that requires her to nurture another woman's child while her own remains an ocean away.

Aisha's hallucinatory encounters are defensive mechanisms designed to protect her against the imposed social disjunctures of the Mammy script, which deviates from the mainstream horror convention of presenting eerie visions as symptoms of the protagonists' deteriorating psyche. If the Mammy archetype requires a total redirection of Black women's maternal energy toward the white domestic sphere, then the aesthetics of Jusu's haunting functions as a spiritual intervention that prevents this total assimilation. There's a pattern to these ghostly moments; when the spirits become visible, audiences witness quiet moments of conflict wherein the "unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde, 1978, p. 3) of Aisha's internal world

collides with the sterile requirements of her labour. The sequence where Aisha prepares to care for Rose on the night of her father's return speaks to this.

On Aisha's first overnight stay in the Havs' apartment, Jusu introduces subtle disturbances that coincide with moments of heightened emotional vulnerability (Jusu, 2022, 0:13:15). After singing a traditional Senegalese lullaby to her son Lamine via her phone, which was a profound display of her maternal attempt to preserve a sense of diasporic kinship, Aisha begins experiencing moments of disorientation within her employer's apartment. Jusu presents it as the apartment itself beginning to fracture. Borrowing from a poltergeist trope, the shower water in the master bedroom runs of its own accord until Aisha locates the issue and turns it off. This signifies the early intrusion of Mami Wata. Though she is not seen, Mami Wata manifests through the natural element of water to signal that the domestic space has been breached by an ancestral presence. This haunting is strategically timed. It occurs in the aftermath of Aisha's maternal longing, which suggests that her suppressed grief and unacknowledged desire serve as the energy source for the visitation. This haunting destabilizes Aisha's comfort in her employer's home, creating an obstacle to her settling smoothly into the implied Mammy script. It ensures that the white domestic space remains haunted by the reality of Aisha's own motherhood, which the Havs' labour requirements seek to erase. For these hauntings to begin on the first night that Aisha is made to stay overnight proves that Jusu engages these visitations as sites of "erotic information" (Lorde, 1978, p. 3), where the eerie appearance of the spirits signifies that her economic and maternal conditions are the true sources of horror.

Similarly, Aisha's silent exchange with the pregnant domestic worker vacuuming the living room functions as plaintive reflector of her current circumstances. Upon Aisha leaving

Rose to her mother Amy's watch, despite being the one who prepared the child for bed, she stumbles across a heavily pregnant cleaning woman of colour who gazes unnervingly at Aisha before Aisha walks away from the intensity (Jusu, 2022, 0:15:15). Her unflinching gaze forces Aisha to confront the horror of her own condition: she is a mother whose labor is extracted to sustain one family while her own motherhood is relegated to the shadows. The pregnant maid's labour, which she performs to facilitate a white family's leisure, is a visceral reminder for Aisha of the "structural availability" (Hice-Fromille, 2021, p. 549) that has historically defined the Black maternal body. Although the maid is a woman of colour, she is viewed through Aisha's gaze. Therefore, through her cryptic performance of domesticity, and Aisha's presence as a witness to this silent exhibition, Jusu confronts a history that has long mandated Black mothering be done in service of white households.

These haunting moments pedagogical value is most evident in Aisha's interaction with Kathleen, an elder Black maternal figure, that Jusu situates to help contextualize the spirits' presence. First, Aisha's choice to connect with Kathleen is a way for her to effectively oppose the isolating Mammy archetype, which mandates her internal self-depletion and reduction of interiority through providing her love and care for the white family instead of her own (Collins, 1991, p. 266). Aisha going to Harlem to sit and drink tea with Kathleen shows her actively cultivating a relationship with someone other than her employers, and on her own time. Second, Kathleen's assertion that "Mami Wata feeds on whatever you give....whether it's fear or rage or vengeance" (Jusu, 2022, 1:02:00) is a generative form of haunting that mirrors Lorde's argument that the erotic offers a "well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation" (1978, p. 88). In turn, I argue Aisha and Kathleen's relationship leads to a crucial enhancement of the narratives around her haunting; Kathleen explains: "The spirits can

equip us with resilience...escape.....but the spirits' tools aren't always kind.....but the spirits' tools aren't always kind.... Some want an eye for an eye. Some just want you rebirthed so you can persist" (Jusu, 2022, 1:03:00-1:05:33).

Kathleen's subversive insight transforms these spirits from punitive specters into ancestral systems outfitted for the Black mother's survival and renewal. This sharing of illuminating information heightens the Black maternal bond between the two characters and corresponds to Lorde's notion that the "sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde, 1978, p. 7). Likewise, I interpret the scene in which Jusu uses visceral imagery of Anansi, the spider slipping into Aisha's mouth as she sleeps as a cinematic manifestation of Lorde's understanding of the erotic power as "creative energy" for empowerment (Lorde, 1978, p. 6). Therefore, Jusu's technical subversion of African spirituality functions as the catalyst to shatter the Mammy archetype's docility and refuse the legacy of Black maternal erasure. Jusu's haunting culminates in Kathleen's assertion that the African spirits seek Aisha's rebirth so she might persist. I view this cinematic exchange as crystallizing Theresa Hice-Fromille's (2021) framework of Black mothers' connection to divine beings as a form of resistance to separation. Hice-Fromille's claims that ancestral guidance is confrontational so that it can activate maternal reawakening, which suggests that the spirits inhabiting Aisha's psyche are "orienting [her] toward [her] true path" (p. 552). In this context, I view haunting in *Nanny* as redressive rituals; a series of "obstacles and aids" designed to facilitate a metamorphic "remembering" of Aisha's divine purpose (p. 552). In essence, Jusu's oppositional narrative approach to contemporary horror transfigures the aesthetics haunting into a liberatory process, where African spiritual symbolism

and ancestral traditions intervene in the present to rectify the historical dislocation of the Black maternal figure.

The Theme of Refusal

I rely on Tina Campt's definition of refusal to contextualize my analysis of Black maternal refusal:

a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise. (Campt, 2019, p. 83)

Us (2019): Refusal

I argue that in *Us*, Jordan Peele subverts the domestic sphere structure by transforming the living room spaces of the home into sites of confrontation for Red and Adelaide. Peele's decision to have two respective living room scenes as critical confrontational moments, disrupts the comfort of domesticity and complicates perceptions of self-definition. Thus, Peele stages two distinct modalities of refusal and in turn produces elaborate strategies for Black maternal resistance. For Red, refusal is oriented toward domination through the act of violent recovery. Whereas refusal for Adelaide is geared towards familial survival through strategic mobility.

Red's Paradox: Refusal and the Mimicry of Dominance.

Red serves as the primary vessel for what Tina Campt defines as "refusal: a decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood" (2019, p. 83). However, Red's refusal is fundamentally complicated by her point of origin. Although Red is introduced in the film's present as a Tethered subject, she is technically an "original" surface-dweller, whose life was

stolen and replaced by Adelaide. Consequently, I contend that her rejection of the “status quo as livable” is not a pursuit of a “generative and creative source of disorderly power” (Campt, 2019, p. 83) intended to build a liberated existence. Red’s refusal is an exercise of vindictive reclamation.

Red’s arrival at the Wilson family home as the alternate maternal figure forged through dispossession immediately reframes the domestic sphere as an terrifying site of scrimmage. Upon her entry, Red ignores Gabe’s attempts at patriarchal posturing: “We don’t have anything here. This is our summer home. We got in today, so--” (Peele, 2019, 0:44:17). Red effectively diminishes Gabe’s authority when she clears her throat and silences him. Yet she maintains sustained eye contact with Adelaide and shifts the gravity of the scene away from the father and toward a primal confrontation between maternal figures. Her arrival interrupts domestic order of the traditional nuclear family structure. This silence is broken by her “quiet and craggy” voice that sounds like it’s never been used (Peele, 2019, 0:44:44). Red’s ability to materialize speech after prolonged deprivation makes her voice an instrument of truth that empowers her to detail the “sexual and reproductive brutality” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) embedded in the Tethered experience. In this moment, Red’s speech is a direct challenge to the historical silencing of Black women and the macabre nature of anti-Black racism and sexism that makes them invisible.

This act of refusal restores narrative agency to the Black maternal figure historically denied interpretive authority over her own suffering. Red recounts her life through a distorted fairytale that narrativizes the deprivation and coerced reproduction that was enforced through subjugated mirroring:

Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected; tethered together. So whatever happened to the girl happened to the shadow... Time

passed. They both got older, and one day the girl met a handsome prince and fell in love. At that same time, the shadow met Abraham. It didn't matter if she loved him or not, he was tethered to the girl's prince after all. Then the girl had her first child; a beautiful baby girl... but the shadow... she gave birth to a little monster. Umbrae was born laughing. The girl had a second child, a boy this time. They had to cut her open and take him from her belly. The shadow had to do it all herself. She named him Pluto. He was born to love fire. (Peele, 2019, 0:44:44)

Peele's allegory of tethering evokes conditions of reproductive control and labour exploitation historically imposed on Black women: "Slave women who refused to choose a man and mate with him had men forced upon them by their overseer or master...Breeding was oppressive to all black slave women" (hooks, 1981, pp. 40, 41). Red's testimony refuses to silence these horrors or present them as aberrant. She converts her trauma into articulation and positions maternal suffering as historically legible.

However, despite the torture that she's endured, Red's methods of refusal ultimately replicate the very systems of domination that conditioned her subjugation. I attribute her rationale to her positionality as an original who bears the resentment of living life as a Tethered. This is evident Red's replication of oppressive logic within her internal family dynamics. Red commands her husband and children to act for her benefit alone, such as when they break into the Wilson home while she enters behind calmly. Red's jurisdiction over her husband and children is not rooted in communal liberation but in a maternal authority that mimics the dehumanization of the slaveholding class. In her revenge against Adelaide, Red willingly sacrifices her son, Pluto, as a pawn (Peele, 2019: 1:29:21), which mirrors the historical haunting

of slaveowners engineering the separation of Black families for the preservation of their own power.

Similarly, considering Red's positionality further emphasizes the power dynamics at play during the home invasion. Amid her children breaking and entering the sides of the home, Red unlocks the door with the hidden key. This gesture reframes her intrusion as reclamation. She moves through the space with familiarity and is the first to sit down in the living room; she occupies the domestic sphere as one who claims prior belonging. Even her instruction to Pluto, "Don't burn the house down" (0:52:20), marks proprietorial control over the setting. I argue that Red's actions exemplify acquisition despite her narrative refusing the historic terrors. Red directs rage toward Adelaide rather than toward the system that produced tethering. Her treatment of Adelaide speaks to this when she demands that Adelaide "tether herself to the table" (Peele, 2019, 0:52:20). I view this as literal and symbolic restriction of mobility that reinstitutes the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2004, p. 34) she claims to oppose. By forcing the only other Black mother in the scene to restrict her own agency, Red reinstates a regime of bodily control historically imposed on Black women's mobility and labour. I contend that although Red's depiction completely disregards the Black matriarchal controlling image that stigmatizes Black mothers for not conforming to submissive roles (Collins, 1991, p. 268), she troubles the scope of resistance by reasserting a sense of dominance through her deployment of the "master's tools" (Lorde, 1984, p. 122).

Although Black maternal expressions of Lordean rage can be seen as a "serviceable emotion" used to "envision a future," (Lorde, 1981, p. 8), Red's identity filters her expression of dissatisfaction. Red's display of anger is also fueled by a "white saviorism" mentality (Khan et

al., 2023, p. 4) and her self-conception as a chosen deliverer intensifies this paradox. She views herself as “special” or “chosen by God” to deliver the Tethered from their misery (Peele, 2019, 1:35:00). This religious framing conflates systemic, state-imposed violence with “destiny,” a move that mirrors the colonial perspective of expansionism, which through the white racial frame, has been presented as liberatory. Her refusal is less about “living otherwise” (Campt, 2019, p. 83) and more about the acquisition of the life she believes is her birthright. In essence, Red’s refusal methods reinforce the system that “rendered her fundamentally illegible” in the first place (Campt, 2019, p. 83).

Adelaide’s Refusal: Strategic Fugitivity.

Adelaide’s refusal emerges through her tactical leadership, which is oriented toward the preservation of her family. I argue that Adelaide’s refusal is characterized by her strategic tendency to escape structures of suppression. Peele stages the second living room confrontation in the Tyler family’s—a white family-of-four—modern home. Peele’s visual landscape of modern architecture, covered in blood, totally disrupts any feeling of ease or comfort attached to the idea of a big, luxurious home. In the scene Dahlia, Tethered of the Tyler family’s matriarch, is dead on top of a coffee table as the Wilsons watch the news of the horrific untethering unfold. Dahlia’s dead body serves as a jarring, juxtaposed visual of the end of normalcy. It is within this unhomelike space that Adelaide’s refusal of the status quo crystalizes. When Jason asks about the potential number of adversaries, Adelaide’s maternal instincts kick in, and she initiates inquiry by turning on the news. While Gabe seeks institutional intervention, “How does 911 put you on hold all night long? I don’t get it,” and spatial containment of staying in the home with a backup generator, Adelaide chooses to adopt mobility. In a hyper-aware and blood-stained scene, Adelaide stands up and announces, “No. We need to move and keep moving... We’ll take the

coast” (Peele, 2019, 1:18:00). Her command, “We have to go,” establishes how she views movement as a condition of survival and refuses confinement within domestic space due to her understanding of it not functioning as a sanctuary for her. Adelaide is still wearing the handcuffs imposed on her by Red, which symbolically underscores her rejection of appeals to police authority.

Adelaide’s refusal is most visible in her rejection of the Matriarch script. Collins (1991) notes that the Matriarch is stigmatized for being “overly aggressive” and “intimidating to the men in her home” (p. 268). However, Adelaide’s assertion of authority is a realization of what Angela Davis calls the “deformed equality of equal oppression” (1971, p. 6). Having escaped a literal subjugation, Adelaide possesses a practical awareness of the reality threatening her family in the situation. Gabe’s patriarchal lens clouds this awareness of systemic harm. Therefore, Adelaide’s confrontation with Gabe clarifies her refusal of patriarchal decision-making. When he attempts to assert final authority, Adelaide responds by yelling, “You don’t get to make the decisions anymore!” (Peele, 2019, 1:19:00). Adelaide’s direct refusal unharnesses the “immense potential” she forged in her “bestial realities of daily experience” as a Tethered (Davis, 1971, p. 6). She recognizes that in this state of emergency, the patriarchal standard and the restrictive stigma of the Black Matriarch archetype are a liability to her liberation. Adelaide’s declaration also reorders her familial governance because her children align with her directives and immediately harken to her maternal command.

Adelaide’s insistence on “moving and keeping moving” invokes the historical legacy of fugitive enslaved women. As Mary E. Fredricks (2013) observes, Black women often “devised measured solutions” and “defied gender norms” to secure the freedom of their families

(Fredricks, 2013, p. 51). Adelaide states, “They won’t stop until they kill us. Or we kill them,” articulating that she views survival as an ethical imperative grounded in preservation of life. I view her willingness to exert force as a rejection of maternal passivity. This is also evident in her choice to head to the coast. Gabe’s desire to stay in the Tyler home and set traps a la *Home Alone* to protect themselves from invasion, speaks to how entrenched his conceptions of safety in the home are rooted in white heteronormative comforts such as food, water, and a generator. It is Adelaide’s positionality as the Black maternal subject that equips her to implicitly recognize that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984, p. 110). Hence, her pursuit of the coast is a path of momentum and fluid survival which rejects the controlling scripts imploring maternal domesticity.

In essence, the key distinction between Red and Adelaide’s expressions of refusal lies in their intent. Red’s family performs labor for her as a service to her will, a dynamic that reproduces the very hierarchy that oppressed her. In contrast, Adelaide’s command over her family is rooted in communal survival. When Adelaide instructs her children to “help your father,” she does so to accommodate his functional incapacity of having a broken foot, because she knows ignoring it will hinder her family’s chances of collective survival. Therefore, Adelaide’s Black leadership stands as a “living, shaping fire” (Davis, 1971, p. 6) aimed at liberation, not the enslavement of others. Yet Red’s articulation of refusal is an inversion of power that sustains a system of subjugation. Adelaide’s refusal is a “generative and creative source of disorderly power” (Campt, 2019, p. 83) that enables her family to live “otherwise” in a world designed for their destruction.

Nanny (2022): Refusal

Aisha's Erotic Power: Intimacy as Refusal.

In *Nanny*, Aisha's burgeoning intimacy with Malik serves as an enactment of what Audre Lorde (1978) defines as the *power of the erotic*, and functions as a direct refusal of the asexual, self-sacrificing Mammy script historically imposed upon the Black domestic worker and Black maternal figure. The afterlife of slavery seeks to regulate Black maternal bodies into states of "dispossession" and "fractured kinship" (Hartman, 2016, p. 166), yet Nikyatu Jusu operationalizes the love scene between Aisha and Malik to facilitate a radical refusal of imposed "desexing" (Collins, 1991, p. 267). In the mainstream American cinematic imagination, the Mammy trope has historically served as a tool of containment for Black women, making them figures of "flattened affect" (Lorde, 1978, p. 6), whose labour is harvested while their own desires are rendered invisible or threatening. Jusu, however, rejects this "ascetic" (p. 6) demand. Jusu actively shifts Aisha's characterization away from a tireless servant in isolated silence and transfigures her into a woman who actively chooses connection. Aisha goes on a date and engages in intimacy, which actualizes her subjectivity as a Black woman, who is also a mother. I read the intimacy between Aisha and Malik as a political act; it is the moment Aisha refuses to be an object for the white household and can embody her interior desires, prioritizing herself.

In this scene, Jusu refrains from approaching the scene with a voyeuristic lens (Jusu, 2022, 0:45:00). Instead, the gaze is one of shared awe, exchanged between the characters; with the soft blue and purple lighting enabling the camera to focus on the natural essence of Aisha's darker skin. Jusu also showcases her waist beads, which highlights her cultural specificity. Beads, much like Mami Wata's presence, are a traditional West African symbol of femininity, fertility, and spiritual protection, which serve as a physical tether to the very ancestral spirits that

haunt her. Jusu's attention to Malik tracing her beads curiously before their bodies connect works to bridge the gap between Aisha's cultural identity and her sexual agency.

Equally, the power dynamic of the scene is a radical departure from the Jezebel or Mammy archetypes. When Malik asks, "You sure?," he offers a level of care and recognition of her autonomy that is systemically denied to her in the white domestic sphere (Jusu, 2022, 0:45:22). Aisha sets their pace and takes control in confirmation, which is notable rejection of imposed submission. I argue that her decision here is a literalization of Lorde's theory of the erotic: Aisha is no longer "satisfied with suffering and self-negation" (Lorde, 1978, p. 9). Instead, as noted in Jusu's screenplay, Aisha's moan is described as a "prayer to ecstasy," a phrasing that perfectly captures the collapse of the false dichotomy between the spiritual and the erotic. Jusu's portrayal of Aisha's shared ecstasy with Malik positions Aisha as a sovereign subject.

Jusu's direction of the intimate scenes between Aisha and Malik serves as a cinematic embodiment of *power of the erotic*. Lorde (1978) contends that Western society has vilified the erotic, confusing it with the "pornographic," which is a state of "sensation without feeling" (p. 88). Mainstream horror often traps Black women in this dichotomy: they are either hypersexualized Jezebels for spectacle or desexualized labourers. Jusu subverts this emaciated form of articulation by treating Aisha's body with gravity and reference. The camera's focus on the softness of Aisha's face, the presence of flowers, and the deliberate pacing creates an authentic essence that is traditionally denied to darker-skinned Black women. I look to Lourde for this framing:

For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation... Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. (Lorde, 1978, p. 9)

By showing a darker-skinned Black woman intentionally being loved, and simultaneously being intentional about her desires, Jusu counteracts a century of image-making designed to soothe white fears of Black feminine aggression.

Additionally, Jusu's choice to focus the lens on Aisha's vulnerability is a subjective reclamation of the Black maternal image. If the initial violence of white supremacy is to the body, and the second to the mind, then Jusu's filmmaking serves as a psychological decolonization. Jusu's "visitation" (DeClue, 2021) adds a version of Black motherhood that is not defined by what it provides to others, but by what it claims for itself, to the American cinematic canon. By refusing the "resignation, despair, and self-effacement" (Lorde, 1978, p. 9) inherent in the Mammy archetype, Aisha's intimacy becomes the groundwork for a new political identity; one where the Black mother is no longer haunted by her own erasure. Through Aisha's refusal, she becomes empowered by her own "erotic knowledge" (Lorde, 1978, p. 9) and becomes an agential character.

Aisha's Bite of Refusal: Redressing Sexual Terrorism.

In *Nanny* (2022), Nikyatu Jusu recontextualizes the white domestic sphere as a space of "exploitative sexual terrorism" (hooks, 1981, p. 25). In the scene where Aisha reveals to Adam that his wife Amy has yet to pay her wages (Jusu, 2022, 0:57:05), Adam responds by forcing himself onto her with a kiss. Aisha's rejection of the white patriarchy, Adam's sexual advance constitutes a decisive act of Black maternal refusal that confronts the historical terrors of

racialized capitalism, and the sexual exploitation of Black women. This situates Aisha within a lineage of Black women whose labour has been extracted within intimate white domestic spaces structured by asymmetrical power. Jusu frames Adam's attempted kiss of Aisha as a calculated move that mirrors the "institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery" (Davis, 1981, p. 23). Adam lures Aisha with food, specifically "extra spicy" food that he contrastingly notes his white wife, Amy, dislikes (Jusu, 2022, 0:56:36). Adam's premeditated racial distinction between his white wife and the suggestion of *deviance* in Aisha as Black domestic worker, exposes his fetishistic lens as one that seeks to "simultaneously exploit yet contain" Black womanhood within the restrictive script of the Jezebel (Collins, 2000, p. 130). Adam's commentary and pursuit of Aisha signals that he is engaging in a "Eurocentric-masculinist hyper-sexualization" of her as his employee (Collins, 2000, p. 125).

Jusu establishes terror through Adam's premeditated gestures of provision and his physical proximity to Aisha. Although Adam purports himself as benefactor by offering Aisha partial payment of the wages at the precise moment she articulates economic vulnerability, these actions echo the material concession that preceded Black women's sexual coercion during the antebellum era. bell hooks describes this dynamic as a strategy through which white male enslavers "tried to bribe black women as preparation for sexual overtures so as to place them in the role of prostitute" (hooks, 1981, p. 25). Adam's apparent benevolence and generosity are obscured by the fact that he leverages his economic control over Aisha's job. His presence and actions contribute to Aisha's exploitation and forced separation from her son. Therefore, in her vulnerable condition, Adam's kiss enacts possession under the guise of intimacy.

Aisha's expression of refusal begins prior to Adam's assault, through her implicit decision to confront him about her unpaid wages. This choice disrupts expectations imposed on her to be a compliant domestic worker whose silence sustains white familial stability (Collins, 1991, p. 268). I read Aisha's meticulous notetaking of her hours and rate as a radical act of record-keeping that rejects the Mammy expectation of uncompensated labour. Crucially, when Adam attempts to reframe his payment as an "advance," Aisha swiftly deploys a linguistic refusal: "It is not an advance. It is what I am owed" (Jusu, 2022, 0:58:00). Her refusal of his narrative reframes their exchange from benevolence to obligation. Aisha's insistence also signals that she perceives economic recognition as a condition of her dignity. Jusu's cinematic techniques further prioritize Aisha's agency. She positions the camera to look up at Aisha while Adam's figure is obstructed by her occupying the frame. Similarly, Jusu codes Adam as a "red flag" through his red hoodie. I contend that this *mise en scène* firmly situates Aisha as the moral and subjective centre of the encounter.

Jusu's direction catalyzes the pivot from Aisha's verbal refusal to her physical retaliation through the apparition of Mami Wata seconds before Adam's attack (Jusu, 2022, 0:58:36). This timing of Mami Wata's spectral presence further situates Aisha's refusal within a diasporic epistemology of protection and warning. Because of Mami Wata's visitation, when Adam kisses Aisha, she bites his lip (Jusu, 2022, 0:58:40). Her decision to bite him stands as a direct refusal of imposed violation and a reclamation of her bodily autonomy. Aisha enacts rage that echoes a survival stance passed down through generations of enslaved women: "Fight, and if you can't fight, kick; if you can't kick, then bite" (Gross, 2024, p. 59). Similarly, in this moment, Jusu redresses the historical malignment of African spirituality in American horror that represents African forces as "demonic" or "sex-negative" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 40). Mami Wata's spiritual

presence provides Aisha with empowerment to bite back. This refusal reconfigures the Western moral framework pathologized symbolic imagery of African religions in horror because her presence is used as protection against the deviant sexual terrorism of white supremacist patriarchy.

When Aisha pulls away, Jusu ensures that the camera lingers on her face rather than his body, which centres Aisha's interiority and serves as a form of narrative redress. Collins notes that U.S. culture has long produced discourses that portray Black women as sexually immoral or inherently deviant, thereby delegitimizing claims of violation (Collins, 2000, p. 125). Therefore, Aisha's forceful response confronts a cultural archive that historically rendered Black women's victimization illegible within dominant legal and social frameworks. I contend that Jusu's staging Aisha's refusal as justified and necessary affirms Black maternal subjectivity within the genre. Overall, it is noticeable that Aisha's decision to refuse is sourced from a narrative power that has historically been relegated to margins of the horror genre. Likewise, Aisha's expression of refusal as a Black maternal figure ensures she does not internalize or replicate her subordination. Aisha grounds her modes of refusal as survival in economic dignity, bodily autonomy, and a sense of maternal futurity.

The Themes of Rage and Retribution

***Us* (2019): Rage and Retribution**

Red's Reckoning: Forethought and Retributive Justice

Despite Red's positionality as a displaced original complicating her refusal of subjugation as a Tethered, I assert that her expression of retribution aligns with Nikki M. Taylor's (2023) theory of Black feminist practice of retributive justice. Taylor defines this practice as defined as a "legitimate response to injustice" (2023, p. 7) that is both vindictory and

premeditated. From this lens, Red's retribution functions as a tenable and calculated response to systemic injustice. Peele shows this through four primary vectors: Red's meticulous years-long planning of the 'Untethering' reckoning; her specific placement of blame upon Adelaide as the primary agent of her dispossession; her selection of the shears as a bludgeoning tool; and her determined deployment lethal violence even at the cost of her own life.

Red's retributive justice is demonstrated by her meticulous planning and forethought of revenge. As Taylor (2023) notes in her study of enslaved women's resistance, a Black feminist practice of justice "reflects a great deal of forethought and planning— even about details— including the time she would commit the murder, the weapon, and how she might escape suspicion" (pp. 130, 131). Red embodies this mode of retribution in her final confrontation scene with Adelaide in the underpass classroom. Standing at the blackboard with her back to Adelaide, Red reveals the depth of her orchestration regarding the 'Untethering,' "I found my faith and I began to prepare. It took years to plan" (Peele, 2019, 1:40:13). Peele splices her confession with a flashback to the Tethereds led by Red in their barracks; they don red jumpsuits and leather gloves, symbolizing their transition from a state of flattened affect to a strategic visibility for the sake of violence. Their coordination is far from spontaneous, and Red's present day confession to Adelaide that "Everything had to be perfect" (Peele, 2019, 1:40:33) confirms the intensive efforts of Red's goal of a reckoning.

Red's use of paper-cut people during this scene is symbolic and serves as a visceral manifestation of her decades-long premeditated payback for the injustice, described by Taylor (2023). While detailing her desire for insurgence, Red cuts paper people. She uses her hands and her scissors to physically create the divide she has been plotting; turning the paper into a medium for her aspiration for vengeance. Red cuts up the paper figures down from four, which represents

the traditional nuclear family—like the Wilsons—to two figures, which represents Adelaide and herself as her double. She raises the two remaining figures above her head and declares, “It’s our time now. Our time up there,” (Peele, 2019, 1:40:57) before finally dividing them. Red foreshadows her personal imposition of violent rupture as a means of frightening Adelaide, which speaks to her compounded wish to invert subjugated conditions for her own benefit. I read Red’s act of measured severance as a tactile performance of decided equity. Her physical and symbolic demonstration of balance aligns with Taylor’s Black feminist justice principle, which “insists that the proportionality of revenge is best determined by the victims of the unjust acts” (Taylor, 2023, p. 12).

Although Red’s key goal to replicate the system of subjugation by seizing the surface through a malicious ‘Untethering’ might appear amoral, I contend that Taylor’s (2023) framework validates her actions as a specific form of retributive agency. Under a Black feminist retributive practice, the victims of unjust acts possess the sole authority to determine the scale and nature of their reckoning (Taylor, 2023: 12). This aligns with the lens that, for enslaved Black women, “retaliatory violence is a morally legitimate response to the injustice within slavery” (Taylor, 2023, p. 7). This framework informs my reading of Red’s specific placement of blame upon Adelaide as the primary agent of her dispossession, instead of the structural forces behind her imprisonment as a Tethered.

Peele highlights Red’s personalized fixation through her dialogue: “I never stopped thinking about you. How things could have been. How you could have taken me with you...” (Peele, 2019, 1:39:44). This is an intimate accusation, and it makes clear that Red’s anger is focused on destroying the privileges of safety that Adelaide obtained only through Red’s kidnapping and subsequent captivity. In this way, Red’s focus strikes at what Taylor (2023)

describes as the “disproportionality of the discipline,” which serves as the “heart of why she felt her treatment had been unjust and why retaliatory justice was the remedy she sought” (p. 82).

Ironically, Red also attributes her very capacity for resistance to Adelaide through her statement, “To think, if it weren’t for you, I never would have danced at all,” (Peele, 2019). She acknowledges that the symbolic mobility gained through the creative outlet of dance, which then allowed her to organize the Tethered, was to some extent birthed from the trauma Adelaide inflicted. This paradoxical gratitude underscores Taylor’s view that, in a Black feminist practice of retributive justice, the victim “alone determine[s] the targets and proportionality of her vengeful act” (Taylor, 2023, p. 131). Red’s story positions Adelaide as her singular antagonist, and transforms her structural abandonment into a private offense worthy of a retributive war. This reordering allows her to assert her right to define the terms of her own justice.

Red’s deployment of the shears as a bludgeoning tool function as a visceral cinematic echo of the historical “wild justice” enacted by enslaved women (Taylor, 2023, p. 139). I argue that Red’s conclusive strikes and stabs at Adelaide are deliberate executions of a long-delayed retributive sentence for her. Red moves through the classroom and corridors with a startling level of certitude; she stands upright, and her body remains unburdened throughout. On the other hand, Adelaide is physically shackled by handcuffs whenever she attempts to defend herself, and she’s shown doubling over in a frantic state of vulnerability after repeated attacks from Red. I view this asymmetry as an intentional inversion of their childhood trajectories; supported by Peele’s use of spliced ballet flashbacks, which highlights this transition. In the flashbacks, the teenage Adelaide once dances fluidly in the spotlight, and teenage Red crawls, sometimes even dragging herself, through the dim hallways of the Underpass (Peele, 2019, 1:43:42). In the

present day, Peele positions Red as the agential centre of the frame within the Black maternal duel.

In terms of vengeful forethought, Red's decision to routinely turn her back to Adelaide's wild swings, is one of the most striking aspects of her retributive expressions. Red moves confidently rarely facing Adelaide; a cryptic gesture that signals both contempt for her double's desperation and an absolute certainty in her own dominance. Red's calm movement stands in stark contrast to the gruesome nature of her lunges. As she stabs Adelaide with the open scissors and bludgeons her with painful force, Red exhibits a complete lack of remorse or ethical constraint (Taylor, 2023, p. 139). Even the jarring moment when Red grabs Addie's face, angrily mouthing an incoherent message before slamming her head and stabbing her hands, is deeply personal (Peele, 2019, 1:42:34). Her intimate retribution here aligns with the assertion that enslaved women who committed murder often "inflicted unbearable pain on their victims, face to face" (p. 139).

Red's absence of hesitation is retributive justice coded, corresponding to Taylor's observation that when revenge is the only available justice, "the disempowered will seize it without concern for the proportionality of the violence" or the "optics of the murder scene" (Taylor, 2023, p. 139). Each blow for Red is an allocation of judgment. She expresses rage against Adelaide as a conclusive indictment of the original who flourished while she was buried (Taylor, 2023, p. 139). Red treats Adelaide's body as a site for this untamed justice by operationalizing the shears, which are domestic tools, in a manner that transforms them into "deadliest weapon," akin to the axes used by enslaved women to slaughter their oppressors (p. 139).

The final proof of Red's commitment to a Black feminist practice of retributive justice lies in her steadfast persistence to enact rage even in the face of certain death. Taylor (2023) argues that within a retributive framework, the success of the act is measured by the statement made, regardless of the cost to the self. She notes that the enslaved Black women who used lethal violence did so fully aware of the fatal consequences of their actions. Red's death literalizes this level of retributive conviction. After concealing herself between two bunk beds for the sake of an ambush, Red rises and rushes towards Adelaide's back, with her scissors. (Peele, 2019, 1:44:36). Adelaide spins around and rams her fire poker into Red's chest; pushing it right through, and out of her back. Red subsequently drops her scissors and sinks to the floor; embracing Adelaide, without struggling to escape or pleading for mercy. Red's choice to stage the untethering and enact her rage against Adelaide despite the certain execution that follows, a fate foreshadowed by the destruction of her Tethered family, aligns her with the historical legacy of Black women who valued the reclamation of their justice over the continuation of their subjugation. Even in her demise, Red's expression of rage troubles the restricted scope of the Black maternal figure and expands the field of permissible responses to include a defiant agency rooted in Black feminist justice. Through persistently engaging in retributive insurgence and pursuing her vengeful plans despite the overarching threat of execution, Red proves a willingness "to die pursuing [her] version of justice" (Taylor, 2023, p. 12).

In conclusion, Peele's depictions of Red's retribution offer a cinematic bridge to the historical uninhibited sense of justice that belonged to Black enslaved women. Peele frames Red's violent call to revenge as disciplined Black feminist practice of retributive justice embodied in her astute plotting, bludgeoning, and terminal persistence in the shadowy halls of death. Red commands her narrative fate by capturing sole authority to decide the proportionality

of her revenge, which is a legacy also claimed by Black women who murdered their oppressors as means of rectifying an unlivable life (Taylor, 2023). Peele grants Red a noteworthy level of subjectivity through her rageful expression. Red's execution of the Untethering transforms her from Tethered object characterized by subservience to a maternal agent who authoritatively dictates the terms of her own reckoning.

Overall, through Red's complex positionality and her use of rage as retaliatory justice, Peele effectively subverts the Sapphire image and the Angry Black Woman archetype that have historically flattened Black women's anger; and pathologized their resistance as social deviancy. Red's rage and reckoning are calculated responses to her dispossession as a Black woman and maternal figure. Peele presents her vitriol as a justified moral indictment of systemic harm, even in the moments when her vengeance is channeled toward, and inflicted upon, a single individual. In this way, Peele approaches Red's retribution with a gravity novel to American horror genre. So, Peele contributes to a contemporary horror canon that prioritizes what Kinitra D. Brooks (2017) defines as "complex characterization," which is one that acknowledges the "simultaneity of oppressions" (p. xiii). I contend that Red's display of revenge allows the Black maternal figure to exist as a multifaceted subject of both horror and profound retributive justice (Brooks, 2017, p. xiii).

Adelaide's Maternal Rage as Redressive Action.

Jordan Peele allows Adelaide to embrace a level of visceral violence that is historically denied to Black maternal figures in the horror genre, and this shatters the narrative confines that pathologize Black mothers as "overly aggressive, unfeminine women" (Collins, 1991, p. 268). Factoring in Adelaide's positionality as a Tethered subject who successfully passed as an original for decades, I interpret her expressions of rage as carrying a specific, mournful depth. I

read her life on the surface through Allyson Hobbs' framework of racial passing as a "chosen or unchosen exile" for the sake of viability (2014, p. 4). Adelaide is aware that her survival was obtained on the "respite from daily indignities" that she gained by swapping places with Red; and how this gamble required her to desert her origins in search of "more secure conditions of freedom" (Hobbs, 2014, p. 5). She also recognizes the intergenerational impact of these haunting stakes. This too frames her expression of rage against whatever threatens her maternal agency. Hence, although Black female anger is traditionally stigmatized as a maternal deficiency, Peele depicts Adelaide's rage as a necessary "act of clarification" (Lorde, 1981, p. 8).

Adelaide's killing of Nix, the Tethered to the Tyler family's daughter, illustrates the operational logic of her rage. She re-enters the Tyler home to retrieve the car keys necessary for her family's escape and runs into Nix. According to Peele's script's notation, Adelaide "curses herself" (Peele, 2019) before she "swats the living shit" out of Nix with a frying pan (Peele, 2019). Adelaide's movement through the house is deliberate and focused because although armed with a fire poker, she is still restrained by handcuffs. But she proceeds despite risk because her maternal obligation to secure her family demands it. This frames her act of rage as intentional even under constraint. Through this scene, Peele performs an inversion of horror's historical punishment of Black female anger because Adelaide's violence is not "stylized for spectacle" (Peele, 2019). When Nix attacks, Adelaide responds with controlled lethality, and swiftly pulls the scissors from a deceased Nix' head. Adelaide's rage is economically targeted to terminate an immediate threat to her life so she can return to her children waiting outside. Her maternal rage operates as retributive protection; and this classifies her anger as motivated by urgency and responsibility.

I argue that the scene depicting the death of Umbrae offers the most morally complex expression of Adelaide's subjectivity through expressed rage. After Umbrae (her daughter, Zora's Tethered) becomes trapped, twisted, and mortally injured in the woods, Adelaide approaches holding a weapon. Yet she halts at a measured distance because the image of Umbrae "hits her harder than she expected" (Peele, 2019). Adelaide kneels observingly and remains present. Her decision to kneel and "shush" the dying girl is a profound, redressive moment that speaks to a relational dimension to Adelaide's rage. She recognizes Umbrae as a figure bound to her through shared origin of dispossession as a Tethered and performs compassionate watchfulness over her in those final moments. Despite the presence of Adelaide's anger, she refuses to adopt "blinded hatred" of Red, her adversary; and this aligns her rage with Lordean characterization of anger that acknowledges "grief over distortions between peers" (Lorde, 1981, p. 8). Regardless of their shared cultural memory, Adelaide does not intervene in Umbrae's demise, showing that she is calculated in her acceptance of death as an inevitable outcome to her pursuit of survival.

The final confrontation between Adelaide and Red presents Black maternal anger as a struggle for restoration under conditions of constraint. Peele stages the climactic confrontation between Adelaide and Red in the underpass beneath the Vision Quest hall, which is a setting that visualizes a literal return to the site of the structural crime. As they fight, Adelaide remains encumbered by Red's handcuffs, while Red moves with unrestrained and lethal precision. Through their physical asymmetries, Peele visually materializes a history of anti-Black racist and classist domination that haunts the expressions of Black maternal agency in their present encounter.

In the finality of their battle, Adelaide strips away any shred of domestic composure that she adopted to pass as a surface-dweller and implements a guttural redress that completely defies the respectability politics imposed on Black mothers to avoid being pathologized as combative. As Adelaide tightens the chains from her handcuffs around Red's neck, she deploys a distinguishable level of unrestrained force. Lupita Nyong'o who plays both Adelaide and Red, transforms her physicality; and affects a primal, heightened kinesthetic language to channel Adelaide's visceral fury at the threat of her diminished existence. Adelaide's performance of rage becomes animalistic in this moment; she bares her teeth, snaps her jaws, and jerks back and forth whilst strangling her adversary to death (Peele, 2019, 1:45:34). When a weeping Adelaide finally chokes Red to death with her handcuff chain and her weeping turns into laughter, this is the sonic manifestation of her "metabolized rage" because she finally achieved her desired "object of change" (Lorde, 1981, p. 8). Adelaide's laughter after such a traumatizing moment signifies that she is no longer ceding to a ruptured identity (Spillers, 1987, p. 72) imposed by systemic harm. Her jarring regression into base survival instincts represents is the ultimate dismissal of the restrictive Black Matriarch stereotype. She intentionally weaponizes this perceived aggression; and transfigures the suppressive image into a generative source of power for her own liberation.

Ironically, Peele positions this moment of unfastened aggression as a cinematic redress of the Black maternal rupture (Spillers, 1987). Adelaide's rageful and physical unharnessing empowers her to claim the key from Red's neck; to literally unlock her handcuffs and symbolically unfetter herself from the restraints of Black maternal objectification. And it is precisely through Adelaide's embodiment of primeval instincts and raw maternal force that she locates her kidnapped son, Jason and reunites with him; which effectively addresses the systemic familial fracture. Even as she smears blood across Jason's cheek, an act that undoubtedly

transgresses a familial status quo, Adelaide redresses the historical haunting of family separation and Black maternal dispossession. The blood is a literal byproduct of her rageful expression to ensure the survival of her kinship structure. The image of Adelaide smearing blood onto Jason and promising him that “They are gone now. Okay? They can’t hurt you” (Peele, 2019, 1:47:07), is visually disruptive. Symbolically, this act aligns with bell hooks’ definition of “queer” not as sexual identity, but as a “self that is at odds with everything around it” which must “invent and create... a place to speak and to thrive” (The New School, 2014). In this light, Adelaide’s blood-ritual queers the traditional concept of familial bonding by inventing a space for survival outside of normative structures.

Overall, Adelaide’s survival above ground produces an ethic of protection and continuity; Red’s life below ground is oriented toward an ethic of reversal and replacement. Where Adelaide’s rage seeks to secure her kinship by enacting retributive force to neutralize present dangers, Red’s expressions of retribution demand restoration of dominance through total elimination. And although Jordan Peele frames both maternal figures’ positions as historically intelligible, his narrative privileges the moral approach of Adelaide’s rage. I contend that Adelaide’s Black maternal rageful force is grounded in a protective responsibility that disregards any consideration of the stigmas attached to the Black matriarch archetype.

Nanny (2022): Rage and Retribution

Aisha’s Generative Rage: Confronting the Economic Mammy.

In *Nanny (2022)*, Aisha’s rage takes the form of an articulated demand through economic confrontation. Aisha transforms a scene of chastisement into a confrontational moment that leads to her reclaiming authority over labour and time. When Aisha directly confronts her female employer, Amy, over unpaid wages, she effectively abandons the performance of the “faithful,

obedient domestic servant” (Collins, 1991, p. 266). Jusu frames Aisha’s anger not as a “generative and transformative” force that breaks the cycle of her emotional rupture and attacks Amy’s punitive attempts at her economic exploitation. Aisha’s confrontation unfolds within a structure of racialized domestic labour historically organized through the expectation that Black women provide inexhaustible care while suppressing self-interest (Collins, 1991, p. 266). Aisha’s anger engineers a narrative pivot that finally secures her the financial means to reunite with her son, Lamine. Hence, I maintain that through her rageful vocalization, Aisha narratively transforms from a ruptured state of servitude to a position of narrative command. This transformation also demands that Amy witness Aisha as a more comprehensive depiction of the Black maternal subject.

Aisha’s rage is ignited by Amy’s incompetence, which is a reversal of the Mammy script where the Black woman is the “expert in the home” who fills “any role needed” (Sewell, 2013, p. 310). When Amy critiques the spicy African food Aisha feeds Rose, Aisha responds by yanking open a fridge filled with molded blueberries and wilted kale (Jusu, 2022, 1:07:25). In this scene, Jusu materializes Sewell’s (2013) noted historical construction of the Mammy as an all-purpose caregiver who fills any domestic role required by white families (p. 310) then interrupts it by Aisha critiquing Amy for having to use her own expenditures in feeding Rose. Aisha ragefully refutes the presumption that her care is inexhaustible by shouting, “Didn’t you ever wonder how your child was eating or you were too busy to care?” (Jusu, 2022, 1:07:38). Her rage acts as a visceral refusal of the Mammy archetype being positioned as a “natural, life-sustaining source of care” for white children (Sewell, 2013, p. 310). Most of all, I contend that Aisha’s anger returns the gaze on Amy’s parenting and its historical roots, which offloads the labour of survival onto an unpaid Black woman, while simultaneously policing the cultural nature of that care.

The scene reaches its peak when Aisha finally renegotiates her wages. Aisha's rejection of Amy's attempt to deduct pay for "lunch and dinner" is a radical assertion: "My time is not free, you know" (Jusu, 2022, 1:08:29). This simple statement shatters the historical expectation that a Black woman's labour is a "natural and inevitable" part of the domestic economy (Sewell, 2013, p. 310). Aisha's ability to enact a wage negotiation marks a narrative shift from petition to rageful command. Aisha sets a higher rate, requires advance payment; "two fifty... in advance" (Jusu, 2022, 1:09:06), and links Amy's present compliance to accumulated arrears. Each of Aisha's demands establishes a term that reorganizes the condition of her labor. She is the one directing the tempo of moment and the emotional price she is willing to pay to sustain her position. There is a spiritual weight to this moment, as the act of negotiating one's terms is a declaration of sovereignty.

Through Aisha's anger, Jusu makes her legible to Amy as a mother and a worker who understands her own value. This sequence exposes the structure of labour exploitation that depends on selectively seeing of Black women and their motherhood, in order to be sustained. Aisha's rageful expression exposes this vampiric structure of domestic labour and makes herself visible as an effect of power. Jusu underscores this maternal authority through the dynamic with Rose; when Rose clings to Aisha's leg, Aisha nudges Rose towards her mother and instructs her to "Écoute ta mère" (Jusu, 2022, 1:09:43). A non-diegetic audio of rhythmic breath sounds that morphs into a symphony can be heard at this moment, which underscores a release. This is a stark refusal to "prioritize the care of the white family above her own" (Collins, 1991, p. 266). By literally and figuratively pushing the white child back toward the white mother, Aisha rejects the role of the "surrogate mother in blackface" (p. 266) and asserts her own identity as a parent whose primary obligation is to her own son.

Overall, Aisha's anger is generative because it produces a material result. By breaking from the professionalism that required her "docile and all-giving nature" (Collins, 1991, p. 267), she transforms her condition. *Jusu* depicts this confrontation as a necessary "shattering" of Amy's idyllic, exploitative reality. In terms of Black maternal subjectivity, Aisha's anger restores her humanity by proving that her "maternal instincts" are not public property, but a private, powerful resource she chooses to withhold or deploy on her own terms. Her rage dismantles the Mammy archetype to reveal a woman who is firm, level-headed, and finally, free. Aisha's rage redefines professionalism as a reciprocal obligation. Her conduct rejects the historical mandates that Black women secure stability for others through self-erasure. Therefore, Aisha mobilizes rage to secure improved economic conditions for her maternal continuity across borders.

Narrative Resolution

The Improved Narrative Resolution

Adelaide in *Us* and Aisha in *Nanny* achieve what I define as an Evolutionary Narrative Resolution, which is a state of evolved and embodied subjectivity that moves beyond the ruptured identities they occupied at the start of their respective films. Their survival transgresses the status quo of their haunted state and establishes a new Black maternal condition that is grounded in agency and what *Jusu* refers to as an ancestral insistence on survival (Jusu, 2022). This contemporary formation of Black maternal survival aligns Robin R. Means Coleman's (2011) concept of the "Enduring Woman" wherein she states that "With no real way to defeat the evil (systems of inequality) that surrounds them, Black women in horror films could be described as resilient Enduring Women. They are soldiers in ongoing battles of discrimination, in which a total victory is elusive" (Coleman, 2011, p. 184). For the Black maternal figure, narrative

resolution is not the absence of haunting, but the attainment of the authority required to navigate it. Adelaide and Aisha sustain a defiant practice of living within constraint while ragefully asserting a transformative selfhood.

Us (2019): Narrative Resolution

Peele formalizes the final exchange between Adelaide and Jason as an act of Black maternal authority grounded in recognition and maternal authority. Adelaide's closing gaze on Jason registers their mutual knowledge of her covert origin story. Jason recognizes the full scope of his mother's identity and chooses to preserve her secret. Their silence suggests an intergenerational pact structured around protection. Peele reveals Adelaide's enhanced maternal authority in her physical position. She now occupies the driver's seat. This transformation shows that she is the one directing her family's movement across the American landscape. Aisha's control over their mobility signals a control over their fate. And her hand on the wheel stands in sharp contrast with her earlier posture as a passenger and anxious observer of Gabe's failed leadership, at the film's introduction. Hence, Adelaide's leadership embraces Black mother's position as protector of her family, which narratively refutes pathological renditions of Black mothers problematic due to their aggression. Thus, by moving toward the border, Adelaide's resolution is sponsored through her continuous act of transition, and an integrated sense of self that finally accepts the necessity of her own rage.

Nanny (2022): Narrative Resolution

The catalyst for Aisha's narrative resolution is the devastating revelation that Lamine drowned and died in Senegal, before their planned reunion in America. Although the emotional wounding from losing child is a frequent trope used to anchor the haunting legacies of anti-Blackness within the horror genre, Jusu subverts this experience for Aisha to transcend the

flattened cliché. Drawing on Rhaisa Kameela Williams' (2016) Black maternal grief framework, I argue that Aisha's narrative resolution is an evolutionary shift in the representation of Black motherhood in horror. Williams (2016) argues that icons of Black maternal mourning—such as the “strong Black mother” archetype or the image of Mamie Till-Mobley weeping over her son's casket—have effectively “circumscribed which maternal responses to trauma are legible and acceptable within public spheres” (p. 17). She notes that these dominant cultural images enforce a standard for how Black mothers should “‘productively’ cope with loss,” typically through a continued public presence or a formal pursuit of “judicial redress” (p. 17). In response to these oppressive conventions, Williams proposes treating Black maternal grief as an “analytical practice” that prioritizes the “silence, unintelligible responses, and vulnerability,” experienced by Black mothers in their sorrowful moments (p.17). Thus, I contend that the evolutionary narrative resolution Jusu provides for Aisha serves as a cinematic manifestation of this analytical practice.

Through Aisha's final immersion in water, Jusu stages a confrontation with loss that produces a renewed maternal subjectivity anchored in ancestral continuity and collective care. Aisha enters the water bearing the “heavy backpack” (Jusu, 2022) of labour-induced burdens and the crushing weight of systemic grief. However, her underwater encounter transforms this space from a site of disappearance into a liminal threshold of encounter. Although this scene occurs days after Lamine's death is announced to her, he appears to her inside of the water as, what Jusu (2022) refers to in her screenplay as, an “aqua angel” who facilitates her release from the labours that separated them.

Jusu deploys African diasporic cosmologies, such as the Mami Wata traditions and invocations of the Drexciya mythos, to frame water as a space of passage and spiritual

mediation. Aisha is ultimately pulled up by the collective hands of her lover, Malik, and his grandmother Kathleen. I interpret Aisha's emergence from the water as Jusu establishing Black maternal survival as a communal practice. By accepting Kathleen's counsel to "forgive" herself, Aisha redirects her internalization of maternal guilt. This radical act of care recontextualizes Aisha's personal loss as an injury caused by a hegemonic system designed for her harm.

Finally, I contend that Jusu's revelation of Aisha's new pregnancy repositions her trajectory toward a generative futurity. Aisha's renewed maternal identity unfolds within a chosen kinship structure and that prioritizes reciprocal care. Jusu's configuration of motherhood intentionally counters historical conditions that fractured Black maternal bonds through labour extraction that dispossessed Black wombs for capitalist gain. And in the final shots of Aisha swaddled in the bathtub, her agency over her body and her newborn daughter is restored. Her resolution is forgiveness without forgetting, where maternal identity is sustained through affirmed relationships. This fulfills Williams' (2016) primary aim to "widen our lens to the myriad ways Black mothers deal with traumatic loss" by constructing resolutions that prioritize private endurance and chosen kinship over the performance of public redress (Williams, 2016, p. 17).

In conclusion, I maintain that both films construct improved resolutions for the Black maternal figures through a sense of narrative endurance that integrates narrative confrontation, survival, and a recontextualized view of maternal authority. Adelaide and Aisha survive through self-possession that refuses the state of rupture and embraces a rageful sense of command. Consequently, I maintain that Peele and Jusu treat their Black maternal characters with a notable sense of gravity and effectively elevate their subjectivity in American horror.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I argue that contemporary Black horror cinema mobilizes refusal, rage, and retribution as affective and aesthetic tactics through which Black maternal characters obtain subjectivity and resist narrative confines of anti-Black sexism. Through close readings of key scenes from *Us* and *Nanny*, I demonstrate that Black contemporary horror operates as a formal language with the capacity to render visible both the imposed and interior fractures of Black women's lives. I also demonstrate that the strategic ways that Black maternal characters are articulated as subjects of refusal, rage, and retribution is a politically meaningful response to structural violence.

For example, the theme of refusal was found as a reordering of Black maternal authority, such as Adelaide's strategic fugitivity and Aisha's reclamation of erotic and economic agency. Both films dismantle the binary of the "good" versus "bad" Black mother by presenting maternal subjectivity as ethically complex; and encouraging narrative arcs that enable them to become structurally aware and agential in their responses. In essence, these narratives suggest that Black maternal power in horror is articulated from the clarity forged in embodying a fullness that rejects their expected dispossession.

A primary finding of this study identified refusal in contemporary Black horror as a fundamental reorientation of power. For example, in *Us*, Adelaide's insistence on constant mobility reorganized the expressed rejection of the heteronormative standards of the domestic sphere. Her assertion that her husband no longer made the decisions pulled directly from her experiential knowledge forged in subjugation. Her refusal rose from an epistemological clarity that she gained by surviving the structure's underside.

Similarly, in *Nanny*, Aisha's erotic agency and economic confrontations were situated to help her reclaim her time and terms of labour. Her declaration that her time has a price ruptures the historical assumption that Black maternal labor is an inexhaustible resource for white consumption. In both texts, refusal determines the characters' self-governance and definitions of survival.

As for Black maternal anger, it was portrayed as a disciplined and targeted survival strategy. In *Us*, Adelaide's violence remained strictly situational. She used lethal actions as instruments of escape to secure familial continuity. There were notable moments where she expressly refused to exhibit blind hatred, even when her counterpart had done exactly that. One interesting finding that spoke to her intentionality was the laughter she released following the death of her Doppelgänger. This affective display of joy was metabolic, signifying how she channeled her rage into a secure state of change.

As for *Nanny*, Aisha's rage manifested through verbalizing her grievances as a means of exposing her exploitation and the setting of material terms. Aisha's anger reorganized her immediate conditions and produced tangible results for bringing her son to America. Consequently, rage functioned as redressive narrative action; much like an intentional force that is calibrated toward restoration of the Black maternal character's well-being. I believe this reframing dismantled the pathologization of Black female anger and repositions rage as a form of Black maternal governance.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study maintains a specific focus on two U.S.-produced films, which provides analytical depth while narrowing the diasporic scope. I suggest that future research could extend

this framework to Black horror traditions in Africa and the Caribbean to trace broader conceptions of maternal refusal. Additionally, scholarship could expand beyond motherhood to examine how refusal circulates through Black girlhood and queer kinship. Industrial analysis of these films would further clarify whether mainstream visibility amplifies or contains the radical potential of these depictions.

Final Reflections

This thesis contends that contemporary Black horror reinterprets the Black mother through strategic, embodied articulations of refusal. *Us* and *Nanny* reject sanitized redemption in favour of insurgent disruption. They insist that Black maternal subjectivity remains unconfined by respectability or silence. Refusal, rage, and retribution function as persistent tools for living otherwise within structures designed for erasure. Within this insistence, contemporary Black horror locates the enduring and disruptive force of Black maternal agency.

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