Crossing Gothic Boundaries: Using Horror to Unpack America's Racism

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Introduction

Appoquinimink High School is a rapidly growing school in the booming district of Middletown, DE. Once a rural district, a population surge on top of increasing commerce and competing as the top-ranked district in the state means that AHS is and has been changing tremendously over the last few years. This coming school year we have exceeded our school's population maximum of 1600 students. To service grades 9-12 we have added more administrative bodies, are continuously working to implement Common Core State Standards, are expanding our subject pathways and adding new courses, are finishing a new early childhood to high school campus, have been a full one-to-one school with chromebooks, and will soon referendum for a new campus property. Though AHS comprises more of the affluent population of Middletown and the surrounding areas, we teach students from a variety of diverse racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds.

AHS functions on 90-minute block schedules with four periods that meet every day; students then change classes in January for the spring semester. In my 12th grades classes this year, my breakdown looks thusly: 2 sections of Gothic Literature Honors (about 65 students); 1 section of CP Inclusion British Literature (20 students); 1 section of CP Inclusion Gothic Literature (about 25 students); and one year-long section of Gothic Literature Honors (36 students).

The mantra at AHS is "college and career readiness;" we want our students to be well-rounded, global citizens that are prepared for life beyond high school. Indeed, that is the aim of any institution. As we continue to grow and aim for "college and career readiness," we are taking inspiration from colleges to organize our courses and curricula via subject pathways, which function like college majors. As a ninth year teacher who has been teaching 12th grade ELA exclusively for about six years, I have been working with my colleges to develop new courses for ELA in general and specifically for 12th grade. Four years ago we piloted two new courses as alternatives to our standard 12th grade British Literature course. I wrote and taught the American and British Gothic Literature class in these initial years; last year I exclusively taught the Gothic course, whereas in its first year I taught both Gothic and British Literature. This year I will again teach a section of British Literature, through the majority of my curriculum is still Gothic Literature. I also coordinate the Senior Project, which has dedicated class time throughout the year on a rotating schedule. Because I am in charge of the entire senior class for this project, this class section allows me work time on the different components and time to guide students

in completing all the required assignments, as well as plan and execute the presentation day for the entire senior body in March.

Rationale

While both high schools in my district have been revamping the 12th grade ELA curriculum together, I am the sole writer and teacher of the Gothic Literature course at my school. Though I am very comfortable in the early Gothic materials from my own academic background and my years teaching the British Literature curriculum, it is the newer units that focus on psychological thriller and horror that I am less familiar with and am working to expand. I want to use this DTI unit to further develop the horror unit as this is the one I am least confident with and have the least amount of knowledge of texts and resources. In general, I think this unit will also serve to add contextual, historical depth to the Gothic as well.

I'd like to use this DTI unit to explore the possibilities within horror and elevate the genre as a sophisticated vehicle for creative writing, emotional expression, the exploration of racially and even gendered viewpoints and community understanding in my classroom where taboo and subversive subjects can be safely and academically explored. My intention to pair what I learn about the history of racism in America with the horror unit of my Gothic Literature class will be fruitful in helping my students understand this subversive topic via a high interest, popular genre. To defend the unit, I plan to offer historical research on race in America and the issues we face today; the significance of the Horror genre in entertainment history, especially as a genre that allows discussion on controversial topics; research on teenagers and how they might be approaching or understanding race, the need to discuss it and what it means to them, and the possibilities of the Gothic and horror to do that. Especially in the later part of my unit, I rely more heavily on film and movies over traditional written texts because movies, for their popularity and visual images, demand our attention in a different way from written literature. Though books are also marketed for mass appeal, it is something about movies that people perceive as more accessible and, therefore, are perhaps more willing to engage with a movie over a book. This is not to demean or devalue the written word at all; instead, it is another opportunity to use a high-interest text and an opportunity to teach students how to *read* a movie and be critical consumers if that story. When we talk about representation in film, this is of critical importance because of how stereotypes and a lack of agency and character development can teach racism, oppression, and worth. In Marcus Benjamin's article about the importance of the new documentary *Horror Noire*, he uncovers that "The depictions of black people in horror flicks are often who the creators *think* [sic] we are, not *who* [sic] we actually are. Finding out there are people who think you barely merit any lines of dialogue or any development means you barely exist to them. That ripple effect is strong and everlasting, and is one we're still fighting against today."[1]

The Rise of the Gothic Genre

A shift in literary trends and cultural representations, like history itself, does not happen in a vacuum. Though we can put our finger on Horace Walpole and *The Castle of Otranto* as "the first Gothic novel,"[2] Walpole is not the first and only progenitor of the genre nor of the characteristics of the Gothic. The rhetoric that I use in class is that the Gothic represents a reaction--a literary, ideological "what if"--that counters the popular thought during its beginning and still does today. Gaining identifiable momentum in the middle of the 1700s, the Gothic is an off-shoot of Romanticism that was a reaction to the Enlightenment ideas of that time. About one hundred years prior to Walpole, Europe began teeming with notions of logic, rationalism, and reason. Politics, science, philosophy, and individuality were called into question and society as a whole trumpeted the idea that human improvement and progress could be made through rationalism and reason. Human knowledge was based on a series of experiences; the authority of a monarchy was debated while liberty and the power of the individual triumphed; nature and God could be explained by science. But while all this enlightened progress was being made, the threats of war and social unrest[3] inspired a reaction to that cool logic--what about emotions? What about the darker side of reason, individuality, and progress? Where the Enlightenment focused on the present and future, Romanticism arose to remind us of the [medieval] past, our lost connection to nature, and of the emotional recesses of ourselves. Thanks to Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and Romantic notions, the feelings of pain and pleasure and the microscopically thin line between them allowed for the development of Gothic, or Gothic Horror. Harkening back to the historic Goths, Gothicism explored the barbaric side of emotions and the darker side of the individual, typically focusing on themes of death, decay, the uncanny, and the sublimity of horror and terror.[4]

Because Gothic occupies the uncomfortable space between solidified ideas, it has long been recognized as an influential genre that, at its core, serves to interrogate the fears and anxieties experienced by individuals and societies, grappling with the taboo subjects of sexuality, science, revolution, identity and, especially for our purposes, racism. In this way, it is especially appropriate because the uncomfortable foundations of race must be interrogated to understand how race is discussed in the 21st century. The rhetoric and artistic decisions by writers, actors, and directors of the past still inform how writers, actors, and directors today create [Black] characters and develop stories.

Racism in America

In the prologue of his seminal work *Stamped from the Beginning*, Imbram Kendi describes the establishment and far-reaching effects of racism in America:
> The principle function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racists disparities. The beneficiaries of slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration have produced racist

ideas of Black people being best suited for or deserving of the confines of slavery, segregation, or the jail cell. Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, or confined so many Black people.[5]

To approach the history of racist ideas in America, one must understand that going back to the original settlers in the early 1600s in America does not fully encapsulate *the* origins of racism in this country. One must understand that the major players of the early settlements, like John Cotton and Cotton Mather, already had racist ideas inherited from previous thinkers, already had solidified notions of the inferiority of certain races, including Africans. To defend and promote the idea of slavery in new America did not require a quantum leap of theology, politics, sociology, or philosophy—the groundwork was primed and ready, and racism quickly and quietly bolted its roots into the new American soil.

The educated class in early America were disciples of the Greeks, classically educated to regard "ancient Greek and Latin literature as universal truths worthy of memorization and unworthy of critique."[6] In this case, it was Aristotle (and a mirrored rhetoric in the Bible) that made American racism natural and normal. So, in their course of study, as the Puritans read the Greeks, they were educated in the concept of a human hierarchy and the "natural" notion that some humans were better than others. In the Greek perspective, it was a simple superiority over all non-Greeks. Translated in Puritan England, this meant the Puritans were superior to Native Americans, Africans, and even Anglicans; basically, all non-Puritans.[7] If the Puritans are educated by the Greeks, than the logical conclusion is that the Puritans, like the Greeks, were superior to all others by comparison, so the Puritans were justified in their world view. Aristotle also provided the Puritans with a model for how to treat and use those who were naturally inferior to them.

In Aristotle's writings, the Puritans found the concept of "climate theory" to explain not only the difference in appearance of other races compared to the Greeks, but it also explained how and why other races acted compared to the refined, sophisticated Greeks. According to climate theory, "extreme hot or cold climates produced intellectually, physically, and morally inferior people who were ugly and lacked the capacity for freedom and self-government."[8] Especially focused on the exotic Africans already brought to American with the first settlers, and long on the European radar from wars and trade, Aristotle helped the Puritans to understand that the "burnt faces" of the Africans were viewed as "'ugly' extremes of pale or dark skins as the effect of the extreme cold or hot climates."[9] This ugliness clearly indicated a physical, moral, emotional, etc inferiority of a people that need guidance and direction in the form of slavery because, according to Aristotle, " Humanity is divided into two: the masters and the slaves; […] those who have the right to commence, and those who are born to obey."[10] Already professionals in the slave trade, the Puritans followed their Greeks inspirations and used climate theory to

justify the necessity for slavery in America. The rhetoric, the terms, were already well-established before the first slave ship landed on the New England coastline.

In addition to the Greek perspective the Puritans, as everyone knows from elementary school retellings of American history and stories of the first Thanksgiving, were fastidiously, even zealously, Christian. As the Greeks gave way seamlessly to the Romans as the purveyors and models of civilization, the idea of climate theory followed and was paired with the rise of a new religion: Christianity. In a similar rhetoric, multiple books of the New and Old Testament defended the core of climate theory and Aristotle—some races are superior to others and deserve to rule over those inferior races.[11] Despite these clearly racist ideas, Kendi makes it a distinct point to note that while "ethnic and religious and color prejudice existed in the ancient world," the "constructions of *races* [sic]—White Europe, Black Africa, for instance—did not, and therefore racists ideas did not."[12] So, how did early America go from the well-laid potential for explicit racism and racists ideas to the actual embrace of those ideologies?

Part of this evolution comes from the process of establishing a new territory, new colony, and new world. Though the Puritans purposefully defected to North America to escape multiple issues in England, they still brought ideas and customs familiar to them and used them to create their new world. In New England's first constitution of 1636, John Cotton mirrored the policies in England regarding slaves and captives by which "he legalized the enslavement of captives taken in just wars as well as 'such strangers as willingly selle [sic] themselves or are sold to us."[13]

Another part of this evolving idea and justification for slavery came from another Biblical source: the curse theory. Genesis recounts that "Negroes were the children of Ham, the son of Noah, and that they were singled out to be black as the result of Noah's curse, which produced Ham's colour [sic] and the slavery God inflicted upon his descendants."[14] Though initially this curse theory was not majority-popular compared to climate theory, public opinion shifted in the intensity of the medieval period to accept curse theory almost across the board. This newly empowered theory and its wide-spread public acceptance laid the foundation for "segregationist ideas and for racist notions of Black genetic inferiority."[15]

With the groundwork for racism already laid, the next jump was the explicit embrace of racist ideas, which came with scientific, anthropological backing in the 1400s. It was in a poem about hunting dogs that Frenchman Jacques de Brézé first gave the English world the term "race." Though the 1481 poem initially used the word to describe the different types of hunting dogs and their qualities, this term "race" was expanded to allow it to be applied to humans. Logically speaking, the desire to categorize all living things stems from the Enlightenment with scientific pursuits to understand everything in the natural and divine worlds. From this we see the development of ideologies like the Elizabethan Great Chain of Being; people wanted to categorize themselves and others the

same way Brézé categorized hunting dogs because, with this evidence, we could understand the world around us and our place in that world. Adding credence to this term was its official inclusion in the 1606 dictionary by another Frenchman, Jean Nicot. This entry on "race" told its readers that "race…means descent. […] it is said that a man, a horse, a dog or another animal is from good or bad race."[16] Unfortunately, this definition is a rather vague and malleable one; the lack of clarity meant that "the British were free to lump the multiethnic Native Americans and the multiethnic Africans into the same racial groups."[17]

On the heels of new dictionary entries and still squarely rooted in Enlightenment pursuits, another proverbial nail was struck in the coffin of African agency, identity, and freedom in the new world. According to Kendi's research, the first slave ship to set anchor in early America was not initially intended to do so. The Spanish slave ship *San Juan Bautista* left Angola with a cargo of 350 captives en route to Mexico were slavery was an established and flourishing practice. Due to pirate attacks and a shifted course, 20 of those Angolans were deposited in Jamestown and sold to governor George Yeardley. Perhaps only days later after this transaction, Yeardley convened a meeting of elected politicians with John Pory—the English translator of Leo the African's book and defender of curse theory—among them. Being a legislative leader in early America, Pory occupied the unique and privileged position to set the price of tobacco. Knowing the demands of growing a cash crop like tobacco, Pory also recognized the necessity for labor to grow and produce tobacco in the obsessed colonies. Seeing Yeardley's purchase and seizing the significance of free, forced labor, Pory led the charge in establishing slavery as a necessary, justified practice in colonial America.[18] Because racist ideas were already percolating, because the Bible modeled this practice, because Africans were scientifically understood to be genetically distinct from Whites and therefore, conceptually less human, because Africans were seen as animals that need a civilizing that could only be accomplished by the White man, racism's roots were firmly, deeply establish in colonial America, and those roots are still racking the foundations of our country to this day.

Gothicism, Gothic Horror, and Race

Part of the mental struggle of slavery and racism in America was [and still is] confronting the grotesque of their everyday lives—their reliance on the people they had systematically oppressed and made inhuman. There is a fitting analogy in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. As recounted by Leonard Cassuto in his book *The Inhuman Race*, Dillard writes about an encounter with a dead frog already in the process of decay and deflation. Seeing the "frog skin bag"[19] mid-way through its transformation from animate to inanimate horrifies and disgusts Dillard, leading her to see the key to horror in the transformation itself. Cassuto interprets this "eureka" thusly:

> The frog is objectified. Its life is literally sucked out of it, and a change of status consequently takes place: a living frog becomes frog skin sec. Animated life

becomes an inanimate thing. […] Such transformations are horrifying because they violate the understood assumption that fundamental category divisions are permanent. Transformations create anxiety by undermining the knowledge and belief that is built upon those divisions.[20]

In a banal occurrence of walking to a creek, Dillard experiences "the grotesque terror in everyday life,"[21] and her once concrete understanding of what is living and what is dead, the solid boundaries between things, suddenly becomes shaky and frightening. And this is the essence of the Gothic. If we consider the unfortunate frog and Dillard's revelation in tandem with slavery and race in America, this anecdote becomes more complicated and embodies even more so the Gothic soul.

In comparing humans to Dillard's frog, Cassuto contemplates what must happen mentally in order for a human to transform in the way the frog is understood to transform. This time however, instead of simply just being alive, we must grapple with the complexity of human hood and what it means to be human so that we may then contemplate what it means to be inhuman. For Cassuto, "the shift involved a figurative rather than a literal and permanent physical transformation; in the case of slavery, for example, person becomes property without undergoing corporeal change. […] Even when the change is physical and permanent (as, say, with cremation), it resonates with problematic liminality."[22] In order to objectify a race of people, Americans had to both acknowledge a natural human perception that see uniqueness among people, and then corrupt that by desperately grasping onto those shades of difference and stripping them down to an essential ambivalence. Only then could they cross the threshold of humanity and see African Americans as something Other, inhuman, and alien. America harnessed the Gothic trope of boundary crossing and transgression to transgress upon a race of people, robbing them of their identity and transforming them collectively, like the decaying frog, into something both everyday necessary and horrifying.[23]

This Gothic trope of boundary crossing is not to be taken lightly in any instance it appears. To cross a boundary is to question everything that is known and already established. This makes the Gothic revolutionary and terrifying. Americans crossed this boundary to justify slavery and racism as essential to the growth of society and the country but, in doing so, they forced African Americans to also cross a boundary as they now had to question their own identity and humanity while Americans simultaneously questioned black identity and humanity. Because African Americans became "the literal subject of the grotesque--as when one questions whether slaves are human--the threat to order becomes very serious. To view people as nonhuman is an open invitation to the most fundamental and enduring category problems."[24]

America created a racial, hierarchal problem by trying to understand where African Americans fit into white society, forcing an objectified race into "an ontological netherworld, part human and part thing."[25] If we return to Dillard and her frog, the frog experiences [and Dillard sees] a complete transformation—what was once living is

completely dead. The same concept cannot be applied to the African American race in the transgressed perception of white Americans. The slave, the black citizen, occupies the space of both "human" and "thing" where neither category triumphs over the other, both exist and persist in one person, in one race. Cassuto concisely emphasizes this point when he further refines the idea of this human objectification when he insists that "It might be more precise to call this 'attempted objectification,' a process in which a person is made to enter into the liminal space between human and thing, a grotesque space where the person's essential humanness is questioned but not altogether denied."[26]

As Browning and Picard quote Jacques Barzum in their book *Draculas, Vampires, and Other Undead Forms*,

> the term *race* [sic] was conceived to promote a sort of 'We' versus 'They' opposition between rivaling European peoples, and later it was used by scientists to classify humans as one 'race.' Thus, the term has no scientific value outside of this usage. [...] As a result, the inherent value placed upon the nonscientific use of the word *race* [sic], and its perpetuation by the public, contributes to the extreme difficulty with which people try to divorce themselves from the illogical and irrational use of the word, particularly in America. Even though America is a multiethnic, multicultural society, and has been since its beginning, the biased social definition of white society created two so-called races, privileging the 'white race' over those of the 'negro race.' When the socially defined 'negro race' was made to see and accept itself as inferior, only time and (re)education would help to overcome the challenges created by this biased definition.[27]

Race and Entertainment and Horror Expressions

The crux of this unit are the following questions: why and how does Horror and race intersect? Why is Horror perhaps the most authentic and liberating way to interrogate and discuss race? What does the Horror genre offer the Black experience that no other genes do?

"I doubt if there exists any more valuable record for the study of the social history of the Negro in American than the naive reflection of American social attitudes and their changes in the literary treatment of Negro life and character."[28] Alan Locke's musing from 1926 is just as true today in an examination of the relationship of African Americans to the entertainment industry as it was before Alan Locke lived. In an almost Orwellian development where those in power pit the poor against the poor to distract from the powerful continuing to have everything and be corrupt, the influx of European immigrants in the early half of the nineteenth century galvanized another level of racism and further entrenched the hatred of black Americans into the country's ideology and identity. As social and economic lines were drawn and redrawn, the explicit racism of the immigrants' new country was adopted along with the dress and language. To further this show of racism, entertainment for the masses bottomed out into popular minstrel shows

that represented a bastardized Commedia dell'Arte. The stock characters of the minstrel show cemented the stereotype of the bumbling black slave who spoke improperly, dressed in rags, and danced stupidly with the abandonment of a child. The cheerful, child-like characters of "Daddy" Rice, Mammy, Yaller Gal, and Zip Coon epitomized the subservient black character who did not want to cause trouble, strove to please and entertain his white "massers." and could not understand the problem of racism and the politics of race and slavery.[29]

Fast-forward from the stage to the silver screen and we see the relationship of Horror and Race as still one of covering, hiding. If we look back to the burgeoning film industry, at a time in American when slavery was "over" but its echoes of segregation were not, we see African American moviegoers, in their separate theatres, ingesting the same entertainment as white audiences. In a distorted way of thinking, in their *separate* spaces African Americans still *equally* attended the movies and found characters to relate to; they "identified with their heroes regardless of who they might be. Despite the social restrictions that were placed upon the 'negro race' as a means of so-called self-preservation by the 'white race,' at the movies, a 'suspension of disbelief' still had to prevail if entertainment was to take place. Therefore, 'ethnicity,' although lacking, in terms of diversity, in the characters generally portrayed on screen, was not a consideration of African American viewers because they accepted on screen that a hero was a hero and that a villain was a villain regardless of genre or theme."[30] Though tempting to read this analysis as idyllic because it seems like we can just enjoy the movies regardless of how characters are portrayed, it demonstrates the ignorance bred in segregation and objectification and the tyranny of under representation.

This ignorance was further enhanced and embraced with the premier of *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. It was Hollywood's first feature-length film and was based off the novel *The Clansmen* by Thomas Dixon. In it, racist tropes were solidified in the visual medium that "depicted Reconstruction as an era of corrupt Black supremacists petrifying innocent Whites."[31] [32] [33] Just in time to replace the fading minstrel shows in the entertainment business of oppressing Blacks, the movie industry, and *Birth of a Nation* in particular, signaled a new era in a greater mass consumption [and justification of] racism and racist ideas in America. Indeed, Black communities and activists had to fight against the *Birth of Nation* legacy that was viewed by millions of Whites as the TRUTH and was responsible for an almost impenetrable wall of racism that "enabled millions of Americans to feel redeemed in their lynchings and segregation policies" and even "revitalized the Ku Klux Klan."[34] Black protest against the lies of *Birth of a Nation* existed with the movie's conception, but it was in the 1960s, uplifted by the pride of James Brown's and Curtis Mayfield's songs,[35] that Blacks pushed back even harder against racism in the movie industry and "began to notice that they were not present in the majority of movies they frequented. And those films that did include them did so in token roles or gave them exaggerated characteristics that tended to underscore the perceived negative qualities of African Americans."[36]

It was through the Horror genre that the response to this stereotyping rocked America in significant ways. To return briefly to the point about the early African American cinema experience of no black representation and seeing the hero simply as a hero, I think this is where we might find a silver lining to that statement and find support in why the Horror genre is *the* genre for this racial conversation. In Horror, taking from almost standard Gothic conventions, the use of stock characters and well-established tropes where the hero is the hero, the villain is the villain we, the audience, do not have to spend more time on that establishment; we are now mentally free to see what more subtle purpose those tropes and stock characters are going to serve in the course of the movie or text. In this way, black directors, writers, and actors could use horror—already transgressive, already thematically established—to send a greater message and begin a bigger, deeper, and more painful conversation about race in America in a variety of genres. The Horror genre is also *the* genre for this conversation because of how the Black experience historically and presently embodies the characteristics of horror. Arguably, the association of the Black experience and representation and Horror is so connected because Blacks have lived in this genre since their first forced steps on American soil, and this is why the fate of Black characters in Horror movies and the recent surge in critically-acclaimed Black directors and actors in the Horror industry is so crucial and so appropriate as a vehicle for social, racial protest.

This is not to say, of course, that Horror did not have issues in how its Black characters were/are written. In much of the older Horror movies, Black was the symbol for all that was evil and monstrous, the thing that terrorized the main [White] character. If a Black character was not the representation of a monster, the character was a sidekick, tending to the needs of the main [White] character or simply providing a moment of comic relief before becoming the first sacrificial lamb to the Horror death counts. Though it may seem like a positive action to have a Black character close to a White main character in a movie, this is still very problematic representation because, as *Still Crew* writer Marcus Benjamin attests, "When a character exists in support of someone else's story, we don't see them as fully functioning human beings. If a character just spits one-liners and isn't given any true depth, they really serve no purpose to this thing I'm watching and may as well be faceless."[37] Without the autonomy and character development of a protagonist title, Black characters in Horror still lived the racism in the movie and Horror industries. Marcus Benjamin sums up this cultural issue succinctly:

> These ideas and interpretations drill their way in our subconscious like an earwig and lays eggs. Keith David, featured in *Horror Noire*, tells a story of a white guy calling him a "pimp" in the '70s all because black men were constantly portrayed as pimps during that era. The guy meant no ill will towards David, but the anecdote shows just how powerful a movie can be. To one man, a pimp is a cool thing. But for the other guy in that equation, it was another day of being associated with a harmful stereotype. And the ramifications of these harmful portrayals on film have far reaching consequence in the real world.[38]

A pioneering retelling of *Dracula* is one such instance of Horror, specifically, being utilized to expose America to the racial divide, the oppressive rhetoric, and the racist ideas so long held. In an essay collection, Paul R. Lehman and John Edgar Browning begin with the transformation of *Dracula* into the hit 1972 *Blacula* as an inciting evolution because *Dracula* itself, being about something "fundamentally archetypal," allows it to be filled, changed, and repurposed for other conversations. For Lehman and Browning, *Dracula* "taps into issues central to our cultural identity and provides a forum in which attitudes and values that both divide and unite us can be explored and coped with in relative safety."[39] Transforming the classic *Dracula* into a Blaxplotation movie embodies particular rhetoric. According to Harry M. Benshoff, "The label 'blaxploitation horror films' thus signifies a historically specific subgenre that potentially explores (rather than simply exploits) race and race consciousness as core structuring principles[40]." Though maybe at the time simply a way to get more Black actors in movies, film critics look back at the Blaxploitation films of this era, specifically a film like *Blacula*, because these films represent the battleground of racial stereotyping by the masses and the attempt for those being stereotyped to overcome and re-write those representations. In his *Guardian* article about *Horror Noire*, Hubert Adjei-Kontoh cites horror writer, academic, and producer Tananarive Due, who captures this contention: "Black characters were put in these boxes, and the roles were so stereotypical. […] However, to see *Blacula* stand up to the police to was empowering. What blaxploitation gave us was visibility, the blaxploitation films were for us, and sometimes, they were by us."[41] So, it is perhaps easy to see that in adapting Stoker's novel and adding a racial message delivered by black actors, *Blacula* was revolutionary because it allowed America to see (i.e., re-examine) Africans, African Americans, and a unified American society through Afrocentric entertainment."[42]

In that vein, and despite issues of representation and stereotyping, Horror is still an essential medium for Black writers, actors, and directors, a relationship that has come into the spotlight recently with Jordan Peele's movies. Though Peele has earned mainstream admiration and acclaim for his Horror movies starring Black actors, he is tapping into a long-held tradition of marrying Horror and the Black experience. Andrew Dix's piece in *The Conversation* reminds readers that this connection goes all the way back to the first slave ships that landed in America: "From the arrival of the first slave ships on the East Coast, African Americans have often fashioned their experiences into narratives of horror. Instead of reporting the enjoyment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, they have testified to a Gothic fate of enslavement and violence."[43] Director Xavier Burgin of the celebrated documentary *Horror Noire* that tracks the evolution of Black representation in Horror movies further augments the important connection between Blacks and Horror by looking back at the White versus Black reception to *Birth of a Nation*, asserting that "for white people, *Birth of a Nation* is beautiful and prideful, and it was shown at the White House;" however, "for black people, it is a horror movie."[44] Because of the history of Blacks in America, is it any wonder that Horror appeals to the community? "Far from appearing somewhat fantastical," Dix continues,

"the genre oddly holds out instead the promise of documentary accuracy."[45] And this possibility of "documentary accuracy" is what allows for eventual subversion and the ability for Black writers, actors, and directors to exploit a shift in the power balance of historical reflection and the way audiences empathize with characters. It forces the viewer to confront uncomfortable, and sometimes unconscious, perspectives. By example, film scholar Barry Langford suggests that "The monster exists to teach an object (social) lesson of some kind."[46] This question makes Andrew Dix wonder, and should also make us wonder, "what we are taught by the figure of the monster in horror movies directed by African Americans?"[47] This is why films like *Blacula* and now *Get Out* are so crucial; they ask viewers to see another perspective, to empathize with a character who looks different than them, and that empathy is what can actually subvert and change racist ideas.[48]

Lessons

The activity ideas listed below are categorized by the four units that comprise the Gothic Literature curriculum at AHS. They are as follows: Unit I—the Foundations of the Gothic genre; Unit 2—Detective Fiction; Unit 3—Psychological Thriller; and Unit 4—Modern and Contemporary Horror. The overarching inspiration for this unit and corresponding activities is to provide the teacher with a few ways to discuss Otherness in Gothic literature with a more specific focus on using race and gender as the inroads.

1. The Foundations of the Gothic Genre

For this activity in the early part of the curriculum, I want to focus on the Gothic conventions that promote and explore the idea of Otherness and why that topic is taboo, frightening, etc. When we look at literary characters in general, we often ask our classes to define how the authors set tone and moods about the character, how they characterized their protagonists and antagonists, and how they create sympathy, fear, anger, etc for those characters. In our case, and in the Gothic case, we want to explore and highlight how authors create sympathy and fear for Other characters to subvert expectations and traditional literary messages/themes; or, we want to explore how authors create sympathy and fear for "regular" characters and then what happens when that character is subvert and their gender or race is changed.

Activities for this unit could start with the teacher devising a way to discuss and analyze identity, asking students to explore how authors make characters believable. In another activity, students could study various political cartoons that depict other races and ethnicities specifically with the lens of *Frankenstein*. A more significant activity is a paring between *Frankenstein* and the book *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein*. In this novel, author Kiersten White writes from the perspective of Elizabeth Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein's ill-fated and mostly silent wife. In the original novel and the 1831 edition, Elizabeth begins life in poverty, but her beauty saves her and brings her into the fold of the

Frankenstein family with intentions that Victor and Elizabeth will be raised as siblings and eventually marry. Using a gendered Other as the focus, the teacher would explore how Elizabeth's perspective subverts the original story and the characterization of Victor.

2. Detective Fiction

There are a few possibilities to examine racism and representation in detective stories like Sherlock Holmes. In the realm of comparative analysis, I have used *The Hound of the Baskervilles* original with the episode called "Hounded" from the CBS show *Elementary* and the episode "The Hounds of Baskerville" from the BBC show *Sherlock.* I have used all three for a paper assignment comparing the choices made with Sherlock and Watson's characters as well as the hound, the setting, and even the patterns of action of the detective genre. For the purposes of this unit, it may be most fruitful to focus on Sherlock and Watson's characters more closely and exclusively. In the case of representation, the teacher can call attention to the fact that in every iteration of Sherlock Holmes specifically, Sherlock is always played by a middle-aged, white, typically British male.[49] This is true of the many variations on *Hound*. Diversity comes with Watson's character, specifically in that the CBS show chose to change Dr. John Watson to Dr. *Joan* Watson, played by Lucy Liu. This detail could even inspire an additional paper or project possibility of female and even Asian-American representation in film and TV and what it means to have John become Joan and have Joan be Asian-American.

Using *Hound of the Baskervilles* again, there is an interesting moment in the first chapter of the story when Dr. Mortimer, who brings the case of the Baskervilles to Watson and Sherlock, confesses to Sherlock,

> You interest me very much, Mr. Holmes. I had hardly expected so dolichocephalic a skull or such well-marked supra-orbital development. Would you have any objection to my running my finger along your parietal fissure? A cast of your skull, sir, until the original is available, would be an ornament to any anthropological museum. It is not my intention to be fulsome, but I confess that I covet your skull.[50]

Besides being a strange thing to say to a person you've just met—and the teacher can have fun with this perhaps by starting of the class by randomly complimenting student's skulls, hairlines, or the width between their eyes—this also is a reference to a popular pseudoscience of the time. The teacher can introduce students to the concepts of phrenology and physiognomy,[51] sharing some historical information and images of the old textbooks easily found in Google. I have also had great success with a physiognomy activity with the students where I give them a checklist with a variety of categories. Students then analyze each other and choose the options in each category that fits their partner. Then, I give them handouts with "translations" of what those qualities mean. Though the Sherlock text mentions phrenology specifically, I choose to go with physiognomy just so students are awkwardly touching each other's heads while not being sure if something is a divot or a bump.

Once they have completed their analyses, we discuss why this might have been considered a science in its time, and what they make of any descriptions that fit their personalities. Then, I ask them to consider what the practical applications could be. This is where there can be a more purposeful conversation about these pseudoscience's role in racism and xenophobia in the 18ᵗʰ and 19ᵗʰ centuries. This could be turned into a longer research project.

3. Modern and Contemporary Horror

Get Out is the inspiration for this unit. The critical acclaim for this movie and the undeniable fact that it comes from a Black mind and stars a Black cast is connected to a long, subversive history that has attempted to shift the rhetoric of what Black artists are capable of while combatting the foundational racist rhetoric that has shaped this country from the beginning. I think the excitement for this movie and the flagship it has become in the mainstream entertainment industry captures Kendi's overarching idea that "Black Americans' history of oppression made Black opportunities—not Black people—inferior."[52]

Get Out provides a wonderful opportunity for comparative analysis to these more traditional horror films. To tease out the [lack of] representation by a racial or gendered Other, the teacher can start off by instructing students in recognizing horror tropes and examining different mainstream examples. The teacher should call attention to the race and gender of the characters and considering who survives, who dies first, who dies most violently, who deserts the group, who is the leader, and so on, especially as these movies juxtapose against traditional horror films.[53] Marcus Benjamin points out a few stereotypes that are specific to the conversation of race. In Hollywood, we see archetypes like "magical negro," the "supportive best friend of the main character," the "comic relief," as well as "sacrificial lambs for the white characters and the "first to die" trope.[54] As the teacher asks students to be mindful of the relegation of Black characters, and therefore actors, to these non-developed stereotypes, the teacher wants to direct the conversation to how to grapple with the meaning of this stereotypical assignment. Another quote from Marcus Benjamin is especially helpful and would be an asset to a class conversation:

> When you're not surrounded by people of races other than your own, you don't develop the empathy gene for them. How can you begin to comprehend how a black person feels about blackface if you don't have any black people in your circle to tell you? Or if you've didn't grow up with any black friends? Or if you grew up in a racist city or town? Despite all your efforts to learn, you'll likely have a cultural blindspot or two. Similarly, when the history of cinema is filled with blackface or monsters and gigantic apes as stand-ins for black people, that means entire generations grew up believing black people were always lesser.[55]

Benjamin's point here is important because, while there is lauding of a film like *Get Out* and the way race is portrayed in the story and by the actors chosen, there are still modern and contemporary films that perpetuate those non-dimensional stereotypes. Hubert Adjei-

Kontoh's article points out that the popular Netflix movie *Bird Box* featured the "sacrificial negro" stereotype with the Lil Rel Howery's character, Charlie, "A black man [who] sacrifices himself for the white women and two kids."[56]

For comparison practices and assignments, the teacher can use *Dracula* as foundational reading, then pair it with film re-tellings with a specific focus on the *Blacula* adaptation as way to explore race in addition to class and ethnic oppression also explored in the original book and early adaptations. Other possibilities of genre progress in racial portrayals are Bernard Rose's *Candyman*, Rusty Cundieff's *Tales From the Hood*, Wes Craven's *People Under the Stairs*, and Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou*. According to Adjei-Kontoh, "Cundieff and Craven are praised for not only providing roles for black protagonists, but also for commenting on the dual horrors of police brutality and suburban racism as discriminatory societal forces. *Eve's Bayou*, though not considered a typical horror film per se, contains fearful elements of America's history and was a rare film directed by a black woman."[57] It may be interesting to pair Bernard Rose's *Candyman* specifically with *Blacula* as a way to delve into what many horror film scholars conceptually categorize as "Blacks in Horror Films" versus "Black Horror Films." Ashlee Blackwell provides a helpful guide comparing these two ideas with *Candyman* and *Blacula*: "Black *in* [sic] Horror Films make suggestions about where an audience places 'the horrifying,' usually within the racial Other (**Candyman** [sic]). *Black* [sic] Horror Films depict horrifying social inequalities and personas as monstrous, with Black centralized protagonists unmasking racist tropes and exercising empowerment (**Blacula** [sic])."[58] Students could view all Horror films this way, keep a running chart of which falls into these categories, the create a larger class project or individual paper about the effects of embodying either category.

If teachers are interested in taking a gendered AND racial approach to the Horror unit, Ellen E. Jones' article in BBC online provides a wonderfully fruitful starting place, with references again to *Blacula*, by examining Octavia Spencer's character in the movie *Ma*. Jones discusses the mythological figure of the "mammy"—the doting, older, usually plump and jovial, Black woman who looked after white children and defended them against all threats—and how modern films like *Ma* are trying to unpack and subvert that character, attempting to speak to the Black *female* experience in the Horror and film industries.[59]

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Appendix A—Implementing District Standards

For the Common Care ELA standards, this unit addresses reading literature standards 2,3, and 4 as the crux of anything a teacher might do with this unit. RL standard 2 is concerned with identifying and analyzing two or more themes over the course of a text and how those central ideas interact with one another. Standards 3 and 4 ask students to interpret and author's choice of developing a story arc as well as specific words used and their connotations. This is especially appropriate if a teacher wants to delve into ideas of "identity" or interrogate what is "human" or "monster" in various text examples. For more in-depth assignments, teachers will employ Reading Informational Texts standard 7 that prompts students to integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information in different media formats and words, especially as they attempt to address a particular question or solve a problem. Finally, there have been a few suggestions for written analyses in this unit; this speaks to Writing standards 2A and 2B specifically that outline how to organize complex ideas and information that builds on itself as well as simply developing a topic via thoroughly-selected facts, details, quotes, and so on.

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[1] Benjamin, 2019

[2] https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-origins-of-the-gothic

[3] Of note, the stirrings of the French Revolution and the American Revolution

[4] For additional characteristics, Alison Rudd quotes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*: "Sedgwick provides an anatomy of general and specific Gothic conventions, which include: discontinuous narratives; the incorporation of stories within stories; multiple narrators; framing devices, such as uncovered manuscripts and interloped histories. She see the Gothic as preoccupied with themes such as: sleep-like or dream-like states; subterranean spaces; live burial; doubling; the discovery of lost family ties; the possibility of incest; unnatural echoes or silences; ineligible writing; the unspeakable; and the effects of guilt, dreams or apparitions from the past" (Rudd 2010, 2)

[5] Kendi, 2016, 10

[6] Kendi, 2016, 16

[7] Kendi, 2016, 17

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] On page 17, Kendi cites 1 Corinthians and St. Paul's three-tiered hierarchy of slave relations "heavenly master (top), earthly master (middle), enslaved (bottom). We see the double-slavery of the African race—to God and to their white masters.

[12] Kendi, 2016, 18

[13] Ibid. It is interesting to note the language here—even in 1636 a slave was already subjected to being a pawn in the economy of slavery without much hope to defend themselves or get out of slavery. If a person is sold to another, their life is already forfeit.

[14] Kendi, 2016, 21. To explore the curse further, here is a helpful citation: Felicia R. Lee, "From Noah's Curse to Slavery's Rationale," *The New York Times.com*, accessed Dec 2, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/01/arts/from-noah-s-curse-to-slavery-s-rationale.html

[15] Ibid.

[16] Kendi, 2016, 36

[17] Ibid.

[18] Paraphrase of Kendi, 2016, 38

[19] Cassuto 1997, 2

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Cassuto 1997, 3

[23] In Cassuto's words, he claims that "Perception is the issue, in other words, not philosophical or even biological reality, for objectification is in the eye of the beholder. As such, racial objectification is the last step in a process of differentiation. People first perceive difference among themselves, and then they perceive race on the basis of that difference. [...] When the difference polarize, as they have tended to in American experience, human objectification follows" (4).

[24] Cassuto 1997, 11

[25] Cassuto 1997, 16

[26] Ibid.

[27] Browning and Picart 2009, 21

[28] Gross 1966, 1-2

[29] Kendi, 2016, 170-1

[30] Browning and Picart 2009, 22

[31] Kendi, 2016, 306

[32] Hubert Adjei-Kontoh's piece in the online *Guardian* builds on this idea of *Birth of a Nation* "*Birth of a Nation,* of course, is the prime example of this mentality – the white lost causers 'save' white women from the hands of rapacious black men. Academic and writer Robin R Means Coleman, whose book the film is based on, argues that this was a way that Hollywood 'use[d] its messaging to create fear around black people, especially fear around black men'. Burgin says that 'for white people, *Birth of a Nation* is beautiful and prideful, and it was shown at the White House' – but 'for black people, it is a horror movie'. 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/07/horror-noire-documentary-black-horror.

[33] Another worth-while point about representation in its early, heavily-stereotyped adaptations comes from Marcus Benjamin, who emphasizes "When you're not surrounded by people of races other than your own, you don't develop the empathy gene for them. How can you begin to comprehend how a black person feels about blackface if you don't have any black people in your circle to tell you? Or if you've didn't grow up with any black friends? Or if you grew up in a racist city or town? Despite all your efforts to learn, you'll likely have a cultural blindspot or two. Similarly, when the history of cinema is filled with blackface or monsters and gigantic apes as stand-ins for black people, that means entire generations grew up believing

black people were always lesser." 2019. https://stillcrew.com/horror-noire-a-history-of-black-horror-shudder-7010f71272ca.

[34] Kendi, 2016, 306

[35] Browning and Picart cite, as examples, "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" and "I don't want you to give me nothing. Open the door, I'll get it myself" by James Brown and "Keep on Pushin'" and "People Get Ready" by Curtis Mayfield and The Impressionists. 2009, 22.

[36] Browning and Picart 2009, 22

[37] Benjamin, 2019

[38] Ibid.

[39] This comes from the Lehman and Browning article "The *Dracula* and the *Blacula* (1972) Cultural Revolution in the anthology *Draculas, Vampires, and Other Undead Forms,* page 33.

[40] Benshoff, 2000, 32

[41] Adjei-Kontoh, 2019

[42] Lehman and Browning 2009, 23

[43] Dix, 2019. Dix provides a few interest examples of the Horror rhetoric from literature: "Little wonder, then, that in his speech 'The Ballot or the Bullet' (1964), the radical black activist Malcolm X said: 'I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.' Or that in her novel *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison paints a nightmarish picture of: 'Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children.'"

[44] Adjei-Kontoh, 2019

[45] Ibid.

[46] Dix, 2019

[47] Ibid.

[48] Marcus Benjamin in his *Still Crew* article discusses a few experiences of watching *Get Out* in theatres. First, he summarizes an experience by Tananarive Due: "Professor Due talks about watching *Get Out* in a packed theater while the white man next to hear clutched his seat and rooted for Chris to survive.: He then shifts to his own experience: "When I went to see the flick, there was a group of white women behind me who had the same reaction I did when the cop car showed up and it looked like Chris would either be carried away in cuffs or worse. Anyone seeing that movie got to be in Chris' shoes and by proxy, know just a little bit of what it looks like to be a black man in America. Even if it's just for two hours. Empathy is a powerful tool." 2019

[49] I am discounting variations of detective stories that are inspired by the early detectives like Sherlock and, instead, focusing only on the named Sherlock character is modern adaptations.

[50] Doyle, 1902, chapter 1

[51] Phrenology is the science based on the measurement and study of the myriad bumps and valleys of the human skull to determine potential mental characteristics. Physiognomy is the science that studies a person's facial features to predict a person's mental/moral character.

[52] Kendi, 2016, 11

[53] There are various sources online that have tracked this information, like: https://wheresthejump.com/horror-movie-statistics/;

[54] For a few examples of actual films that have these stereotyped characters, here is Benjamin's full quote: "There are several stereotypes that can be commonly found in Hollywood. There's the "magical negro" e.g., Scatman Crothers in *The Shining* and the "supportive best friend of the main character" e.g., Elise Neal in *Scream 2*. Don't forget about the "comic relief" e.g., Kelly Rowland in *Freddy v Jason*. Black people are also made to be sacrificial lambs for the white characters, e.g., damn near any black character in a *Friday the 13th* flick. And of course there's the age old trope of "first to die." The list of stereotypical roles is longer than a line at a grocery store before a snow storm. You could throw a dart at a horror movie and there's a good chance you'll run up against at least one stereotypical black role." 2019

[55] Benjamin, 2019

[56] Adjei-Kontoh, 2019

[57] Ibid.

[58] Blackwell, 2015

[59] For Jones' full article, follow this link: http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190530-rom-mammy-to-ma-hollywoods-favourite-racist-stereotype.