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**The Thesis Committee for Laura Alyssa Springman
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**Haunted Homes and Restless Ghosts: (In)Visible Structures of Power
and Violence in American Haunted House Films**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Curran Nault, Supervisor

Charles Ramirez Berg

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Laura Alyssa Springman

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2021

Dedication

To my parents, whose endless love and support has acted like a warm blanket against this often cold world, and who have always reminded me of how far I've come and how far I can go.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisor Curran Nault, whose invaluable support and expertise made this project possible. Our conversations never failed to inspire me and provided insightful feedback, encouraging me to consider new approaches and always foreground intersectionality. Your positivity, empathy, and dedication to inclusive scholarship has been an inspiration for both my academic work and daily life. In addition, this thesis would not have been possible without your Fall 2019 Colloquium presentation, which introduced me to the concept of necropolitics.

Thank you to Charles Ramirez Berg for your extensive genre knowledge and always including words of encouragement. Your own scholarship has been a great inspiration to this project and your detailed feedback has been enlightening and greatly strengthened my work.

Thank you to my cohort for always being there and providing a space I could turn to for advice and questions. Although we have had to be socially distanced, our Zoom meetings and park gatherings provided reassurance whenever I experienced doubt or felt stuck. Thank you for letting me brainstorm and talk through my various ideas as I worked on this project.

Thank you to my parents for letting me ramble endlessly about ghosts and death, for sitting through multiple viewings of the same horror movies, and for being a sounding board for ideas you were unfamiliar with. In addition, this project would not be possible without our family Saturday morning Mystery Science Theater 3000 marathons, which

first introduced me to horror. And thank you to my sister, for recommending non-horror television to watch when all the death became too much.

To my friends Mallory, Shannon, and Kiersten, thank you for never getting annoyed when the question “what are you doing today” was inevitably always answered with “working on my thesis.”

Finally, thank you to BTS for being my soundtrack throughout the writing and editing process. A year spent writing about horror and violence needed moments of joy and hope, and your music was immensely helpful during this process.

Abstract

Haunted Homes and Restless Ghosts: (In)Visible Structures of Power and Violence in American Haunted House Films

Laura Alyssa Springman, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

Supervisor: Curran Nault

This thesis explores depictions of suffering in American haunted house horror films and considers how hauntings can draw attention to systems of power and violence in our real world. Through textual analysis of *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), *THIRTEEN Ghosts* (2001), and *The Amityville Horror* (2005), I argue that an intersectional, necropolitical lens sheds light on the ways systems of violence, death, and memory operate in the American context of the horror film. Drawing from the insights of Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, in conversation with scholarship on hauntings, death, and the horror genre, I consider the ways violence functions in regard to both who is depicted as suffering, but just as importantly who is not. In doing so, I foreground the complex manner in which these films can both victimize the living, while also re-subjugating the dead. Further, I interrogate how real-world instances of violence in and around the home are made both visible and invisible within these limited white depictions

of haunted homes. Taken together, my four case studies demonstrate the ways in which ghosts in haunted house horror films can unearth real-world instances of past and present American violence.

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Introduction

In August of 1957 a couple and their three children moved into their new suburban home in Levittown, Pennsylvania.¹ The Myers family and others like them were pursuing promises of prosperity made by private companies and government propaganda during the war. This image of post-war prosperity was represented with the figure of the single-family home in the suburbs.² And for the first-time in history, urban and rural dwellers were outnumbered by suburban residents.³ However, what greeted this family was not prosperity, domestic bliss, or the imagined American Dream. Instead, the family experienced terror and trauma. After moving in, Daisy Myers received threatening phone calls, their food deliveries disappeared, they were haunted by disturbing images, fires on their lawn, and rocks thrown at their windows.⁴ The Clark family, who, six years prior had excitedly moved into the growing Chicago suburb of Cicero, had similar experiences.⁵ They too suffered fires and rocks thrown at them, trauma, and violence. And again, the same thing occurred years later in 1987 in the suburb.⁶

These real life events, when phrased like above, probably seem like the plots of haunted house horror movies. Instead they are true stories, harrowing tales of racist violence during the twentieth century. The families discussed were all Black families that had moved into all-white suburbs and there are countless more tales than just these three. The American Dream promised

¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2004), 218.

² Cohen, 73.

³ Cohen, 122.

⁴ "Whites Riot in Response to Arrival of First African American Family in Levittown, PA," The History Engine, 2015, <https://historyengine.richmond.edu/episodes/view/5272>.

⁵ Michael C. Reiff, "Peril, Imprisonment, and the Power of Place in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*," in *Dark Forces at Work: Essays on Social Dynamics and Cinematic Horrors*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, 2019, 247.

⁶ Reiff, 247.

in the post-war era was clearly not for everyone in America, but rather for white, middle-class, heterosexual families. These communities were designed to be white through practices such as redlining and succeeded in this endeavor, as is evidenced with the term that is often synonymous with suburbia: “white flight.”⁷ The image of the idyllic American Dream works to hide this dark reality, to ignore those who were excluded and forcefully pushed out from these communities.

As I watched haunted house movie after haunted house movie for this project, I couldn't help but think of these stories that were made visible to me through what had been rendered invisible. The stories we see most often in haunted house horror films are the tales of unsuspecting white families, as seen in popular films like *The Amityville Horror* (1979) and *Poltergeist* (1982). The suburban settings depicted in these films are in conversation with the real histories of the Myers and Clark families. For these Black families it was not ghosts that terrorized and haunted them, forcing them to flee after just days or months. Instead, the ones responsible were humans, their white neighbors in fact. And yet, even if it may not seem like it at first, there are connections between the stories depicted in haunted house films and the real suburban horrors of the past and present. They are stories of fear, violence, and the American Dream, forcing us to consider ideas of belonging, safety, and systems of violence. By putting the two in conversation, it becomes clear that the real-life horror stories located in the home and suburbs are obfuscated in the depictions of predominantly white families in haunted house horror films. Yet it is in their obscurity that they are visible, haunting these horror films like ghosts.

American culture has a complicated relationship with both the home and horror. The notion of the American Dream relies on meritocratic notions of success, perpetuating the lie that anyone can succeed if they just work hard enough. Privileged parties are led to believe, that, one

⁷ For more work on the process of manufacturing these spaces see Hayden (2002) and Rothstein (2017).

day, anyone can have a house in the suburbs and a nuclear family. The reality of course, is far more complex and relies heavily on often invisible and visible structures of power that dictate who can live where, what that life looks like, and further, if one deserves to live at all. Built on a foundation of white supremacy, the American Dream and its prominent symbol, the suburban home, are structures of exclusion rather than the inclusive social mobility it purports. Horror introduces the ghostly figures of American's violent past and present that many would rather keep buried elsewhere, and depicts these ideas through allegorical figures like vengeful poltergeists, animated corpses, cannibalistic families, immortal killers and more. Drawing from these attributes of the horror genre, my work explores the insights we can gain from adopting a necropolitical lens with which to analyze American haunted houses. I consider how these depictions parallel the real-world violence many Americans face, and emphasize the importance of taking on an intersectional approach to horror films. The American home has always been a site of horror, both in reality and in film. As such, it encourages vital conversations about boundaries, both in terms of identity markers that separate "us" from "them," but also in terms of physical walls that separate inside from outside.

The horror film has long endeavored to challenge notions of safety and comfort, pinning its sights on locations considered to be familiar and secure only to horrify and disturb audiences. The horror film's growing popularity paralleled another rising star in the American landscape, the suburban home. Taking advantage of this new space, horror made the home uncanny, both familiar yet not, resulting in unease and promoting anxiety. Classics like *Psycho* (1960), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Halloween* (1978), while not particularly focused on the home itself, take place in, and challenge our perceptions of home, family, and safety. One popular approach to depicting an unsafe home comes in the form of the

haunted house. Unlike films like *Psycho* or *Halloween* however, the danger doesn't come from outside the home, encroaching on an otherwise safe environment, haunted house movies reimagine the home as the danger itself. This raises the question, how does one escape said violence if it's located in the very same space that we would normally seek out to find safety? Drawing from the long tradition of the Gothic, the haunted house, as depicted in films like *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), *THIR13EN Ghosts* (2001), and *The Amityville Horror* (2005), complicate binary understandings of life and death, past and present, safety and danger, family and stranger. The haunted house is a liminal space where violence is commonplace, thus facilitating a necropolitical reading of the genre.

These films fall into two time periods that both included a recession or other economic instability, the late 1970s/early 1980s and the early 2000s. During these periods, many questions were raised about the attainability of the American Dream and the viability of the American economy. In addition, these were times either during or after moments of political and social unrest. Whether it was the Civil Rights movement and its conservative backlash, or the new landscape of America post-9/11, these periods were haunted by turmoil, inequality, violence, and consolidations of power. It is always vital to consider film's contexts, but particularly horror, as the genre is a visual reflection of a specific cultural moment's fears (Skal, 1993; Lowenstein, 2005; Phillips, 2005; Grant, 2018). Haunted house films specifically, engage directly with history and things long buried, bringing them to the surface and demanding our attention and action. Moreover, the American home stands for more than just a roof over one's head, it is a cultural symbol of the American Dream, of the American capitalist system, and while often forgotten or erased, the American suburban home stands for white flight, redlining, and stands *on* stolen land.

I am exploring “othering” in American haunted house horror films during the two time periods mentioned above, the late 1970s/early 1980s, and the early 2000s. The research questions that guide me include: How might necropolitical theory provide a useful lens through which to analyze how power is enacted in haunted house movies? How can one put haunted houses in conversation with death worlds as discussed by necropolitical theorist Achille Mbembe? How might who is punished, and who is protected, be interpreted in terms of an intersectional interplay of class, race, and gender differences? What role does capitalist ideology and the American Dream play in these films? For all that horror is related to death and killing, there is little scholarship that connects necropolitical theory to horror films. I would also like to add to the more limited scholarship on class in horror, challenging the often-invisible nature of class in American culture. Finally, I want to intervene in horror scholarship that often takes a singular focus of analysis, instead, foregrounding how these power dynamics and identity markers inform one another. In this way I am taking inspiration from Kimberlé Crenshaw and her work on intersectionality, emphasizing the importance of “account[ing] for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.”⁸

A vital aspect of the scholarship I wish to emulate is the inclusion of the author’s subjectivity. I think it is vital to name my position as a white American academic and the ways this influences my work and my place in society. With this positionally I want to clearly name that I applying scholarship from an African post-colonial theorist to a genre of media that is often extremely white. My work seeks to use the invaluable insights put forth by Achille Mbembe, put it in conversation with other scholars of death and horror, and consider the ways violence functions in regard to both who is depicted on screen, but also very importantly who is not. My

⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039>, 1245.

work explores how these depictions speak to a reality that has a long history of erasing and subjugating people of color and their experiences with violence and exclusion. In addition, while the vast majority of these films are white-centered, they are in many ways speaking directly, or peripherally, to race and colonization. I endeavor to name whiteness and remove it from the unnamed center. By making visible the frequently invisible nature of whiteness I hope to shed light on the structuring and violent nature of whiteness in film and reality. I do not find it particularly productive to keep reality and fiction in silos, rather I seek to understand the ways these two influence each other and how they overlap. My work engages with, and adds to, scholarship that refuses to see media content as neutral or completely removed from the real present and past.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis intervenes in, and pulls from, a variety of literatures, but, broadly speaking, my work intervenes in horror and cultural studies in the mold of the Birmingham school, interrogating the hegemonic implications of these films. I am drawing from the Center's history of interdisciplinary work that centers questions of meaning and ideology, and interrogates structures of class, race, and gender. My work draws on haunted house scholarship, studies of spectrality and hauntology, and necropolitical theory that itself intervenes in biopower studies. These bodies of literature can be simplified by placing them into two main categories, horror genre studies with a special emphasis on identity in horror, and literature on death with a special emphasis on necropolitics, hauntings, and spectrality. By bringing these bodies of literature together, my work stresses how these films can be grounded in lived realities and histories. I emphasize the importance of understanding how death worlds created by ghosts and demons in

horror films are not so easily separated from those manufactured by the state in our everyday world.

The first body of literature involves examining the horror genre, including some seminal works in the field. This provides a foundation for my genre study and grounds my specific case studies within the larger genre, considering tropes and lore that are hallmarks or anomalies of the genre (Jancovich, 2009). This section also situates both my case studies and the larger genre within the historical context that spawned them (Skal, 1993; Lowenstein, 2005; Phillips, 2005; Sharrett, 2019; Aviva Briefel and Miller, 2012; Wood, 2020). Robin Wood's seminal essays on the horror film inform my conceptualization of the genre, interpreting horror as the return of what our society represses, representing not just the fears of an individual, but of society's "collective nightmares."⁹ Hence the importance of grounding each film within its specific time period, and the fears that existed then. Of particular interest to me however, is in *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* by Kendall R. Phillips, who builds on Wood's concept of collective nightmares, arguing that there are certain horror films that "touch upon our collective fears [and] become part of our culture," yet none of the films he discusses include haunted house films.¹⁰ To fill this gap, my work will argue for the legitimacy of haunted house films as conversations with our collective fears that are emblematic of our culture and the violence within it. Adam Lowenstein's book *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* is particularly valuable to me, positing "the allegorical moment as a means of understanding these contexts, suggest[s] that the modern

⁹ Barry Keith Grant, ed., *Robin Wood on the Horror Film: Collected Essays and Reviews* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 57.

¹⁰ Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears : Horror Films and American Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), 3.

horror film may well be the genre of our time that registers most brutally the legacies of historical trauma.”¹¹

In addition to this, because my work is a genre study of horror, I am also engaging in genre scholarship more broadly to better ground my analysis (Schatz, 1981; Grant, 2012; Wood, 2018). These works assist in my explanation of how the horror genre functions and is organized, thus allowing me to argue for the legitimacy of a sub-genre of the haunted house film. Barry Keith Grant’s work on genre in *The Film Genre Reader IV* emphasizes the importance of historical grounding of genres, something I find to be invaluable in my study, as the events of the 20th and 21st century changed the larger horror genre, and the haunted house sub-genre. One cannot examine these films without considering the historical context that informed them. Both Grant, and Thomas Schatz in *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, argue for the understandings of genres as myth makers, serving as “a textual system [that] represents a set of rules of construction that are utilized to accomplish a specific communicative function.”¹² “Genre films,” Schatz comments, “much like the folk tales... serve to defuse threats to the social order and thereby to provide some logical coherence to that order” making genre films function as a kind of social ritual and collective expression of culture.¹³

In addition to the broader explorations of horror, this body of literature also includes research into identity and othering in the horror film. Taking on a variety of approaches, these works examine how othering is expressed within the genre (Benshoff, 1997; Clover, 2015; Coleman, 2011; Grant, 2019; Newitz, 2020, Reiff, 2019, White, 1991; Williams, 2014, Wood, 2009). Robin R. Means Coleman’s influential book *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror*

¹¹ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 10.

¹² Barry Keith Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader IV* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012) 116.

¹³ Tom Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and The Studio System* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 263 & 12-13.

Films from the 1890s to Present traces the history of Black people within the horror genre, making explicit the exclusion, racism, and white focus that has existed within horror since its inception. Harry Benshoff's work *Monsters in the Closet* analyses how the horror monster stands in for the queer individual. And, of course, any study of othering in horror would be remiss without considering the seminal work of Carol Clover *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* in addition to the recent anthology edited by Barry Keith Grant *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Both take on the question of difference in horror through the lenses of gender, patriarchal violence, and the heteropatriarchal family.

Few of these works consider how othering within horror occurs in the figure of the ghost; with the exception of Patricia White's piece "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: *The Haunting*" which touches on how a ghostly presence can mimic an oppressed identity. Similar to White's work, my understanding of ghosts in movies has a distinctly queer tone to it. It views the existence of ghosts as a challenge to heterosexual understandings of death as the opposite of life and procreative futures. White's work is closely aligned with Carla Freccero's work "Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past" which seeks to disrupt heteronormative historical continuity and argues for a model of queer historiography that utilizes the spectral and acknowledges the queerness in the uncanny. This is important to consider because ghosts are political, and in many cases hauntings function as a situation where invisible structures of power make themselves known.

Also pertinent to my study are a limited number of pieces that specifically consider class within the horror genre. This is a central focus of Chapter 2 where I emphasize how important class considerations are for American culture even if American society is built on a myth of classlessness. David Simmon's *American Horror Fiction and Class: From Poe to Twilight* offers

an in-depth exploration of how American perceptions of class have changed over the years and how these shifts are reflected in American horror fiction. Erika Tiburcio Moreno's driving question in "Classism and Horror in the 1970s: The Rural Dweller as a Monster" (2019) is "how economic disruptions of the era created a new type of cinematic monster?" which provides important foundation for my work, positioning horror as directly in conversation with time-specific American class concerns.¹⁴ From here I expand on this relatively small body of works, applying class analysis to horror films instead of books, and analyzing the suburban haunted home, as opposed to highlighting the rural focus that characterizes Moreno's work. In addition to these works, Ananalee Newitz's *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture* examines the role of capitalism in monstrosity and horror, detailing the ways economic structures are easily translated into horror films, most often in the form of supernatural creatures. Newer scholarship has also emerged out of the context of the Great Recession and subprime mortgage crisis, illustrating how precarious home ownership is, and how 2007 and later horror films have dealt with this topic (Gaines, 2020; Banco, 2019; Snelson, 2014;).

Despite the numerous haunted house films, literature, and TV series produced over the past few centuries, there are fewer pieces of scholarship about haunted houses in film. At the time of my initial research I found only three books that focus on the location of haunted houses in horror fiction, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* by Dale Bailey, *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* by Barry Curtis, and *The Haunted House on Film: An Historical Analysis* by Paul Meehan (Bailey, 1999; Curtis, 2008; Meehan, 2020).¹⁵ These books each approach the haunted house with a different focus: fictional

¹⁴ Erika Tiburcio Moreno, "Classism and Horror in the 1970s: The Rural Dweller as a Monster," in *Dark Forces at Work: Essays on Social Dynamics and Cinematic Horrors*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, 2019, 99.

¹⁵ Since then, Dahlia Schweitzer has announced her newest book *Haunted Homes*, set for release in June of 2021.

narrative, architecture and location studies, and historical analysis respectively. Lacking is a media studies examination of haunted houses in horror, especially an analysis that takes into consideration structures of power and personal identity. A particularly glaring gap within these works is illustrated in the limited or non-existent discussion of white flight and the practice of redlining, which can help explain why the families depicted are always white. One of the key questions I raise in this thesis is how to examine films that ignore or erase this issue. A second one is considering the connections between erasure and the violence in these horror films. The scholarship that touches on this within the horror genre tends to be more recent and often focused on films like *Get Out* (2017) or *Candyman* (1992) (Coleman, 2011; Aviva Briefel and Ngal, 2019; Briseño, 2019, McKenna, 2019; Reiff, 2019).

Due to the recent housing crisis in the mid-2000's more scholarship has been produced examining haunted house films in relation to the economy and recessions, which connects the haunted home to issues of class and accessibility (Banco, 2019; Brayton, 2013; Gaines, 2020; Liu, 2015; Snelson, 2014). I also consider the common disparaging question "why didn't they just leave" that is used as a way to justify or invalidate the inhabitant's experiences. Such an attitude expresses a privileged form of thinking, expecting someone to up and leave a home they might have been barely able to afford, and reveals how the experience of being forced to stay in an unsafe situation is often tied to lack of economic mobility in the real world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The aforementioned films are predominantly examined through the lens of necropolitical theory. My work builds on Mbembe's theorization and considers how his ideas can be used as a framework through which to explore the ways violence, death, and memory in the American context are made visible through the vehicle of horror films. And how regimes of public memory

and understandings of the past are reflected in stories of ghosts and haunted homes. I also want to specify that I take inspiration from his term death-worlds, but distinguish my analysis by removing the hyphen in order to demonstrate how these two terms speak to each other, without speaking over the horrors of the specific death-worlds he is referring to.

Necropolitics posits the notion that certain bodies are marked for death, and examines how social and political power is used to enact this predetermined outcome (Mbembe, 2019). For Mbembe, “the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” thus “creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead.”¹⁶ This raises the questions of how can we see these haunted houses as expressing domination over the inhabitants, and how might we see these haunted homes as fictional death worlds? Necropolitics intervenes in biopower theory, asserting that it’s not enough to say that certain bodies are controlled and privileged in societies (Foucault, 2006). Necropolitics argues that rather than just dividing people into the dead and the living, certain bodies are in essence “the living dead” because power punishes and enacts physical and political violence against these chosen bodies to maintain control. These individuals are not simply dead, they often experience a kind of “death-in-life,” existing in a state of injury yet still physically alive. Necropolitical theory easily translates to other works like *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* by Judith Butler, which considers the concept of “grievable life,” the notion the certain lives are more grievable than others, and certain forms of mourning serve national interests. Her work asks similar questions to Mbembe, seeking to explore “what

¹⁶ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), location 1919, Kindle.

counts as a liveable life and a grievable death?” and considers both locations of death and violence, and the people who are disproportionately subjected to this violence.¹⁷

I am also interested in how ghosts and hauntings can be used as “an analytical tool that *does* theory.”¹⁸ Drawing from Derrida and his concept of hauntology, I explore how haunting is historical, and how haunting and concepts of specters and spirits transcend binaries and boundaries. The ghost works to challenge what we know and what we see as reality, it demands action and recognition, and is innately tied to trauma. Derrida’s practice of tying ideas of haunting with Marxism also speaks to my emphasis on class analysis, and analyzing how these stories of hauntings can symbolize more than just a literal haunting with ghosts. I draw from Derrida’s ideas that places are haunted by absence, and that hauntings and their specters are “of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood. It resists the intuition to which it presents itself, it is not tangible.”¹⁹ I find it important to consider how representations of death and spectrality relate to the invisible yet visible structures of necropolitical power that maintain our society. As Derrida wrote, “haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony.... The hierarchies of power that structure our lives are themselves ghostly. Power is unreal, insubstantial, somehow imaginary. At the same time, of course, it is undeniably real.”²⁰

My work takes these theoretical approaches and wonders what would we see if words like the living dead, ghosts, haunting, and resurrection, and asks, were interpreted literally? What

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004), xv.

¹⁸ Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, “Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 1, Kindle.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, “Spectrographies,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 38, Kindle.

²⁰ Quoted in Renée L. Bergland, “From Indian Ghosts and American Subjects,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 376, Kindle.

if we apply these theories to zombies, ghosts, and other horror creatures? Metaphors of haunting and spectrality become real and concrete in my work; no longer is “being haunted” just a metaphor for suffering and mourning, instead it also means the reality of seeing ghosts within representation. So, what does it mean to take a supernatural look at scholarship about valuable lives, and what does it mean to look at the deaths in these horror movies as symbolic of structures of power, violence, politics, and value? In many ways, I am attempting to give validity to these supernatural cinematic experiences as ways to understand our quotidian lives. As a queer person, when I say I am haunted I mean it in a way that blurs literal and figurative. I am haunted by the memories of friends who have passed, and sometimes feel truly haunted, as is the case when I am reminded of their spectral presence on social media in the form of memorial pages or abandoned accounts. And, I believe, many other marginalized folks’ lives are haunted by death and violence in both very real ways and metaphorical ways, frequently to an even greater degree.

My work also utilizes the lenses of critical race studies, feminist theory, and queer theory. These theories are not all separate concepts, rather they work together to provide a clearer and more thorough picture of the media I’m researching. Necropolitical theory is vast, and all of these theories relate to it. What is more, they all engage with analyses of structures of power and how they are designed to harm specific bodies. Thus, an exploration of ghosts leads to considerations of Native ghosts and genocide, and analysis of locations of violence and safety invariably leads to questions of colonialism, redlining, and segregation. Even if these films often fail to truly explore these topics and their implications, it is critical to consider what these films don’t show, or rather what they imply through erasure.

METHODOLOGY

I analyze these films through textual analysis, utilizing semiotics and genre studies. Taking my cue from scholars like Harry M. Benshoff, Robin R. Means Coleman, and David Simmons, I utilize semiotics to interrogate what the images and stories mean in relation to identity, power dynamics, and ideology. Genre study also plays a very important role in this work, as I'm specifically examining American horror films, and am emphasizing the role these films have in contributing to, or challenging, hegemonic notions of American society and life/death. I also distinguish the sub-genre of "haunted house" films, both in terms of semiotics and narrative. This is worth discussing because horror is an extremely wide and diverse genre, and while for horror fans there seems to be an understanding of a sub-genre of haunted house films, scholarship has been a bit slower to take up this practice. There is a kind of understanding that horror serves a particular function in society, displaying our worst fears specific to the cultural moment, challenging our comfort and daring to show the un-showable. But the horror genre is not monolithic, and different sub-genres of films, and even specific films in each sub-genre react to different political and social norms.

My case studies include *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), *THIR13EN Ghosts* (2001), and *The Amityville Horror* (2005). I selected both the original and remake *Amityville Horror* because the plot so heavily engages with themes of gender, class, and race. The films make explicit mention of economic instability and the societal importance of buying a home. Also of particular interest to me is the different ways the two films explain the home's haunted nature. The 2005 remake adds a Colonial America setting to the story, thus engaging with themes of race, colonization, genocide, and adding new weight to the idea of *owning* land. *THIR13EN Ghosts'* storyline carries with it interesting and largely unexplored carceral implications in addition to speaking to class in similar ways to the other case studies. *Poltergeist*

is a bit of an obvious choice for a piece on haunted houses, but it is a classic for a reason, and, while it is frequently mistaken for having an “Indian Burial Ground” narrative, it references death, class, and the politics of the Reagan era in important ways.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

As my work is focused on ghosts and hauntings, it is only fitting to ensure my work is haunted as well and structured around ghostly presences. This thesis is organized thematically by ghosts. That is, I examine ghosts as aggressors and then as victims. This approach encourages comparison between films, drawing connections or highlighting differences between the films that I argue are all in a sub-genre of horror.

Chapter 1: Horror Films as Necro-texts

My first chapter digs deeper into necropolitics, the circumstances that gave rise to this theory of power, how it operates, and how it relates to work by other scholars I draw from, including Judith Butler and her theory of grievable lives. From here I explore the implications of a necropolitical application to the wider horror genre and specific horror films. I argue that these texts already carry necropolitical implications, even if it has not previously been defined as such. As there is little previous scholarship on applying a necropolitical lens to horror, this chapter will set the foundation for my later chapters of textual analysis and provide an introduction to how necropolitics can be applied to these horror texts. In this chapter I explain my more literal interpretation of Achille Mbembe and Judith Butler’s theorization, drawing connections between the macabre and gothic terminology utilized in this scholarship and the supernatural world of the horror movie.

I also touch on the categorization of haunted house films as a kind of sub-genre to the broader horror genre. I lay out why I think a distinction of this sub-genre is valuable to

scholarship, mentioning the common themes, events, characters, and narratives depicted in haunted house horror films. As my work is specifically applying necropolitics to the haunted house horror film, I will discuss the value of this sub-genre study, and begin asking questions that can lead to further work on necropolitical horror scholarship in other areas of the genre.

From here, my chapters are divided by the specific ways necropolitical power is enacted in relation to ghosts. By this I mean I examine ghosts as the ones enacting violence and then ghosts as the ones experiencing violence. This approach allows me to emphasize my dedication to intersectionality, examining race, class, and gender in both chapters, but considering the different ways these identities manifest and engage with one another. Each chapter is an opportunity to discuss specific attributes of the films, and allow for comparison between films, drawing connections or highlighting differences between the films that I argue are all in a sub-genre of horror.

Chapter 2: There's No Place Like Home

In this chapter I explore ghosts as the ones enacting violence on specific bodies, how do they terrorize the families and simultaneously uphold structures of violence? Class in particular is an integral part of haunted house films. Most, if not all haunted house films deal with issues of affordability and class status. The inciting incident for most haunted house films deals with a family in need of finding a home for a decreased price. This “deal of a lifetime” can’t be turned down because they’ll never find a better option. However, this deal is always too good to be true, and results in a terrorized family. Money is always the motivating factor for these films; whether it be saving money or trying to make money, these characters’ actions are constrained by their access to funds. In addition to this, we also see class manifest in the desire for upward mobility and the role a home plays in the American Dream.

Further, drawing from the American Dream, every film discussed previously includes a heterosexual family with at least one child. The family as a unit experiences violence, but each member of the family experiences the terror in a different way, which is often tied to gender. The strange occurrences are often first noticed by the mother or a female child, but there are also effects on the father. Typically, the fathers become more prone to violence over the course of the films. In particular, with the case of *The Amityville Horror* films, George Lutz becomes increasingly volatile and violent, terrorizing his family as much as the ghosts are. It's also interesting to consider the gendered implications of how women experience hauntings, as women are generally the ones who notice the supernatural occurrences first, or are more open to the possibility of the paranormal than men. I wonder in what ways this connects with, or serves as an allusion to, experiences when men refuse to believe women when they talk about sexism or violence?

In addition to this, I want to consider the privilege of being able to say "no." By this I mean, who has the privilege to remove themselves from dangerous situations like hauntings but also more broadly in society? Here I examine a common rejoinder to a haunted house film - "why didn't they just leave?" As I mentioned earlier, the ability to move and exist safely are privileges that are tied to class and money. These families presumably cannot just up and move houses because they can't afford it. They are in danger because they couldn't say no to the deal. This mimics how class is tied to safety in the real world as well, with many folks often having to rent in unsafe areas, with predatory landlords and the like, because they can't afford anything else. Notably, all of the films selected tell the stories of individual families, echoing aspects of the American Dream and American neoliberalism more broadly. In each case, bad things happen to *individual* people instead of it serving as the symptom of a larger *systemic* problem.

I also consider the ways these movies very simply tell the story of specific spaces that are deemed unsafe. Rarely is a space dangerous for *everyone*, more often it is unsafe for select groups, predominantly marginalized folks.²¹ So, while these films are challenging the notion of the suburban or perfect home as inherently safe, that was only a reality for some people, specifically white heterosexual families. And even then, the safety of the home was not guaranteed for women, even if it was considered their domain. So here I ask, how can we theorize the haunted home as a space of danger that speaks to the lived realities of those both included or forcefully excluded from these spaces? How do the hauntings for these white families obfuscate the violence and exclusion Black families experience when trying to live the American Dream and settle in suburbia?

Chapter 3: How do You Think a Ghost is Made?

The last chapter shifts the focus to look at ghosts as the ones experiencing necropolitical violence. Who or what were these ghosts prior to being killed traumatically, resulting in their spectral presence? How have, or are, they being terrorized to uphold structures of violence? In this chapter I endeavor to listen to the ghosts in these films and consider what their presence can tell us about past and present injustices. America is inherently haunted, and indeed scholars like Colleen E. Boyd, Coll Thrush, Renee L. Bergland and others, have discussed the role ghosts play in the American national identity. By telling these ghost stories on American land, the films are dealing with the histories of slavery and genocide, even if they don't explicitly reference these issues. This brings up questions of who is or isn't a ghost? Whose pain created these hauntings? Ghosts do not appear when someone passes peacefully, ghosts are a symptom of trauma, and a haunting subsequently is a call for justice or some other form of response. A haunting occurs

²¹ Rosemary Briseño, "Unmasked Horror in Idyllic Places: America as a 'Sunken Place,'" ed. Francesco Pascuzzi (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020), 238.

when something from the past disrupts the present and refuses to quietly disappear. It problematizes binary understandings of life, death, presence, absence, visible and invisible, and forces us to come face to face with what is frequently ignored.

As Toni Morrison has discussed, whiteness has always been plagued by ghosts, and whiteness and its connection to home ownership and the American Dream, is invariably tied to a history of slavery and genocide.²² Barry Curtis writes in *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*, “‘ghosts’ and the dark places where they dwell have served as powerful metaphors for persistent themes of loss, memory, retribution and confrontation with unacknowledged and unresolved histories.”²³ This chapter will explore these understandings of ghosts and hauntings to consider the experience of the ghost instead of the living.

Conclusion

I end with an analysis of a recent British haunted house film that foregrounds issues of violence and power previously peripheral in the American case studies throughout this work, considering what this film can mean for both my work and future scholarship on haunted house horror films. In addition, reflecting on the process of conducting this research and analysis, foregrounding the pandemic reality that this thesis was written in and how this project has grown since its inception. Concluding, I touch on future opportunities for analysis around the horror genre more widely and my hopes for where the genre might be headed.

POST-SCRIPT: THE STAKES OF HAUNTED HISTORY

On September 17th, 2020, Donald Trump announced the “1776 Commission,” an attempt to rewrite American history and the way it is taught in schools. His nationalistic approach to

²² Quoted in Annalee Newitz, *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2006), location 280, Kindle.

²³ Barry Curtis, *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*, Locations (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2008), location 70-77, Kindle.

rewriting history foregrounds patriotism and rejects any and all criticisms against the United States. History is a tool for his propaganda machine, a chance to perpetuate the white supremacist myth that there was a time in history when America was “great,” and that with his leadership, we can return to it. One of the many problems with this is that it completely ignores the reality that life in America has never been great for everyone. To ignore this reality, and the very real violence that is still occurring in America daily, is to ask for ghosts. Our history is haunted with violence, and so is our media. We are currently experiencing what happens when America fails to reckon with the reality of our history, calls for justice and change speak to the ways modern violence is haunted by past events. Ghosts transport the past into the present, and with it comes all the unsavory bits of our country’s history. Avery F. Gordon writes, “haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security.)”²⁴ My work takes these concepts and applies them to horror, the favorite genre of ghosts, and asks what these films can tell us about power and violence. Horror has long been discussed as a space to reflect on our cultural fears, each iteration of horror scholarship building on each other, adding to our object of analysis and the lenses we adopt. Horror is a genre deeper than its surface, and it should be treated with respect and academic vigor. My work considers what happens when we see ghosts as more than just ghosts, as calls to action, and as complications of time and space, challenging our understanding of how the world is structured.

²⁴ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), location 188, Kindle.

Chapter 1: Horror Films as Necro-texts

“Nowadays a good many individuals are beset with dread, afraid of having been invaded and being on the verge of disappearing.... They maintain that an outside no longer exists such that to protect themselves against threats and danger the enclosures must be multiplied. Wanting not to remember anything any longer, least of all their own crimes and misdeeds, they dream up bad objects that return to haunt them and that they then seek violently to rid themselves of.” – Achille Mbembe ²⁵

HAUNTED NECROPOLITICS

Coined by Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe, necropolitics was first explored in a 2003 article and has since been expanded on in the 2019 book *Necropolitics*. Mbembe’s work builds on theorization by Frantz Fanon and Michel Foucault in the context of the post-colonial world. He pays particular attention to situations like post-colonial Africa, Nazi Germany’s concentration camps, American slave plantations, and the occupation of Palestine. He intervenes in the theorization of biopower and Foucault’s notion of “the right to kill” by asking “but under what practical conditions is the power to kill, to let live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right?...Can the notion of biopower account for the contemporary ways in which the political takes as its primary and absolute objective the enemy’s murder, doing so under the guise of war, resistance, or the war on terror?”²⁶ As I touched on in the introduction, his work argues that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” thus giving those in power the ability to define who exists as an Other, and subsequently as the walking-dead.²⁷ As an Other who is surrounded by terror and violence, this living-dead subject exists in “a state of injury – a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty” that transforms their reality into a

²⁵ Mbembe, location 129.

²⁶ Mbembe, location 1371.

²⁷ Mbembe, location 1919.

“death-in-life” or “death-world.”²⁸ He emphasizes the fact that, for many people in the world, the end of their world has already occurred, and they are living in the aftermath, marked by violence and death.²⁹

Of note is how Mbembe theorizes these death-worlds not as the antitheses to a democratic society but as part of democracy. Thus, allowing for a logical link between necropolitical theory and American culture and society. He writes, “the history of modern democracy is, at bottom, a history with two faces, and even two bodies – the solar body, on the one hand, and the nocturnal body on the other. The major emblems of the nocturnal body are the colonial empire and the pro-slavery state.”³⁰ The solar body then, is the surface image of democracy, the impression that a democratic society is pacified. The solar body, or the body that shines and is easily seen, is the popular image of democracy, a peaceful and violence-free world that works because the institutions work and are powered by the will of the people. Democratic societies endeavor to hide any awareness to this violent reality, covering up its foundations and myths that give legitimacy to the socio-political structure and how violence plays a role in maintaining its validity and longevity.³¹ This attempt to hide democracy’s violence is what sets it apart from other systems of government that utilize violence more overtly, rather than there being an actual absence of violence in democracy.³² This raises the question of how we can uncover necropolitics at work within the mythology of American democracy, specifically for the purpose of this work, the myth of the American Dream.

²⁸ Mbembe, location 1563.

²⁹ Mbembe, location 65.

³⁰ Mbembe, location 520.

³¹ Mbembe, location 621.

³² Mbembe, location 398.

Much like the American Dream, in practice, separates the haves and the have-nots, necropolitics distinguishes between humanity and Others, the outside versus inside. In particular, the necropolitical throws into question constructions of proximity and the distance between safety and chaos and terror. Mbembe argues that the way violence has invaded daily life in our post-colonial world has effectively destroyed any distance between the safety of the colonizer and the danger they have caused to the colonized. “Owing this structural proximity,” he writes, “there is no longer any ‘outside’ that might be opposed to an ‘inside’ ... one cannot sanctuarize one’s own home by fomenting chaos and death far away, in the homes of others. Sooner or later, one will reap at home what one has sown abroad.”³³ This view is informed by the reality of a post-9/11 world and the “war on terror,” which divides enemies not exclusively by nationality or location but by the ways in which they are not us or rather, US(A). This war against terror has the effect of cheapening life in huge sweeping generalizations, predominantly affecting people of color, including those within the US, and those deemed dangerous to the American way of life.³⁴ By naming it a “war against terror” it is indefinite, it is focused on eradication, and it allows those crusading for this cause to employ violence in whatever way they deem necessary, they have acquired a cart blanche on terror, cruelty, and torture.³⁵ This process of violence breeds more violence, multiplying indefinitely, sometimes in very small forms, other times on wider, more global scales.

Additionally, the lives destroyed in these battles are not seen as grievable or even deserving of mourning, connecting Mbembe to the previously mentioned work by Judith Butler in her Post-9/11 reflection *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. While

³³ Mbembe, location 876.

³⁴ Mbembe, location 833.

³⁵ Mbembe, location 833.

Mbembe reflects primarily on aspects of identity related to coloniality and race, Butler discusses how other marginalized bodies experience violence and are systematically devalued. Under what conditions, she asks, are certain human lives less valued, more vulnerable, and less grievable?³⁶ By focusing on grievability she questions not only whose death cannot be mourned, but also who is excluded from living. Similar to how Mbembe theorizes how one's status as an Other legitimizes violence against them, Butler discusses how "those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless because those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed."³⁷ She builds on Mbembe, discussing not only who is exposed to violence and death, but what it means after death; the implications of loss when those who are lost were already partially dead. She refers to these not as the living-dead like Mbembe, but as the unreal: "Those who are unreal have, in a sense already suffered the violence of derealization, What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as 'unreal?'"³⁸

Here, I argue, is where spectrality comes into play, as ghosts are a kind of inherently unreal entity, both living and dead, both real and unreal. Ghosts in horror movies exist in a liminal space, often perpetuating violence, or experiencing their own deaths over and over again, they exist in a world marked by death and violence. As Butler articulates, "the derealization of the 'other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral."³⁹ Mbembe similarly writes, "people for whom living means continually standing up to death, and doing so under conditions in which death itself increasingly tends to become spectral."⁴⁰ In addition to ghosts

³⁶ Butler, 30.

³⁷ Butler, xvii-xix.

³⁸ Butler, 33.

³⁹ Butler 34.

⁴⁰ Mbembe, location 832

being a metaphor or device of analysis and theory, we can also look at how ghosts are calls to action, how ghosts in a way can be seen as figures that resist the systems of valuation that encourage us to forget the dead when they come from a precarious life, when they are bodies already marked for death. As I touched on in the introduction, Jacques Derrida saw ghosts as unruly figures that blurred lines between the known and unknown, as entities that inherently demanded justice or at the very least a response.⁴¹

Renée L. Bergland expands on Derrida's points, applying them specifically to American spectrality, and our history of imagining specific bodies and communities as ghostly. "Ghostliness," she writes, is "closely related to oppression and to the hope of denying or repressing the memory of that oppression."⁴² So with this understanding, what does it mean when the dead come back to life to haunt the living? There is a kind of accepted social understanding that ghosts return because of unfinished business, they come back because they have been wronged in some way or never had the opportunity to accomplish their goal. Could it be that someone returns as a ghost because they were denied full personhood in life? When employing a necropolitical lens, this means a ghost's existence can be interpreted in similar ways to the bodies marked for death by the state, they both exist in a world of violence and loss. But further, the ghost's existence is similar also to the power that creates these structures of violence, as Mbembe writes, "power itself is spectral."⁴³

We see this every day, in the sense that there is no physical embodiment of sexism, no physical pink tax for example, these systems of power are both seen and unseen. We frequently

⁴¹ Pilar Blanco and Peeren, "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities," 8.

⁴² Bergland, "from Indian Ghosts and American Subjects," 377.

⁴³ Maria del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, "Spectropolitics: Ghosts of the Global Contemporary/Introduction," in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 95, kindle. Derrida also talks about this: 'The hierarchies of power that structure our lives are themselves ghostly. Power is unreal, insubstantial, somehow imaginary. At the same time, of course, it is undeniably real.' Quoted in Bergland, 376.

see these oppressive forces in more invisible or cloudy ways. This can be indirectly observed for instance in the racist logics that structure laws and hiring practices, our medical system, our beauty industry and more. Because these aspects are frequently invisible or obscured, only seen by the well-trained eye or when overt violence makes the system visible, it becomes easier for those with privilege and power to deny the existence of these structures and instead brush them off as individual occurrences. This demonstrates how power is also spectral in the sense that people often refuse to believe that which they cannot see easily or have not seen personally – something that is true about both systems of power and ghosts. One can also draw a connection to the work of Richard Dyer on whiteness and its “normalized” and “invisible” nature in American culture and media. In his words, “when whiteness *qua* whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death.”⁴⁴ As Avery F. Gordon wrote in her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, “haunting occurs on the terrain situated between our ability to conclusively describe the logical of Capitalism or State Terror, for example, and the various experiences of this logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, ambiguous.”⁴⁵ A haunted necropolitics as outlined above presents the opportunity for a deeper analysis of horror as a genre and individual films more specifically. Further turning away from popular understanding of horror as an escape or low-brow genre, this theoretical grounding encourages readings of horror as a parallel to everyday instances of violence and oppression, and to explore horror’s depictions and relationship with death. As I have outlined, necropolitics goes hand in hand with the study of ghosts and haunting, and brings up important considerations of how our everyday lives are

⁴⁴ Richard Dyer, “White,” *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 44–65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/29.4.44>, 44.

⁴⁵ Avery F. Gordon, “From Her Shape and His Hand,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 119, Kindle.

intertwined with death and the ghostly presence of previous injustices. From here I consider how this foundation supports a reading of horror films as necropolitical texts in of themselves, and further, how theory around ghosts and necro-worlds of the living dead can be found within the walls of haunted homes.

NECRO-TEXTS

Although it hasn't fully been explored before, horror films are a group of texts ripe with potential necropolitical readings. In part this is because horror films in a very literal way depict death worlds and systems of violence and torture. I argue that many horror films, if not all, function as a kind of necropolitical text. I consider how haunted necropolitics works as a framework in which to examine horror and reconceptualize the violence and death depicted within. What new insights can be gained about American society and its relationship to violence and death when one looks deeper at horror and places it within a broader understanding of the role of violence in the modern world? At their simplest, horror films depict death worlds and illustrate the various ways violence can be experienced in our culture. When viewing horror, it is integral to consider the power dynamics at play and choices related to those who are experiencing violence and who are committing it, speaking to necropolitics and the grievable life. Mbembe also touches on the relationship between real life and technology, writing that "no impenetrable separation exists between the screen and life. Life now transpires on the screen, and the screen is now the plastic and simulated form of living."⁴⁶ The relationship between what is experienced in real life is not so easily separated from that which is displayed on a screen.

In an interview for the horror documentary *Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, horror director John Carpenter described the two

⁴⁶ Mbembe, location 349.

different categories of horror stories, both centering on the image of a group huddled around a campfire telling scary stories. According to Carpenter, the first scenario involves a story where the evil exists as the Other, the unknown that sits and waits in the forest. This is how the majority of horror stories are set up. However, there is another option. The second scenario tells the tale of evil existing within each and every person.⁴⁷ Carpenter's two conceptualizations of horror relate to biopolitics and necropolitics. They tell the story of an us and an Other, and what's more, not just any Other, but an Other that is categorized as evil, as a threat, thus validating violence against this figure. This description also brings to mind Mbembe's discussion of the blurred line between victim and executioner and between inside and outside.⁴⁸ Violence is all around, always a potentiality.

Because they are often campy or blood drenched, it can be easy to devalue horror and position it as a lesser genre, or as a deviant genre whose fans are sadistic and invested only in explicit depictions of torture, blood, and guts. The reality is, like most things, much more complex. Horror as a genre is compiled of countless sub-genres, from zombies to body horror, found footage to horror comedy, slashers to psychological thrillers, vampires to hauntings or possessions; the options are endless. The genre, I would argue, is so vast in part because of its nature as a genre created to scare, disturb, create discomfort, and show viewers their greatest fears. Everyone experiences terror in a different way, each culture has different fears ingrained in its foundation, every identity-based community has different vulnerabilities and historical traumas, and each time period engages with different threats both to normalcy and to life itself. In part, for these reasons, horror becomes such a perfect focus for cultural studies, identity scholarship, and psychoanalytic film studies. These films bring attention to otherwise invisible

⁴⁷ Andrew Monument, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, Streaming, Documentary (Lux Digital Pictures, 2009).

⁴⁸ Mbembe, location 850.

death-making dynamics, thus part of their pleasure entails a certain kind of ideological exposure and political subversion.

In addition, much has been written in horror scholarship on how the monster or villain exists as a stand-in for marginalized identities and cultural anxieties of the time (Skal, 1993; Lowenstein, 2005; Phillips, 2005; Grant, 2018). In this way, the horror villain can be seen as a less grievable life à la Butler. A dangerous Other whose life and death are devalued and ungrievable. Another popular category of horror scholarship has examined the identities of the victims, examining the common horror and slasher formula that punishes the sexually promiscuous, the outlier, the woman, the person of color, and so on (Benshoff, 1997; Clover, 2015; Coleman, 2011; Grant, 2019; Newitz, 2020, Reiff, 2019, White, 1991; Williams, 2014, Wood, 2009). These horror victims can also be connected to Butler, seeing these identities as less valued and although these deaths are grievable to a degree. There is a kind of horror thought process, as evoked in the meta classic *Scream* (1996), where the burden of survival is placed on the individuals. There are generic rules you have to follow, and to ignore them validates your death in some way, thus making you less grievable.⁴⁹ Which brings to mind the ways many marginalized folks and people who refuse to follow social norms are blamed for the oppression they face. These characters are a kind of living-dead, the viewer knows they will inevitably suffer and die. It is considered inevitable. Horror depicts death worlds, whether the deaths are caused by stalking killers with sharp knives, poltergeists, zombies, vampires, or more. It is arguably not a horror film without some death or threat of death.

It is also worth considering how genre, and in this case the horror genre, engages with myth making, reifying certain understandings of the world over others. Horror, in particular, is

⁴⁹ We see this rhetoric too in haunted house films, if the family just would have listened to the warnings sooner, or been more considerate of the questionable history of the home, they never would have been put in a life or death situation.

fascinating because it is a genre designed to scare, encouraging questions related to what is scary, why it's scary, who it's scary for, who is vulnerable, who is innocent? Robin Wood's famous work "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" speaks to these questions when he outlines the role of the Other in horror and what the Other represents. "Linked to repression is the 'other'," he writes, "otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with one of two ways – either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it."⁵⁰ He continues, "It is the horror film that responds in the most clear-cut and direct way, because central to it is the actual dramatization of the dual concept of the repressed/other, in the figure of the monster.... And the happy ending (when it exists) typically signify[ies] the restoration of repression."⁵¹ Horror has long been theorized as a genre that represents or provides a reading of, American culture and its fears, rather than an escapist fantasy (Phillips, 2005; Janovich, 2009, Wood, 2009;). The horror monsters, even the vampire, zombie, werewolf, or other fantastical creature, are not random choices, they reflect and speak to the fears of the culture, and in particular, stand in as representations of the Other and that which society fears and wishes to repress and destroy.

Consider the film *It* (2017) and how it can be read through a lens of haunted necropolitics. Adapted from the 1986 novel by Stephen King, *It* tells the story of the "Losers," a group of children living in Derry, Maine. The kids are brought together at first due to their outsider statuses, but their bonds are strengthened as they face the threat of the evil clown named Pennywise, who torments and kills children. The entire town of Derry exists under a shroud of death and violence, whether it is at the supernatural hands of Pennywise or the very human hands of parents and bullies. The town of Derry is an environment of death and children are the ones

⁵⁰ Grant, *Robin Wood on the Horror Film*, 77.

⁵¹ Grant, *Robin Wood on the Horror Film*, 79.

marked for death and trauma, a kind of living dead in this small Northeastern town. Both metaphorically and literally, as we are shown the zombified corpses of the missing children towards the end of the film. The parents and bullies of Derry, even prior to Pennywise showing up, establish dominion over the children through acts of violence, trauma, and emotional abuse. Beverly Marsh exists in constant fear of her abusive father, fearful of his touches, his controlling rules, and his physical violence. Their apartment, even more than Derry as a whole, is a world of violence that keeps Bev in a constant state of injury and fear. Similarly, Eddie Kaspbrak's experience at home is one of control and manipulation, although not overtly violent like Bev's father, his mother expresses dominance over him, keeping him sick, in fear, and under her rule. Bill Denbrough's home too, while not filled with violence or trauma the way the other Loser's homes are, still lives in a death world, haunted by the disappearance of his little brother Georgie. Georgie's room is like a tomb, untouched and a constant reminder of his absence. Bill also sees Georgie sometimes, a physical ghost that reminds Bill of his own permanent injury, the loss of his little brother. In a slightly different way, Mike Hanlon's life has been marked by death and violence with the loss of his parents, his work on the sheep farm, and his experience as a Black boy in a racist town. Henry Bowers, the local bully and racist, targets Mike and stalks him, infecting Mike's days with his racist comments and threats of physical violence. The entire Losers Club is filled with the bodies of marginalized children, one fat, one female, one Black, one Jewish, one gay, one with a stutter, one with mental illness. These bodies are marked as less grievable, and while the audience roots for their survival, we seem to be the only ones who care. They are alone in both the fight for their literal survival against Pennywise, but also in their struggle with growing up. Their existence as children is of note too, as Robin Wood wrote in his

discussion of the American horror film that the child is an “Other.”⁵² And as they eventually grow up and leave Derry, they are left permanently injured, even if they forget about it for a while. Their trauma exists within them and keeps them marked for death and violence because Pennywise’s return is inevitable, not unlike how structures of power create an inevitable and constant threat of violence.

In addition to considering the specifics of the horror genre as related to power structures, the genre more widely has been studied as a way to understand cultural norms and the value structures inherent in the norms of each genre. In *Film Genre Reader IV* by Barry Keith Grant, he discusses the genre film in terms of a kind of popular folklore, ritualizing certain cultural ideas and conflicts into a familiar and accessible package.⁵³ He refers to the research of Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, saying, “myth fulfills an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforcement morality; it vouches for the efficiency and contains practical rules for the guidance of man.”⁵⁴ As I briefly touched on in the introduction, Thomas Schatz also writes extensively on this in his seminal work *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and The Studio System*. He discusses genre as a cultural ritual which exists as a “form of collective cultural expression,” writing, “to identify a popular cinematic story formula, then, is to recognize its status as a coherent, value-laden narrative system” and goes on to say, “we might define film genres... as social problem solving operations – they repeatedly confront the ideological conflicts within a certain cultural community.”⁵⁵ He considers the role American ideology plays in genre films, both renegotiating and reinforcing this ideology, adding to American mythology by negotiating cultural problems, often through the

⁵² Grant, *Robin Wood on the Horror Film*, 77-79.

⁵³ Grant, *Film Genre Reader IV*, 116.

⁵⁴ Grant, *Film Genre Reader IV*, 114.

⁵⁵ Schatz, 12-13, 31, 16, 26.

lens of violence and the destruction of the “Other” and its threat to social norms.⁵⁶ He argues for the importance of interrogating genre structure and cinematic norms, emphasizing the significance of rejecting genres as a given or some form of natural system. Nothing is inevitable, so we, as scholars must ask, why did these conventions arise? What do they tell us about our culture and our values? What do they tell us about myths or ideology that we consider natural? He argues that through genre analysis we can “consider the ways in which popular film narratives structure experience with their formulaic treatment of sociocultural issues... the closer we examine the popular arts, the better we come to understand our culture and finally ourselves.”⁵⁷ Taking this into consideration, the possibility of understanding horror through a necropolitical lens becomes more feasible. In addition, it helps one to understand how horror functions to reify or challenge constructions of violence and death in our society.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE SUB-GENRE

As I mentioned previously, there is value in considering the specifics of horror sub-genres and the power dynamics that are depicted within the norms of each sub-genre structure. While there are certainly hallmarks of horror that seem to transcend sub-genre or specific narratives, these stories are often rooted in the environment in which they take place, the traditions of the films are in conversation with audience expectations and the lore that already exists. One doesn’t need to know slasher film lore in order to enjoy or comprehend a haunted house film and vice versa. While not the case 100% of the time, these sub-genres and their films exist within different systems of norms and often attract different viewers. For example, when a friend asks me for horror recommendations my first question is “what sub-genre? What are you in the mood for?” I probably wouldn’t recommend the atmospheric haunted house film *The*

⁵⁶ Schatz, 35, 261.

⁵⁷ Schatz, 264-267.

Changeling (1980) in the same list of recommendations with a film like the campy and blood soaked *Re-Animator* (1985) because they evoke different emotions, tell vastly different stories, and include extremely different content.

There are certain norms within the haunted house horror sub-genre that, if you are literate in them, can add to your viewing experience, prepare you for what's to come, or shock you if the film deviates from the expected plot points.⁵⁸ In addition, because horror is so focused on scaring or unsettling the viewer, it's worth considering the different fears each sub-genre engages. Horror draws upon our collective anxieties, and while there are overarching fears that relate to broader societal concerns or that are as natural as the fear of dying, horror sub-genres often play off more specific fears relative to the situation characters find themselves in. For example, *When A Stranger Calls* (1979) reflects the common anxiety of babysitting, being responsible for others, and being a young woman alone in a strange home. *The Thing from Another World* (1951) can be seen as a reflection of anxieties relative to the Cold War and Red Scare, while the 1982 *The Thing* plays off fears of the AIDS epidemic and Soviet technology. I also want to quickly note that my decision to argue for a haunted house sub-genre is not an effort to differentiate it from "lower forms" of the genre like slashers or other blood heavy films. I am not making a comment on the value of these films over other types of horror, rather, I am emphasizing the importance of distinguishing sub-genres so as to not lump this vast and varied genre into one kind of film, thus allowing for deeper analysis of the films and their reflections and challenges to social norms and fears.

In his recent work *The Haunted House on Film: An Historical Analysis* Paul Meehan lays out what he considers to be the three main features of a haunted house on film, "the haunted

⁵⁸ The decreased price of the home due to the terrible events that previously occurred; the terror that slowly ramps up, often beginning with harmless inconveniences but turns deadly; the heterosexual family with children, and some form of economic anxiety, to name a few.

property is offered for rent at a reduced rate due to ghosts; the living resident of the house is obligated to discover the underlying mystery; once the reason is found out, the ghost can be laid to rest or exorcised.”⁵⁹ Dale Bailey goes further into detail in his book *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, where, utilizing *The Amityville Horror* (the 1977 book and the 1979 film) he lays out a detailed formula for the haunted house story. In his list he includes “a home with an unsavory history,” “a middle-class family...skeptical of the supernatural who move into the house,” and “an escalating series of supernatural events which isolates the family.”⁶⁰ His formula also specifies the common climaxes in these films, the first resulting in the destruction of the home and the escape of the family.⁶¹ The second depicts a family escape but the house remains standing, thus implying that the horror will continue for another family.⁶²

Yet the question remains, even with these understandings of a haunted house formula, is it valuable and applicable to consider haunted house horror films as a sub-genre? Scholars seem unable to agree. Paul Meehan refers to haunted house films as a “frequently used plot device” and charts its history as a physical location in film and what it stands in for within certain narratives.⁶³ His book pulls together a group of films and discusses the haunted house tale as having both a narrative and locational function, yet he avoids making an argument for or against a proper designation of a haunted house sub-genre. Instead looking at how the haunted house has

⁵⁹ Paul Meehan, *The Haunted House on Film: An Historical Analysis* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2020), location 106, Kindle.

⁶⁰ Dale Bailey, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), location 1217- 1230, Kindle.

⁶¹ Bailey, location 1217- 1230.

⁶² Bailey, location 1217- 1230.

⁶³Meehan, location 326.

changed or stayed the same since the time of the “old dark house.”⁶⁴ Dale Bailey refers to it as a formula, and later mentions “genre denotes an overarching group of texts broadly linked in content, while formula and sub-genre signify sub-sets of discrete conventions.”⁶⁵ So, although he doesn’t call the haunted house horror film a “sub-genre” he puts it in the same category by calling it a formula. In comparison, Barry Curtis, the author of *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*, writes, “the suggestion that these films constitute a genre is a tenuous one. What I am proposing is that it is possible to make a haunted house reading of many films that may or may not be identifiable as horror films.”⁶⁶ However, my work differs from his as mine is discussing specifically horror films, and if his claim rests on the issue of not all haunted house films fitting into the horror category, then I feel more than justified to claim a haunted house horror film sub-genre, specifying this selection of films and norms within the realm of horror. Even if not all can agree on the benefit or practice of designating a sub-category for haunted house horror movies, the existence of this plot structure demonstrates that there are a set of norms specific to this grouping of films, and speaks to specific concerns, social issues, and narratives practices.

For the purpose of this work, my designation of a film that fits under the haunted house horror sub-genre is one that must: take place primarily within a home (whether it is the home of the main family, or they are renting/visiting); the home in question has a dark history or exists on land with a violent or tragic past; focuses on a group of people and their relationships – often a family, but sometimes a group brought together for other purposes; involves ghosts and or poltergeists within the home that make themselves known through physical and psychological disturbance; and the only way to escape these disturbances is to leave or destroy the house. It

⁶⁴ Meehan, location, 305 and 512.

⁶⁵ Bailey, location, 1192.

⁶⁶ Meehan, location 97.

involves issues of money, trauma, historical unrest, blurring of the past and present, family, safety, and more. By distinguishing a sub-genre for haunted house movies my work sees these films in dialogue with one another, strung together through shared narratives, themes, and histories. Instead of seeing these works as one-off instances or specific to the filmmaker of a text, I see them as part of a larger picture and a larger trend that raises a host of questions related to each other. Looking at these films together allow me to have a more nuanced understanding of the haunted house film within horror, and explore the various ways this story has been told. One can ask what these films tell us about home ownership and the American Dream, specific to each film and in conversation with one another. They encourage us to think about families, about questions of what locations are safe and which are dangerous, and also which homes are safe; they discuss anxieties about money in very concrete and explicit ways often not seen in other sub-genres of horror. I do not distinguish these films to keep them confined away from other implications, questions, and themes in horror, but rather to cordon off this area to be better explored.

Haunted house films also engage with location in ways specific to the sub-genre. The experiences are truly confined to that one home/land. Even in something like *Friday the 13th* (1980) which seems like it would only take place at Camp Crystal Lake, the horror extends far beyond that realm and location. Similarly, *Halloween* is centered in Haddonfield but not at the Myers Home per say, and in *Nightmare on Elm St.* (1984) the home plays an important role but the dreamscape transcends traditional boundaries and locations. Horror perhaps can be boiled down to the question of what/who is haunted? Whether that be literal in the sense of a haunted home or a demonic presence latching on to a person, or less literally in the examples of Freddy haunted by the sins of the parents, or Chucky, the haunted doll, Oculus the haunted mirror,

werewolf's who are haunted by their curse... it's all haunting in some way and in some definition of the word. Haunted house movies are specific in that the location is the important piece, it could be any family that wanders into this cursed territory, but what matters to me is that it's *not* just any family, there is a reason they come to this land and this home.

USHERING IN DEATH

Bailey, when charting the history of the haunted house narrative wrote, “since Poe first described the House of Usher in 1893, the motif of the haunted house has assumed an enduring role in the American tradition.”⁶⁷ As an introduction to the application of necropolitical hauntology to the haunted house film, we can thus look at the 1960 classic *House of Usher*. The Roger Corman film follows Phillip Winthrop, who travels to his fiancée's Madeline Usher's home, only to experience discouragement and hinderance from her brother Roderick. He informs Phillip that the Usher bloodline and home are cursed and the siblings are doomed to a quickly approaching death.

The house in the story is quite literally a death world, there are coffins filled with the past generations of Ushers in the basement, the house is dying and falling apart, and both Madeline and Roderick are doomed to a rapidly approaching death. Indeed, even the land the home stands on is a location of death, no vegetation or flowers can grow in the soil, and a thick fog covers up a previously pristine lake, a lake that we learn still has the corpse of an Usher long dead within it. Of particular note in the case of *House of Usher* is the theme of the sins of the fathers visited upon the children. The home and the sins within it were physically brought over from England to New England, bringing the Usher's violence and cruelty with it, not unlike the journey of the colonists that came to America. Just as the previous discussion of hauntology considers how

⁶⁷ Bailey, location 197.

ghosts and hauntings complicate the flow of time and bring history into the present, the Usher home does exactly this. It brings the Usher family's history of depravity into the present, and dooms Madeline and Roderick to death, lest they pass on the curse of the Usher line. The two siblings live in a world of injury, the home itself is even injured, cracked and decaying, and the siblings know that death awaits them. In this case the home, and the Usher ghosts that have infected it, are the ones establishing dominion over its inhabitants. This old dark house is teeming with ghostly inhabitants responsible for violence in a manner of different ways. As Roderick goes down the line of portraits of his ancestors, he discusses their crimes, "merchant of flesh... assassin.... Harlot, murderess... slave trader... mass murderer."⁶⁸ He goes on to say, evil "is reality, like any living thing, it can be created and was created by these people. The history of the Ushers, is a history of savage degradations.... For hundreds of years, foul thoughts and foul deeds have been committed within its walls. The house itself is evil now."⁶⁹ The house of Usher is a death world, an environment created by those who had the power to decide who lived and who died, which has now backfired on the present heirs, dooming them to death unless they wish to continue the history of violence and evil.

HAUNTED POSSIBILITIES

While my work has chosen to focus on haunted house horror films, as I've discussed previously, horror as a cinematic genre is composed of thousands of texts and ripe for these theoretical readings. I'm sure different conclusions and questions are raised when one looks at slasher films and their necropolitical implications, or possession films, rape revenge films, torture porn films from the post 9/11 era, and more. All of these films depict different kinds of

⁶⁸ *House of Usher*, directed by Roger Corman (American International Pictures, 1960), 0:40:56 to 0:41:39, <https://www.amazon.com/House-Usher-Roger-Corman/dp/B001MLBHEE>.

⁶⁹ *House of Usher*, 0:42:26 to 0:43:04.

death worlds and relationships with violence, domination, trauma, and sociopolitical context. To further the push to take horror seriously, dismiss the notion of films as a simple form of escapism, and emphasize the importance of intersectional scholarship, interrogating these films' place in our violent and ghostly post-colonial world is an important step. In the following chapter I apply this haunted necropolitics to haunted house films to explore the ways in which ghosts are the ones expressing domination, and power in the form of violence, over the inhabitants. I discuss the ways class plays an important role in these stories, exposing those in search of a discount to violence and trauma. In addition, how these narratives can be perceived as indicative of the reality of the so-called American Dream, proving that not everyone is able to make that goal a reality. I consider the identities of those being tormented, how they found themselves in these dangerous situations, and how each member of the family unit experiences the hauntings.

Chapter 2: There's No Place Like Home

A spectre is haunting the home— the spectre of financial ruin⁷⁰

Foundational to American mythology is the understanding of American culture as classless and meritocratic. America has seen, in even the last 50 years, a shift in the way the country deals with concepts of poverty and wealth distribution.⁷¹ Since the 1980s, American culture and politics have become increasingly hostile towards the working class and those in poverty. In one example, this classism has intersected with race and gender to form the mythic image of the “Welfare Queen,” a figure that haunts conservative speeches arguing for the evisceration of safety nets and government assistance, and the favorite target of racist vitriol by those who still subscribe to the meritocratic myth of American society.⁷² According to this belief it is always the individual at fault when they find themselves in poverty, never a systemic problem. This allows class to exist as an invisible aspect of American dialogue, including within academic analysis of media, which, “ignores the important role that differentials of wealth, power, and prestige have on the representations Americans make of and about themselves.”⁷³ When interviewed about his 1989 horror film *Society* producer/director Brian Yuzna discussed the film’s depiction of classism saying, if Americans are forced to come face to face with class it “threaten(s) their whole world. The American world-view is predicated on this idea that those who have more really deserve it.”⁷⁴ In order to shed light on the way class plays a vital role in

⁷⁰ This is my take on the famous opening of *The Communist Manifesto*, placing it in the context of America’s relationship with class and real-estate.

⁷¹ David Simmons, *American Horror Fiction and Class: From Poe to Twilight*, Palgrave Gothic (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1-3.

⁷² For more work on the hostile climate fostered around poverty and meritocracy – and how it intersects with race and gender see: Adair (2001), Hancock (2004), Foster (2008), and Gibson (2015).

⁷³ Simmons, 6.

⁷⁴ Annalee Newitz, location 106-110.

haunted house films, and to challenge its frequently ignored nature, this chapter will pay special attention to mentions of class, both implicit and explicit, in these films.

The opening sentence of Marx and Engels' 1848 document *The Communist Manifesto*, "a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism," while specific to Europe at the time, can be easily translated to a more modern American context.⁷⁵ There is a spectre haunting America – the spectre of class, and it has been there for centuries. Class is both present yet absent from American culture in a very noteworthy way, it haunts the American landscape like a ghost. Borrowing from Derrida and his work on Marx, the figure of the ghost can be used to examine that which "haunts like a ghost" or as a "figuration of presence-absence, the negotiations of which compels a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."⁷⁶ Using this understanding, we can look at how class is both real and unreal in American culture, it is real in the sense that American society is filled with unequal distribution of money and resources, but it is also made unreal in the way American politics and mythology refuses to acknowledge its integral role in structuring individual opportunities, presents, and futures. In addition, in *Specters of Marx* Derrida discusses both Marx's and communism's haunting presence after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and reflects on the historical nature of hauntings, writing, "haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents."⁷⁷ This understanding of hauntings and their close ties to discussions of class easily translates into the figure of the American haunted home. Further, the American haunted home can be reinterpreted within a necropolitical approach, making visible the ways the haunted home is expressing power over the residents, deciding who will live and who is doomed for death and attempting to enact

⁷⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. David Harvey (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2008), 31.

⁷⁶ Quoted in del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities" 7-9.

⁷⁷ Quoted in del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities" 14.

that outcome through violent altercations with ghosts and the occasional demonic entity. In many ways through a discussion of capitalism and American ideology one must engage with necropolitics, and the structures of violence and constant injury, that protect and normalize these systems.

American neoliberal mythology rests on the idea that those who are rich earned it and worked harder than others, and on the other end, that those who are poor, or homeless, or struggling, have not worked hard enough and are responsible for their situation. As discussed in David Simmons' book on class in American horror fiction, "we have turned to thinking that the poor are fundamentally different... that this is their choice."⁷⁸ Combining this understanding of class specific to American culture with Mbembe's necropolitics, we can glean an understanding of capitalism as a form of horror and violence. Capitalism is not simply a system of economics separate to the violent reality it creates, a reality of extreme wealth inequality, a lack of safety nets for those struggling, equating human value to their productivity and more. Capitalism creates a world filled with horror. In her book *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*, Annalee Newitz explores "capital as dead labor" and capitalism as a form of "symbolic and literal death" that "mutilates the laborer into a fragment of a man."⁷⁹ Just as Mbembe discussed in *Necropolitics*, these subjects are a living dead that exist in a state of constant injury. On top of living in a deadened state caused by one's forced participation in the capitalist system, the ghost of financial ruin is always haunting Americans, especially post-Great Recession and currently during the Covid-19 recession. The connection of hauntings and ghosts to American capitalism appears both in this everlasting fear of financial crisis but also in the

⁷⁸ Simmons, 2.

⁷⁹ Newitz, location 148-157.

form of “the alien forces that exert control over the working-class individual’s life.”⁸⁰ In many ways, Simmons writes, poverty is a life haunted.⁸¹

When discussing the American family as depicted in media it is vital to consider what the family unit stands for, especially in regard to horror content. American media in general has long depicted the family as a “symbolic alarm bell of our era’s internal and external problems”⁸² and further, in terms of horror, “American anxieties around the breakdown of the family unit” have frequently been represented “through the horror of the haunted house.”⁸³ The reason the family unit has been a favorite vehicle for depicting social issues stems from what the American family represents. The family is, in many ways, the most basic unit of society, and reflects and reproduces the social relationships and systems of power within American society at large.⁸⁴ As Tony Williams writes in *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, “the family is an institutional prop of bourgeois capitalism, producing colonized subjects and reproducing ideological values.”⁸⁵ While it may be a gut reaction to see the American home and the family inside it as separated from the “outside” world, it is impossible to consider families as removed from the structures of power and social, political, and economic norms that structure the way one sees the world and themselves. The American family prepares children to be American citizens, teaching them of the capitalist norms that they are expected to subscribe to as they grow up.

⁸⁰ Simmons, 90.

⁸¹ Simmons, 21.

⁸² Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, Updated (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 9. See also Murphy (2015).

⁸³ Emily E. Roach, “Haunted Families, Queer Temporalities and the Horrors of Normativity,” in *The Streaming of Hill House: Essays on the Haunting Netflix Adaption*, ed. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2020), location 4323, Kindle.

⁸⁴ Williams, 4 & 12.

⁸⁵ Williams, 12.

Not only have haunted homes been a favorite way to depict anxieties around the American family, but they have also served as a reflection of economic anxieties and were produced out of times of economic recessions or stagnation.⁸⁶ During times of economic turmoil the housing dream becomes either completely inaccessible or a kind of nightmare. Lindsey Michael Banco reflects on these ideas in his analysis of “recession horror” and the “haunted housing crisis.” In his analysis of horror fiction post- 2000s housing crisis, he draws connections between haunted tales from the 70s and the newer works that were produced in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis. “Horror novelists and filmmakers of the 2000s and 2010s,” he writes, “responded as they did in the 1970s: with haunted house tales... the burden of inheritance trope.”⁸⁷ In both cases these narratives flip the American Dream on its head, where the American home, or the “primary marker of class and our central symbol of domesticity...becomes the site of nightmares.”⁸⁸ We can go further in our understanding of the home when we consider the role a home plays in one’s ability to move through life. Having an address, in many ways, makes you a full person in the eyes of certain American systems. You need an address to open a bank account, get a loan, get a job, to file taxes, to sign up for health insurance, to vote in most places, and so on. And beyond that, there is a difference in social status between renters and property owners. To say, “I rent a home” carries different connotations than saying “I bought it.” And real estate is also a favorite way for many people to build their wealth.

⁸⁶ Lindsey Michael Banco, “Recession Horror: The Haunted Housing Crisis in Contemporary Fiction,” in *Dark Forces at Work: Essays on Social Dynamics and Cinematic Horrors*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, 2019, 82.

⁸⁷ Banco, 84. Bernice M. Murphy writes similar thoughts in her piece “It’s Not the House that’s Haunted: Demons, Debt, and the Family in Peril in Recent Horror Cinema.” Connecting to the American Dream she writes about the sub-prime mortgage crisis, “it is relevant for our purposes too that the ceaseless desire for home ownership... was a major factor in the economic crash.” Murphy, 245.

⁸⁸ Banco, 79.

Because the home is so integral to social mobility and aspirational wealth, it is also simultaneously a symbol of the “nightmare of dispossession, downward mobility.”⁸⁹ Having a home now doesn’t mean you will always have a home, especially in today’s economy. Further, the term “dispossession” is a term that requires a deeper look. Not only do haunted house films frequently depict the loss of a home, but they also touch on the loss of one’s autonomy over their body. Possession is a common theme included in the haunted house film, extending the fear of losing one’s physical belongings to also losing control of one’s body. Mikal J. Gaines writes about the possession subplots in haunted house horror as reflective of “underlying worry about how recent economic and sociocultural upheaval has undermined fundamental liberal concepts of proprietary selfhood... a deep rooted fear that the mind, body, and soul – those most intimate territories of the self over which we can claim sole ownership.”⁹⁰ Post-colonialist scholarship has expanded on these concepts, “fundamentally challeng[ing] the idea that all political subjects, actors and bodies are (dis)possessed of the self in a universal or uniform way” and further, that “how ‘we’ experience the interiority of personhood in radically different ways.”⁹¹ What is particularly interesting is how this plays out in a sub-genre that is extremely white. It is vital to consider the privilege of dispossession being something one considers to be fictional, instead of a lived reality for generations of Americans. The idea that one owns their body is unfortunately a privileged position. People who were assigned female at birth, intersex folks, transgender folks, disabled folks, and people of color frequently experience instances of their autonomy being removed in the form of legislation and state and personal violence. Possession narratives in

⁸⁹ Curtis, location 2012-2034.

⁹⁰ Mikal J. Gaines, “They Are Still Here: Possession and Dispossession in the 21st Century Haunted House Film,” in *The Spaces and Places of Horror*, ed. Francesco Pascuzzi, 2020, 179–202, 183.

⁹¹ Brenna Bhandar and Davina Bhandar, “Cultures of Dispossession: Rights, Status and Identities,” *Darkmatter: In the Ruins of Imperial Culture Reflections on Dispossession: Critical Feminisms*, no. 14 (May 16, 2016), <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2016/05/16/cultures-of-dispossession/>.

American culture cannot be fully removed from the “histories of slavery; subjection to military, imperial, and economic violence; poverty, securitarian regimes, biopolitical subjectivation, liberal possessive individualism, neoliberal governmentality, and precaritization.”⁹²

“IT’S THE DEAL OF A LIFETIME”

A family in need encounters the deal of a lifetime; struggling financially they finally find a house on the market that seems to check all their boxes, and shockingly, it’s affordable. Or, in a similar kind of tale, a group of people in desperate need of money find themselves in a situation too good to be true, just stay the night in a home and all their financial woes will disappear. These two premises are frequently utilized in the set-ups of haunted house tales, emphasizing the economic motivations that cause these individuals to act in ways that may seem less than logical. Barry Curtis writes, “the individuals or families who experience these spirits from the past are often in tenuous emotional or financial situations... susceptibility to haunting is usually indicated or promoted by a withdrawal from society.”⁹³ This introduces the idea that part of the reason these families deal with the haunting is due to their existence outside of the “norm.” These families also frequently deal with deeply emotional hardships, whether it comes from the death of a loved one, an illness, relationship tensions and more. In this section I utilize specific films as case studies to better explore how the previously discussed theories of haunted necropolitics, and systems of power like classism can be read within the films.

The films I have selected are those that are considered to be classic haunted house films. If one was asked to name a haunted house horror movie, the most common answers would presumably be *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist*. These two films popularized many of the now classic themes that define haunted house films including the family focus, the slowly

⁹² Gaines, 180.

⁹³ Curtis, location 1905 and 1914.

increasing severity of the ghost's actions, the economic focus of the plot, and the gendered implications of the hauntings. However, they also differ in important ways. *Amityville* is very much the traditional haunted house film, where a family moves into a new home and after experiencing aspects of a haunting flee the home and never return. *Poltergeist* meanwhile depicts a delayed haunting that ends in the complete destruction of the haunted home. But both films, while different in their specific stories, offer important insights into the various ways class and capitalism structure the tale of the haunted house horror film. These two films speak to the ways we structure and understand who is portrayed as a victim. It is worth noting that both films chose to depict only white families and supporting characters, encouraging an understanding of these film's depictions of class as inextricably linked with race as well.

Originally a book published in 1977, *The Amityville Horror* film version was released in 1979, during a time of economic turmoil and anxiety. During the mid-late 1970s inflation was at an all-time high, yet economic output was stagnating, multiple American cities were near or in bankruptcy, and unemployment rates were rising.⁹⁴ America more broadly was experiencing an economic horror story of its own, in addition to what President Jimmy Carter referred to as a "crisis of confidence" that extended past economics to a moral and spiritual crisis that could be witnessed in America's obsession with material goods and the self.⁹⁵ This was the context that produced *Amityville* and its economic focus.

The original 1979 and 2005 remake of *The Amityville Horror* tell the same basic tale, a family of five find an amazing deal on a home that would normally be totally out of their price range. When the real estate agent discloses the truth behind the affordable price tag, that Ronald DeFeo Jr. murdered his entire family in the home one year prior, Kathy and George decide to

⁹⁴ Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, Twentieth-Century American Culture (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pages xxi-xxx, and 11-12.

⁹⁵ Kaufman, 16-17.

move forward with the purchase regardless, motivated by the price. As Kathy, George, and Kathy's three children from a previous marriage move in, they experience strange events and emotions. The babysitter gets locked in a closet by an unknown power, the youngest child Amy befriends an imaginary entity, a nun and priest experience health issues after entering the home, and George grows more and more aggressive. No matter how much George emphasizes that homes don't have memories or the ability to kill, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that as the home's intentions become more sinister. From the beginning, these two iterations of the Amityville story emphasize the fact that the Lutz family never would have been able to afford this house without the decreased price made possible by the DeFeo murders. This is indicative of capitalist culture, where the death and tragedy of one, is frequently a tool for profit or benefit for another. Sentences like "nothing else for this price," "deal of a lifetime," "houses here are out of our price range" litter the dialogue as Kathy and George peruse the home and marvel at all it has to offer. When Kathy expresses concern over the murderous events George consoles her with the words, "houses don't have memories," something that later on is proven alarmingly false.⁹⁶ What is notable though is that even if the home isn't seen as an embodiment of the horrors that previously occurred within the walls, the home is still understood as a place of injury, just economic injury. The \$1500 cash meant to pay for the caterer at Kathy brother's wedding goes missing in the home forcing George to pay the price; a man from the IRS continuously calls George; he's been ignoring signing paychecks for his small business, presumably because he doesn't have the money. This last point also extends the economic impact of the haunting to those in George's life who have never even seen the home. All of these struggles come back to the home, summed up when George complains about the draft in the home with the biting

⁹⁶ *The Amityville Horror*, directed by Stuart Rosenberg (American International Pictures, 1979), 0:9:53to 0:9:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82j1E4dmcVg>.

sentence, “they’ll nickel and dime you to death.”⁹⁷ So even if he doesn’t see the home as “evil,” owning the home connects to injury and death, a state of constant pain and suffering over the ways a home will drain one’s bank account. George in the 2005 remake makes a similar statement when he complains, “she’s happy, I’m broke” gendering the home and its effects on the owners.⁹⁸

In both the 1979 and 2005 version George make a fuss about the home and its economic impact, refusing to part with it and the symbolic value it holds. 1979 Kathy begs George to take the events in the home seriously, saying something must be done, and later sobs as she pleads with George to accompany the family as they flee. George responds with the words “This is my house” and later, in response to Kathy’s plea, “Let’s just pack up our stuff and go,” he says, “we’re not going anywhere, you were the one that wanted the house. This is it so just shut up,” before slapping her.⁹⁹ 2005 George similarly responds to Kathy’s urge that the family needs to leave with the retort, “Everything we have is in this house, everything... I’m not going anywhere and neither are you so shut up about that!”¹⁰⁰

Class also makes itself very apparent in these films when one considers the desires of many of these families for upward mobility and the role a home plays in acquiring the American Dream. Not only do they latch on to these homes because they’re a once in a lifetime chance, but also because of what these homes represent. A single-family home presumably isn’t always the most economically frugal choice, but it has an undeniable draw motivated by its integral role in the American Dream and expectations of what American families should look like. This most

⁹⁷ *The Amityville Horror*, 0:21:2 to 0:21:25.

⁹⁸ *The Amityville Horror*, directed by Andrew Douglas (MGM Distribution Co., 2005), 0: 11:10 to 0:11:14, <https://www.hulu.com/movie/the-amityville-horror-ba100981-0e0c-47bf-83f6-ba9322b92d7d>.

⁹⁹ *The Amityville Horror*, 1:38:10 to 1:38:34.

¹⁰⁰ *The Amityville Horror*, 2005, 0:57:56 to 0:59:35.

notably comes to the fore in the two Amityville films where the dialogue explicitly references upward mobility. In the 1979 version of the film, when George and Kathy are discussing their new home, she mentions, in regards to her family, “we’ve always been a bunch of renters, I’m the first one to have bought a house.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, in the 2005 remake when Kathy is emphasizing how much she wants to get the house, even with George’s hesitancy, she says “we deserve this George, we deserve this” and later says, in regards to a single family home, “this is the life we want.”¹⁰² David Simmons summarizes this in his discussion of *The Amityville Horror* book, writing that it is a “haunted house narrative that relies, in part, on the threat of downward mobility for its scares. Indeed, the text can be read as a sort of warning that if something seems too good to be true then it probably is.”¹⁰³

The way Kathy is treated throughout the haunting is not an anomaly in haunted house films, but reflects the gendered way hauntings are experienced. Kathy, and countless other women in haunted house films experience danger that is not limited to ghosts or demons, but also includes their husbands. George becomes increasingly violent and dangerous as the film progresses, taking the majority of his anger out on Kathy. Similarly in other haunting films like *The Shining* (1980), Wendy is in danger because her husband Jack is the one swayed by the negative energy of the hotel, or in *Poltergeist 2* (1986) Diane experiences danger in the form of the poltergeist but also, perhaps more harrowingly, in the form of her possessed husband Steve attempting to rape her. Emily Roach discusses these ideas in “Haunted Families, Queer Temporalities and the Horrors of Normativity,” writing, “there are no women who can escape the

¹⁰¹ *The Amityville Horror*, 0:32:23 to 0:32:30.

¹⁰² *The Amityville Horror*, 2005, 0:10:30 to 0:10:55.

¹⁰³ Simmons, 143.

violence of the family home completely unscathed.”¹⁰⁴ Roach, notably, writes this about homes in general, but a haunted home only intensifies this truth. As touched on earlier in this chapter, the American home and the family that lives inside of it experiences a microcosm of society; patriarchy on a personal level one could say.¹⁰⁵ In all of these examples discussed previously, the men are the heads of the family and the house, it is *their* home and they get the final say in deciding what the family will do in response to the haunting. Not only are the women of the family or group in positions of submission, but women’s bodies are frequently the ones who are the most terrorized and punished. In *Paranormal Activity* (2009) it’s Katie who is bitten by the demonic force, in *Grave Encounters* (2011) it is Sasha whose back is scratched with the message “hello,” in *Ghostwatch* (1992) Suzanne is the one covered in scratches, and in *Amityville* Kathy Lutz is the one who finds boils all over her face.

It seems no matter what, the American Dream and its capitalist home owning system will result in pain, suffering, and likely, death. The Amityville home is a death world for more than just the obvious reasons that it is scary and haunted by evil energy. It is a death world through its place on rotten land, that in the 1979 version, was a Shinnecock burial ground and where Satanic worshipper John Ketcham lived. However, notably in the 1979 version, the burial ground is a footnote in the story, instead emphasizing the existence a portal to hell living in the basement. It becomes a manner of good and evil and demonic power, instead of being forced to face a historical evil grounded in reality. In the 2005 version the land was marked by death because the home itself was previously owned by Reverend Jeremiah Ketcham, who had been said to kill and torture Indigenous people. The film shows shattered images of dead, dying, and tortured

¹⁰⁴ Emily E. Roach, location 4534.

¹⁰⁵ Robin Wood writes similarly in his work “American Family Comedy” that “the domination of the family by the father, the domination of the nation by the bourgeois class and its norms, the domination of other nations and other ideologies, more precisely, attempts at domination that inevitably fail and turn to mutual destruction - the structures interlock.” Grant., *Robin Wood*, 190.

Indigenous peoples throughout the film, terrorizing the young children with their bloody faces. These dead and undead bodies are emphasized towards the end of the film, once George discovers the formerly forgotten jail cells in the basement. The 2005 *Amityville* home is built, even more so than the average American home, on a history of racial violence. In the words of Maisha Wester, a scholar on the Gothic and race, “there is no land in America that isn’t soaked with minority grief and blood.¹⁰⁶”

The home is also a death world through the environment it creates for the DeFeo’s and Lutz’s. It exercises ultimate power over the inhabitants and decides who dies and how they meet their death. The house’s power is what made Father Delaney choke, fall ill and injured, it was the house that blinded him, and then tried to kill him and Father Bolen by taking control of their car. The house was responsible for Kathy Lutz’s rash filled face, for imprisoning the babysitter and terrifying her, the house was what drove George to attempt to hurt his family, and motivated Robert DeFeo to successfully kill his whole family. The house was the actor in the story, holding tremendous power, and used that power to create a death world.

REAGAN’S HOUSE OF HORRORS

Just one year after Ronald Reagan was sworn in as the 40th President, *Poltergeist* was released in theaters. *Poltergeist*, like *Amityville*, came out of a very specific economic and culture moment, a time when America was learning about a new approach to its economic turmoil. “Reaganomics” was a response to the continued stagflation and unemployment that defined the late 1970s but also had an important moral component to it as well. Not only did this approach to American socioeconomics espouse the importance of individuality, “trickle-down” economics and deregulation, it also emphasized white conservative family values and national

¹⁰⁶ Maisha Wester, ““Whose the Real Monster Here?” Racial Nightmare in American Horror Films” (Romancing the Gothic, Zoom Webinar, January 16, 2021).

strength and identity that was at odds with the “dangerous” communist practices of the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁷ Just as Carter had warned against it in 1979, the 1980s was a decade defined by consumption, patriotism, individualism, and the haves and have-nots. *Poltergeist* speaks directly to these sociopolitical realities, opening with the National Anthem and the famous image of GIs at Iwo Jima, and later zooms in on a book all about Ronald Reagan. In addition, the film’s focus on technology, namely that of the television set, positions it squarely in the 1980s.

The trailer for the movie opens up on a typical California suburban landscape accompanied by the voice over, “The house looks just like the one next to it, and the one next to that, and the one next to that...”¹⁰⁸ Immediately the film emphasizes the same-ness of the suburban location and places it firmly in a white environment that has flourished with the help of redlining. In 1978 California voters voted in favor of legislation called “Proposition 13,” which has contributed heavily to economic and housing inequalities between white populations and communities of color. The amendment limited the property tax on commercial and residential properties and at first may seem harmless. However, the lowered property tax rate meant less money for public services and safety nets. These wealthier communities agreed to give up better funding for state-wide services in order to avoid their resources benefiting higher density areas with more diverse populations that required higher taxes to pay for community services and safety nets.¹⁰⁹ The amendment has made housing less accessible and affordable, has hurt funding

¹⁰⁷ Graham Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s*, Twentieth-Century American Culture (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1-8.

¹⁰⁸ Movieclips Classic Trailers, *Poltergeist (1982) Official Trailer - JoBeth Williams, Craig T. Nelson Horror Movie HD*, February 27, 2014, 2:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eZgEKjYJqA>.

¹⁰⁹ EJ Toppin, “Reforming Anti-Tax Prop 13 Is a Racial Justice Issue,” UC Berkeley Othering & Belonging Institute, June 3, 2019, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/blog-reforming-anti-tax-prop-13-racial-justice-issue>.

for education, and has kept traditionally white spaces white.¹¹⁰ This, even if it isn't explicitly mentioned, is the context that *Poltergeist* arises from and speaks to.

In the film, viewers are introduced to the Freeling family who live in a typical suburban home in the new Cuesta Verde development. The family moved into the model home before anyone else lived in the area as a perk of father Steve's job as a real-estate salesman. After around seven years of domestic bliss, things began to change. Carol Ann, the youngest, witnesses something in the static of the TV and is called to it, later informing the family that the TV people are "here." After that night things take a turn for the strange for the Freeling family. Diane, the mother, finds that that items in the kitchen have begun to move by themselves. At first, the supernatural occurrence stirs emotions of excitement and wonder instead of terror. Chairs move around on their own, and Diane experiences a child-like thrill testing the limits of the mysterious powers. However, these exciting supernatural experiences quickly turn from parlor trick to nightmare. During a horrific rainstorm, the giant tree outside Carol Ann and Robbie's room comes to life and breaks through the window, taking Robbie with it. While Steve and Diane are focused on saving their child, the closet door to the kids' room opens and sucks Carol Ann inside. Robbie then discovers that Carol Ann is speaking through the TV, where she is trapped. After the traumatic night, Steve turns to a group of parapsychologists for help. To their shock the Freeling home has been taken over by spirits, specifically a poltergeist, who has transformed Carol Ann and Robbie's room into a kind of alternate reality. After an investigation they learn that there is both an opening and exit to a spiritual world inside the unassuming suburban home. It is notable, as was mentioned in my analysis of the 2017 film *It*, that children are included in the list of "others" in horror, and even outside of films children are some of the most powerless

¹¹⁰ John A. Powell, "Voting to Repeal Proposition 13 Will Shrink Racial Equity Gaps on Property Tax Rates," *The Sacramento Bee*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.sacbee.com/opinion/california-forum/article244415522.html>.

members of society. To choose children to prey on is a further illustration of the ways this haunting disproportionately affects those who are already othered or marginalized in some way.

Their home has literally become a death world, home to multiple spirits who have taken over. The Freeling family lives in fear of their home, just like in *Amityville*, scared to go into certain rooms. The house is no longer their domain, the spirits in the home now hold ultimate power over the family, killing Robbie's pet bird, spoiling meat and other food, stealing Carol Ann into their dimension, and traumatizing one of the parapsychologists by causing him to hallucinate pulling the skin off his own face. The Freeling family lives in a world of death and the living-dead, mourning their daughter even before she has truly died. In a break from the haunting, Steve meets with his boss, Mr. Teague, and learns that "phase 5" of the development plan is to build up into the hills around the valley, necessitating the removal of a cemetery. Mr. Teague assures Steve that it's a simple process and they had done it before, for Cuesta Verde and nothing had gone wrong then. At the end of the film both the Freeling family and the viewers learn that the cause of the haunting comes from the immoral business practices of Mr. Teague, who, instead of truly moving the graveyard that use to sit where Cuesta Verde now sits, he just removed the headstones, leaving the corpses in the ground.

Poltergeist is a very real example of the ways in which American culture, in particular the suburban American Dream, is built on top of the bodies of those who came before. All in the name of development, progress, and good business, the real-estate company made a decision to disrespect corpses in order to make more money by building cookie cutter homes to sell off to those chasing the American Dream. In many ways this practice can be seen as capitalism being fueled by death, that the capitalist system seeks "to turn others' suffering into profit."¹¹¹ Notably,

¹¹¹ Gaines,195.

contrary to popular understanding, the burial ground is filled with unknown bodies of unknown origin, and is not the site of, in the words of Mr. Teague, “an ancient tribal burial ground.”¹¹² But, even if we don’t know who the bodies used to be, there is no denying that these homes have been built on stolen land regardless, and that American progress has been built at the expense of countless marginalized bodies that are intended to stay forgotten and buried. *Poltergeist* is what happens when bodies refuse to stay buried and forgotten. What is interesting is that Mr. Teague leaves the whole situation unscathed; instead it’s Steve and his family who suffer the punishment of the capitalist business practices.

In line with the haunted experience of the Lutz family, the Freeling family members experience the hauntings in specific ways tied to their identities. Carol Ann is the one targeted and the only one taken, which is common for young girls in haunted house movies and tales of “real” hauntings like the Enfield Poltergeist. Young girls are the targets in *Amityville*, *Ghostwatch*, *Dark Water* (2005), *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011), and the two *Conjuring* films (2013 and 2016). As mentioned before, children hold a status as “other” in American culture and horror films, which explains the targeting of Carol Ann and also why Robbie is tormented too. Similar to the gendered experience of the haunting in *Amityville*, the trauma experienced by Diane, and the power she holds, is markedly different from that of Steve. While it is Diane who experiences the events first, as is the norm in these movies, because Steve is shown undeniable proof at the start of the events, there isn’t the same struggle for recognition and belief as there was in something like *Amityville*. However, we still see, as we did with George Lutz, that Steve is the one who takes control of the situation and family due to his position as father. He decisively tells Diane, “no one goes into the kitchen until I know what’s happening” giving

¹¹² *Poltergeist*, directed by Tobe Hooper (MGM/UA Entertainment Co., 1982), 1:13:10 to 1:13:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_xMF7hvhtU.

himself the power.¹¹³ Diane is notably the one who has to go into the ghost dimension to save Carol Ann, but it is interesting to consider how Steve's power to control the situation is then effectively removed only when one leaves the traditional living American plane of existence for the topsy-turvy death world. Another gendered aspect of haunting arises after the family and viewers are lulled into thinking everything has been fixed. As Diane relaxes in bed after a bath, she is attacked by the poltergeist. The attack is extremely sexualized in part because Diane is only wearing a t-shirt and underwear, but also in the way the unseen force touches her. The helplessness she experiences when the force pulls up her shirt and then manipulates her body is irremovable from associations with sexual assault in America, and in particular sexual assault in the family home.¹¹⁴

WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST LEAVE?

Even when these films stress money as the motivating force for these characters' actions, its rarely understood as part of larger discussions of classism and American capitalism. I have discussed previously in this chapter the privilege to say no, to refuse an offer because you know there are other options. For many people there are not multiple options, and it is important to remember that one cannot truly consent or say "no" in high-pressure situations where one is being coerced or threatened, if you have no other choice, your "no" is not a true "no." Which brings me to an exploration of the "privilege to say no more." The ability to draw a line and refuse to accept anymore of something, whether it be microaggressions or oppressive language, for example, is a privilege. Creating boundaries, enforcing them, and having them respected is not a universal experience. Within this train of thought, it's important to consider the comment viewers frequently scream at the screen "just leave!" As Eddie Murphy articulated in a standup

¹¹³ *Poltergeist*, 0:36:14 to 0:36:29.

¹¹⁴ It is worth noting that marital rape did not become a crime in all states until 1993, 11 years after this film.

routine, “I was watching *Poltergeist* last month. I got a question: why don’t white people leave the house when there’s a ghost in the house? Y’all stay in the house too fuckin long; just get the fuck out of the house..... In *The Amityville Horror*, the ghost told them to get out of the house. White people stayed in there! Now that’s a hint!”¹¹⁵ In his book *American Nightmares* Dale Bailey uses this quote in a few ways, but notably as a way to reflect on the experience of a Black man moving into a white middle-class neighborhood. And this is a vitally important connection to make, one I will further discuss later in this chapter. But at this moment I want to focus on the comment Bailey makes later, “people in haunted house stories act in consistently unbelievable ways; they remain in the house long after any rational person would leave. The illogical behavior of the characters is necessary.”¹¹⁶

I want to challenge this understanding of haunted house films in a few ways. While it is true that getting annoyed at the protagonists of haunted house films is expected at this point, and frequently is felt by myself, I want to unpack these claims of “illogical” and “unbelievable” behaviors. Because, as I have laid out previously, economic issues are a staple of the sub-genre and we cannot understand the actions of these families as occurring within a classless vacuum. Our understanding of the motivations for these characters changes when we consider how their mobility is directly informed by their financial situation. For example, we see this in the real world when women are stuck in unhealthy or abusive relationships in part because they don’t have the money to leave.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, abuse like this is frequently pretended away by observers or those involved.

¹¹⁵ Bailey, location 1040-1058.

¹¹⁶ Bailey, Location 1094.

¹¹⁷ This is also known as economic abuse/financial abuse - Lindsay Dodgson, “Using Money as a Weapon Is Called Financial Abuse — and It’s the Ultimate Form of Manipulative Control,” *Business Insider*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-financial-abuse-2018-6>.

There is a kind of gaslighting that commonly accompanies the hauntings in these films. Women or young girls are generally the ones who first experience the haunting, perhaps in part due to the fact that the home is the domain of women and children and thus they are there more often than the husband. But it also speaks again to the gendered experience of the haunting and the work of Judith Butler's work on precarious lives. It is not random that women and young children, two groups considered to be others and thus living in precarity, are the ones who first come into contact with the haunting and are the ones put in the greatest danger.¹¹⁸ When these women and children share their supernatural experience it is frequently met with disbelief, mockery, or a complete refusal to listen.¹¹⁹ Without "objective" proof Steve Freeling refused to believe the supernatural presence in his home, and without any proof George and Kathy Lutz silenced Amy's repeated assertions that her friend Jody existed and spoke to her. Likewise, in *Dark Water*, a haunted house tale reimagined in an apartment complex, mother Dahlia refuses to listen to her daughter Cecilia's comments about her friend Natasha. Children and wives are ignored in favor of objective proof, something that is common in cases of assault, bullying, and critiques of oppressive systems. The burden of proof is put on the victim, accompanied by a kind of gaslighting rhetoric that makes the victims in question start to doubt their own sanity and reality. Both the existence of ghosts and the words of women and children are ignored and wished away. And children in particular carry the burden of having no power in both the home and in society more broadly. Children are literally considered "dependents," they are dependent on adults and unable to move about the world and society freely. And while the home is largely considered to be the safest space possible for a child or teen, the reality is much more complex.

¹¹⁸ Bernice M. Murphy writes that in haunted house films, male characters are associated with technology and science while female characters are tied to the spectral, the "other side." Murphy, 235.

¹¹⁹ Tim Snelson, "The (Re) Possession of the American Home: Negative Equity, Gender Inequality, and the Housing Crisis Horror Story," in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 160.

Children are frequently at the mercy of their parents or guardians, stuck without a way to leave. This is especially true for many queer minors who are frequently forced to stay closeted or in unsafe situations inside their family home until they are 18 or have the finances to leave.

The idea of not leaving an unsafe home is not illogical or unbelievable in these situations, it is a symptom of the American capitalist patriarchal family system. In addition, adopting the perspective of “why didn’t they just leave” promotes a victim blaming rhetoric that understands the victims as “bear(ing) a degree of responsibility for their fates.”¹²⁰ It is also worth considering the realistic situations where people in need of a place to live encounter unsafe or unsatisfactory situations. For example, interrogating the privilege of being picky and heeding warnings of danger, especially when considering that there are certain groups of people that are almost always in danger.

Further, if the family has put all of their money into the home, how can they leave and stay somewhere else? For example, the Lutz family in *Amityville* lost all their assets after leaving the home and never returning, and the Freeling family lost their money after their haunted home was swallowed up into ghostly dimension and could not receive any money from their insurance company. Stephen King, in his 1981 non-fiction book *Danse Macabre*, reflected on *Amityville* writing, “it’s an economic horror story... the movie might as well have been subtitled *The Horror of the Shrinking Bank Account*.”¹²¹ And for the people in situations like *The House on Haunted Hill* or *THIR13EN Ghosts*, these people are literally locked inside, and in the case of *House on Haunted Hill*, they would be forfeiting \$1 million by leaving, a choice that is far from simple.

¹²⁰ Bailey, location 1280.

¹²¹ Quoted in Meehan, location 3014.

HAUNTED HOUSES UNEXPLORED

The list of films explored in this chapter is of course not an exhaustive list and only scratches the surface of films that can be analyzed through a haunted necropolitical lens that stresses the violence of capitalism. Future scholarship can explore the richness of the genre through further consideration of films like *THIRTEEN Ghosts* (2001) and *House on Haunted Hill* (1999), films that tell different stories to those like *Poltergeist* and *The Amityville Horror*. These two remakes from the late 90's/early 00's lean in to the premise of a group of people locked inside a haunted home, literally unable to leave, placed in the deadly situation for monetary gain. These films emphasize the way in which one's ability, or lack thereof, to leave a haunted home, is directly tied to money and class, in different ways from the previously explored films in these chapters. *House on Haunted Hill* (1959) is probably the best-known film that depicts a group of people forced to stay in a home overnight to make money. The 1999 remake ups the ante and sets the film in a home that has been adapted from its past as a psychiatric institute for the "criminally insane." A seemingly randomly selected group of people are brought to the home and told that if they survive the night, they will be awarded \$1 million. The film does not pull punches when it comes to hammering home the economic focus of the plot, including a line by the host, Stephen Price, when he refers to the group of people as "a group so hungry for money that they'd be willing to do anything."¹²² This continues when he introduces the guests to the rules of the game, announcing they can expect to get a million dollars if they stay the whole night and survive, "if you die, you lose. Your check gets divvied-up by those still amongst the living... Anyone who's not comfortable with the rules, you're free to walk, anytime. Seven

¹²² *House on Haunted Hill*, directed by William Malone (Warner Bros., 1999), 0:21:02 to 0:21:08, <https://www.amazon.com/House-Haunted-Hill-Geoffrey-Rush/dp/B004N17J9C>.

digits poorer, goes without saying.”¹²³ The film depicts people caught in two nets, the net of economic instability requiring them to put themselves in danger by staying the night in a haunted home for a life-changing amount of money, but also literally caught in the net of the house that locks down and prevents anyone from leaving.

On a slightly different note, *THIRTEEN Ghosts* focuses on the Kriticos family, who are struggling financially and emotionally after the mother of the family died tragically in a fire that destroyed their home. The film takes place over the course of one night when they are first shown the mansion that Arthur Kriticos’ uncle left him when he died hunting ghosts. From the beginning the mansion is obviously not normal, composed almost entirely of glass and metal and inscribed with mysterious letters. When the family gets locked in it becomes obvious that the home is not just odd but deadly, both through the ghosts that inhabit it, and the literal motivation of the home. The home was created with evil intentions and very literally expresses authority over the inhabitants by attempting to kill them and reach its true potential, as the eye to hell. What’s important to consider, is that the family was brought to this, at first just questionable space, because of the promise of money and the economic security that they so long for. Economic motivations led them to a world of trauma and death.

These two examples demonstrate opportunities for further analysis and the importance of emphasizing class issues in American horror. Another area of opportunity for future exploration can also be found in considerations of long-term trauma. As I have mentioned previously, ghosts and hauntings are innately tied to trauma, specifically trauma that festers. This leads to considerations of what happens to these injured families post-haunting. In *Amityville* (1979), the priest who visits the home at the beginning of the movie later goes blind and has a mental break.

¹²³ *House on Haunted Hill*, 0:23:38 to 0:23:59.

One of the two survivors of the 1999 *House on Haunted Hill* is later found to have committed suicide in the 2007 sequel *Return to House on Haunted Hill*, and it's obvious the Freeling family are suffering from the trauma of the first film in *Poltergeist 2*. We're not sure what has happened to many of the other families that lived in haunted homes as the sequels frequently depict different families or new scenarios of terror, but it's not difficult to imagine that living in a haunted home would create longstanding trauma for those involved. All of these ideas and more can motivate future scholarship exploring haunted house horror and the structural violence depicted in the films. But in addition to these aforementioned considerations, scholarship must also always consider what is *not* depicted.

HAUNTED WHITENESS

So far, this chapter has considered how the ghosts of the American home punish those who are in vulnerable positions, especially vulnerable economic situations and along gendered lines. However, these families are by no means vulnerable in all areas of their identities, and it is worth noting that even if in many cases they could not afford to buy these homes without a discounted rate, their whiteness undoubtedly got them a foot in the door, and they are still economically stable enough to buy a home, and then leave it.

Importantly, every single family discussed in this chapter has been white, which not only spurs important discussions of naming whiteness, but also necessitates considerations of those who are erased from these haunted house films. As Toni Morrison wrote, "we can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'... certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like

neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them.”¹²⁴ Rarely if ever, is a space safe for everyone, and the fact that the single-family home, frequently in the suburbs, has been chosen for a sub-genre dedicated to making “universal safe” spaces unsafe is extremely telling. To imply the home is an inherently safe space ignores the dangerous reality many people – especially those who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color – face in this location. The danger can be internal in the form of partners or family members or external threats that manifest in a variety of ways including, break ins or no-knock warrants to name a few. I want to be clear here, that while I am putting reality in conversation with fictional stories, I never want to imply that through these connections I’m fictionalizing or trivializing real violence and deaths.¹²⁵ I am never implying that real-world instances of trauma and death are *comparable* to fictional ones, rather I seek to draw parallels between real violence and horror violence. In particular, emphasizing how these fictional settings, characters, plots, and deaths speak to our reality and cannot be understood as truly separate from the real histories of violence and danger in our culture. For many the home has not been the sanctuary it has been perceived to be. The reality of

¹²⁴ Quoted in Sharon Patricia Holland, “Introduction: Raising the Dead,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 363, Kindle.

¹²⁵ I have struggled with whether or not to include explicit mention of two prominent cases over the last year of police breaking into the wrong home. I want to both center these Black women and make clear the very real danger that exists in the home including in cases of no-knock warrants. But I also do not want to participate in the memeification and exploitation of Black people killed and traumatized by the police. I have decided to include links to articles about Anjanette Young and Breonna Taylor in an effort to raise awareness of the Black female victims of state violence. For more information on this topic (as well as more work on the violence Black women face) one can look into the #SayHerName movement, work by Kimberlé Crenshaw including her 1991 piece referenced earlier in this work, Richie (2012), Ritchie (2017), and Kaba (2021).

I want to reiterate that I do not find these cases to be similar to the deaths depicted in horror films. Rather, it feels wrong to not mention these instances and share these women’s names. To refer to no-knock warrants but not share these stories would feel like I was making these women and others like them invisible.

Anjanette Young, Sara Goodkind, Jennifer R. Zelnick, Mimi E. Kim, Sam Harell, and Jessica Toft, “#IAmHer: Anjanette Young Speaks Truth to Power,” *Affilia* 36, no. 2 (May 2021): 129–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109921996067>.

Richard A Oppel Jr, Derrick Bryson Taylor, and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, “What to Know About Breonna Taylor’s Death,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html>.

how one understands the home and its association with safety is extremely complex and informed by race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and more. For an entire sub-genre to depict homes as the primary location of the horror, even if it is unintentional, or not referenced explicitly, brings up the real instances of horror, trauma, and violence that are experienced in the home.

In a slightly different approach, Aviva Briefel and Sianne Ngai explore the “privilege to be haunted, or afraid” in their analysis of another film that explores another kind of haunted home, *Candyman* (1992). Combining these approaches allows for the exploration of haunted house films as reflections of the privilege to be haunted in a *home*. Thus we consider both the privilege of the location of the haunting but also the privilege of being haunted/afraid. Briefel and Ngai discuss the fact that certain populations, namely white folks and those middle class and up, are more able to afford a home and thus it is a kind of privilege to be scared of what happens to, or in, your home. They write, “the genre of the horror film presents owning a house in particular as a form of proprietorship that automatically entitles the buyer to the experience of fear, as if fear itself were a commodity included with the total package – just like sophisticated alarm systems or guards.”¹²⁶ Which leads them to explore the idea that being afraid, or being able to control the emotion of fear, can be interpreted as a way of “justifying and confirming predetermined claims to cultural power.”¹²⁷ This fear is also frequently temporary in a way specific to white identity and privilege. The fear felt in these haunted house tales has an end point, where, even if there is lasting trauma felt by the family, the immediate physical danger has an expiration date. Whereas for people existing in more precarious positions, there is a kind of

¹²⁶ Aviva Briefel and Sianne Ngai, “How Much Did You Pay for This Place? Fear, Entitlement, and Urban Space in Bernard Rose’s *Candyman*,” *Camera Obscura* 13, no. (1 (37)) (January 1996): 69–91, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-13-1_37-69, 71.

¹²⁷ Briefel and Ngai, 71.

permanent state of fear made possible by systematic structures like racism that leaves one in a state of constant injury and awareness of death and its close proximity.

In the American context it's impossible to not consider the historical legacy and modern iterations of racism when talking about the ways fear can be mobilized as a way to consolidate and justify power. In her seminal work *Horror Noire* Robin R. Means Coleman dedicates an entire chapter to "The Birth of The Black Boogeyman" in cinema prior to the 1930s. Her discussion of these racist films importantly argues that just because these films are not "horror" doesn't mean they aren't depicting horror or creating an association between Blackness and evil/fear/danger and the monstrous. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), she argues, depicts the birth of the Black Boogeyman and solidifies Blackness, both on film and off, as dangerous and horrific.¹²⁸ This occurs through the depiction of the idea that "every Black man longs for a white woman."¹²⁹ Fear is a tool that can be weaponized to solidify the current structure of power and thus can be a privilege to feel. Fear can act as a justification for restrictive laws, acts of violence, murder, imprisonment and more. There is also a value placed on who experiences that fear, in particular the fear experienced by white people is valued above others, justifying white actions taken to eliminate that which is considered threatening. Further, this speaks to how certain places are safe only for specific people. Rosemary Briseño writes on this topic in her analysis of *Get Out* (2017), discussing how "certain places are scary because different places mean different things to different people."¹³⁰ Just as they were designed to be in the post-war era, suburban

¹²⁸ Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 34-5.

¹²⁹ Coleman, 34-5. This concept and the "fear" white women felt towards Black men has been used as justification for white communities to lynch Black men and young boys in real life. Coleman explores this in the section "I Do Love De White Women" in "Chapter 4: Black Invisibility, White Science, and A Night with Ben." For more work on this subject see Davis (1981) and Wells-Barnett (2014).

¹³⁰ Rosemary Briseño, "Unmasked Horror in Idyllic Places: America as a 'Sunken Place,'" ed. Francesco Pascuzzi (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020), 238.

neighborhoods are not safe for people of color, especially Black folks.¹³¹ There are countless stories of white women calling the police on Black adults and children just for existing in spaces where they are considered alien.¹³² Drawing again from Coleman's work on the Black Boogeyman, these suburban spaces are haunted by this legacy, of white fears over decreased housing values, sparked by the presence of Black people in spaces manufactured to be white. The complete erasure of people of color, and especially Black people, from these films centered in the home and the suburbs, erases the historical and present ways these spaces were designed to be purposefully unsafe to anyone who wasn't white. It erases the reality many Black people experienced or experience in the suburbs, and instead re-centers the home and suburbs as locations for fictional tales about terror and violence for white families. In addition, with films like *Poltergeist* and *Amityville* touching on, or more so referencing in passing, the existence of Indigenous burial grounds, they are relegating Indigenous existence to history, and a history of death but never explicitly *genocide*. Indigenous existence is never a reality of the living present and perpetuates the American colonial myth that Indigenous populations were made extinct.¹³³

As Coleman articulated in *Horror Noire*, the audiences of these haunted house films like *Amityville* and *Poltergeist* are “asked to mourn over the Lutzes’ failed attempt at securing the

¹³¹ In *The Spectralities Reader*, Sharon Patricia Holland reflects on her book *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* and the impact of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. She writes, quoting from Morrison, “we can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’... certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them.” Holland, 363.

¹³² Rachael Herron, “I Used to Be a 911 Dispatcher. I Had to Respond to Racist Calls Every Day.,” Vox, October 31, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/5/30/17406092/racial-profiling-911-bbq-becky-living-while-black-babysitting-while-black>.

Molly Beck, “Monona Police Draw Guns, Handcuff Black Man in His New Home after Neighbor Calls 911,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 3, 2020, sec. News, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2020/06/03/cops-draw-guns-cuff-black-man-his-new-home-when-neighbor-calls-911/3135193001/>.

Roxana Hegeman, “ACLU: Black Man Detained While Moving into Own Kansas Home,” *Associated Press News*, March 21, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/north-america-us-news-ap-top-news-american-civil-liberties-union-ks-state-wire-df20dedf955a468397aa724f73640c37>.

¹³³ Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush, eds., *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in North American Culture and History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), vii, xv, and 152.

suburban American dream.... And the great financial hardship that the whole sad affair has cost them – rather than mourning for any dead Native American.... The audience is encouraged to feel for one particularly beleaguered family whose ‘whitopia’ dreams come to an abrupt end.”¹³⁴ While not discussing horror films and dispossession of this nature, Brenna and Davina Bhandar’s post-colonial work argues for recognition of the reality that “to be dispossessed of one’s home, land, territory, means of subsistence, history, language, and sense of self has been a defining experience of much of the world’s population in the modern era.”¹³⁵ Again speaking to the work of Mbembe and the reality that for much of the world’s population the end of the world has already happened. These films notably end with running and never looking back, explicitly articulated in *Amityville* when George, in the 2005 remake, tells Kathy not to look back, to not even *think* about the home. In her analysis of the film Maisha Wester points to these lines to discuss the way the ending of the film embodies the message that the solution to these hauntings is to re-repress it, that they must refuse to grapple with the history they have just discovered.¹³⁶

While the moral of these stories seems to tell white families not to meddle in dark histories, ghosts as entities more broadly have been popularly theorized as calls to action and reminders that history can never truly die.¹³⁷ As Barry Curtis writes, “ghosts are reminders of past injustices that have been inadequately acknowledged... agents of morality and reminders of the repressed injustices and illegalities of the past.”¹³⁸ Annalee Newitz wrote similarly that ghosts exist as reminders of injustices, anguish, and truths we would rather forget.¹³⁹ The

¹³⁴ Coleman, 193.

¹³⁵ Bhandar and Bhandar.

¹³⁶ Wester, “Whose the Real Monster Here?”

¹³⁷ Derrida famously wrote that ghosts demanded justice and responsibility. Derrida and Bernard, “Spectrographies,” 42.

¹³⁸ Curtis, location 2265.

¹³⁹ Newitz, location 75.

existence of ghosts in these films implies deeper histories than just what is included in the 90 minute plot. In the next chapter I explore the ghosts not as violent actors, not as manifestations of punishment towards those who are down on their luck, but as calls to justice and action. I explore how these ghosts came to be and how their existence marks an instance of violence so traumatic that it produced specters and not just a dead body. While this chapter asked, why are the ghosts doing this?" my next chapter asks, "who are the ghosts and how did they become phantoms?"

Chapter 3: How do You Think a Ghost is Made?

“Specters disturb the authority of vision and the hauntings of popular memory disrupt the great forgettings of official history” – Anne McClintock ¹⁴⁰

In the introduction to her book *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* Sharon Patricia Holland discusses the ways Black subjectivity is tied to death. She emphasizes the importance of “discovering who resides in the nation’s imaginary ‘space of death’ and why we strive to keep such subjects there,” drawing connections to Mbembe’s *Necropolitics*.¹⁴¹ One of the focuses of her book is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which Morrison described as a story that depicts what happens when the dead refuse to stay dead and instead haunt the present. Holland writes that the book challenged the “Western paradigm that those who die do not come back, that the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is finite and, therefore, never porous.”¹⁴² The figure of the ghost interrupts the passage of time and challenges the way individuals and society work to forget injustices of the past and present. A ghost is more than just a floating bedsheet or a vengeful incorporeal being, a ghost is a call to action, a demand to reckon with the past. Jacques Derrida writes about the figure of the specter as “negotiations of which compels a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” and considers the ways in which a haunting “demands justice, or at least a response.”¹⁴³ Ghosts exist in a liminal space raising the questions who can become a ghost, why does one become a ghost, and what needs to be done to lay the restless spirit to rest? There is work to be done when one encounters a ghost. To be haunted is to experience the dead demanding to be heard and recognized. Holland writes

¹⁴⁰ Anne McClintock, “Paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 1 (2009): 50–74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2008-006>, 52.

¹⁴¹ Holland, “Introduction: Raising the Dead,” 364.

¹⁴² Holland, 361.

¹⁴³ del Pilar Blanco and Preen, “Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities,” 7 and 9.

that, “embracing the subjectivity of death allows marginalized peoples to speak about the unspoken – to name the places within and without their cultural milieu where, like *Beloved*, they have slipped between the cracks of language.”¹⁴⁴ The ghost is not just a non-corporeal figure but also a subjectivity, a way of understanding the world and one’s place in it.

The existence of a ghost speaks to recurring events that trouble the carefully constructed American imaginary, events rooted in death, trauma, and torture. Cathy Caruth, a scholar of English and comparative literature who has written extensively on trauma and language, writes, “ghosts, in this case, are part of a symptomology of trauma, as they become both the objects of and metaphors for a wounded historical experience.”¹⁴⁵ These understandings of ghosts, even if they don’t mention it by name, are tied to the necropolitical. Both theorizations focus on the dead and undead and foreground the ways in which structures of violence are enacted in ways that are not neutral or equal. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, necropolitics forces us to ask who has the ability to live, but further, who is subjected to death and injury? The death worlds created by government and non-government actors target the Other, but who the Other is depends on factors of identity. In many ways the ghost is the ultimate Other. Ghosts have been reimagined as representations of marginalized identities in a variety of literature, forcing us to consider the ways ghostliness, just like violence and death, are not neutral. Ghosts and hauntings are innately tied to marginalized groups because of the pain, death, and precarity that go hand in hand with their histories and identities. Because the ghost is a liminal figure, and because precarity is a reality for many different identities, a wide variety of readings can be performed using its presence.

¹⁴⁴ Holland, 364.

¹⁴⁵ del Pilar Blanco and Pereen, “Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities,” 12.

While I cannot outline every ghostly interpretation as they are manifold, this chapter will engage a few possible readings of the ghostly. Over and over again the figure of the ghost suggests the ways history cannot be relegated to the past. In America, as I've previously discussed, the country has yet to face up to its dark history, leaving it haunted by the injustices committed against a large portion of the country's population. Tiya Miles speaks directly to this in her book *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* when she discusses the way haunted tours in the South speak directly to, but also cover up, the reality of slavery in America.¹⁴⁶ She refers to the complicated way America negotiates its relationship with its violent past, writing that hauntings "seep from beneath our floodwalls of denial and show in our persistent stories about ghosts of the oppressed."¹⁴⁷ Slavery and genocide haunt the American landscape and will continue to do so until the country truly owns up to its past and works to repair the damage, bringing to mind the way ghost stories speak to the requirement of action in order to finally lay the specter to rest. Miles discusses the two prominent figures of the American ghost story and the ways they speak to our past, writing, "the enslaved African American ghost is the Indian ghost's double. While the red ghost keeps alive the memory of Indian removal in US history, representing white 'terror and lament,' the Black ghost marks the demonic spirit of possession through which Americans transformed people into things."¹⁴⁸ These ghosts exist as a kind of "transgenerational communication" and bring to light the ways that past traumas "of previous generations might disturb the lives of their descendants

¹⁴⁶ Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 15-17. Miles writes, "Historic sites that feature stories of black ghosts in bondage seek to engage and yet also avoid the troubling memory of slavery.... Slavery and the racial ideology that justified the practice are cultural wounds that have never healed.... Recognition must therefore be a *misrecognition* that diminishes the harsh realities of America's peculiar institution," 17.

¹⁴⁷ Miles, 16.

¹⁴⁸ Miles, 17.

even and especially if they know nothing of their distance causes.”¹⁴⁹ Marita Sturken explores this concept in her work on memory and the history of Japanese concentration camps in America during World War 2. She discusses the work of Rea Tajiri and her experience uncovering her family’s history and the ways this trauma impacted her even when she knew nothing of it. Tajiri wrote, “I remember having this feeling growing up that I was haunted by something, that I was living within a family of ghosts.”¹⁵⁰ This is an example of what Sturken refers to as “silences and strategic forgetting” and the way this forgetting produces memory in its “absent presence.”¹⁵¹ These strategic acts of forgetting work, according to Sturken, to avoid the questions of what makes up American nationalism and challenges the idea of American Exceptionalism and the claim to morality that accompanies it.¹⁵² In her work on the War on Terror and those tortured in locations like Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, Anne McClintock similarly argues that “specters disturb the authority of vision and the hauntings of popular memory disrupt the great forgettings of official history” and to truly see these ghosts of torture and dehumanization would force us to “forfeit the long-held US claim of moral and cultural exceptionalism.”¹⁵³ The ghosts that haunt America are not always American, but they all work to expose the cracks in the American foundation that was built on the backs of dehumanized groups of people on a systematic level.

¹⁴⁹ Colins Davis, “État Présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 54, Kindle.

¹⁵⁰ Marita Sturken, “Absent Images of Memory: Remembering and Reenacting the Japanese Internment,” *Positions Asia Critique* 5, no. 3 (August 1, 1997): 687–707, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/positions/article/5/3/687/21949/Absent-Images-of-Memory-Remembering-and-Reenacting>, 698.

¹⁵¹ Sturken, 692.

¹⁵² Sturken, 704.

¹⁵³ McClintock, 52.

Speaking again to how ghosts disrupt temporality scholars like Terry Castle, Patricia White, and Carla Freccero discuss the figure of the ghost as a representation of queerness. This conceptualization considers the ghost as an example of social erasure and disappearance and how spectrality challenges heteronormative understandings of the progression of time and the binary of life and death. Patricia White discusses how the ghost and the idea of life after death challenges the “heterosexual obsession with conception” and the “heterosexual close” meaning of death.¹⁵⁴ The life a ghost has after death challenges the idea that life only comes from birth and that death means the end of everything, queering understandings of life and time. Carla Freccero similarly writes that historical continuity at large conforms to a heteronormative understanding of the progression of time and how it is “tied to heterosexual reproduction.”¹⁵⁵ Spectrality “reminds us that the past and the present are neither discrete nor sequential. The borderline between then and now wavers, wobbles, and does not hold still.”¹⁵⁶ Even if a ghost isn’t explicitly queer in the sense that they are the ghost of a gay person, the existence of ghosts queers that which we take for granted and assume to be normative understandings of both the world at large but also the individual.

I would also like to bring the idea of queering temporality into conversation with Walter Benjamin’s work on history. Benjamin discusses the concept of “jetztzeit” which is “time filled by the presence of the now... a risky, momentary collision between past and present... an allegorical moment, an instance in which an image of the past sparks a flash of unexpected

¹⁵⁴ Patricia White, “Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: ‘The Haunting,’” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (Philadelphia, PA: Routledge, 1991), 152, 153.

¹⁵⁵ Carla Freccero, “Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, First (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 336, Kindle.

¹⁵⁶ Freccero, “Queer Spectrality,” 337.

recognition in the present.”¹⁵⁷ His writes of “jetztzeit” as a challenge to understandings of history as “eternal, universal, and as progress, where the historicist merely establishes a causal connection between various moments in history.”¹⁵⁸ “Jetztzeit” however holds revolutionary potential where the “oppressed past no longer languishes unrecognized.”¹⁵⁹ In addition to this, Benjamin is discussing history and “jetztzeit” in relation to images of death, specifically the human skull or as he refers to it, the “death’s head” and its allegorical role in “animating” the German mourning play.¹⁶⁰ He refers to this allegory as a “meaningful corpse,” a “dialectical image of death where the past becomes *recognizable* to the present only through the violence of the dialectic movement” (italics in original).¹⁶¹ Benjamin is discussing what happens when the death’s head, an object from the past, is received in the present. Considering this, it is not a stretch to see the ghost as a representation of “jetztzeit,” this moment when the past is brought into contact with the present. The ghost shocks the present because it is out of place, it is an object from the past (whether that is the recent past or hundreds of years ago) that collides with those in the present, and brings to sharp relief the ways in which history does not stay in the past.

THE INVISIBLE THREAT

From the 1990s into the beginning of the new millennium, the assumed threat faced by America shifted. From the solid face of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc into a more spectral presence, that of the unknown. America had to come to terms with a new identity now that it could no longer define itself against the threat of communism. Colin Powell and George W. Bush, prior to his administration, articulated a new understanding of the threat beyond our

¹⁵⁷ Lowenstein, 13-14.

¹⁵⁸ Lowenstein, 13.

¹⁵⁹ Lowenstein, 14.

¹⁶⁰ Lowenstein, 12.

¹⁶¹ Lowenstein, 13 and 15.

borders. Powell said, “The real threat is the unknown, the uncertain” and the younger Bush echoed him with the words, “We do not know who the enemy is, but we know they are out there.”¹⁶² While not publicly acknowledged, the US was being haunted by its past and present actions, and very soon after the start of the new millennium one of these hauntings became visible in the form of 9/11. After September 11th the narrative around the threat facing America started to shift from a mysterious unknown force to a ghostly presence. Attorney General Gonzales cautioned, “We face an enemy that lies in the shadows” and the brand-new President George W. Bush announced that “This is a conflict with opponents who believe they are invisible.”¹⁶³ Rhetoric that frankly wouldn’t be out of place in a horror script, was now being broadcast from the White House.

Tiya Miles reflects on the relatively recent rise of a tourism market obsessed with ghosts, writing that the increasing appeal is “tied to a broadly experienced contemporary worry about societal change at the start of the twenty-first century. ‘Millennial anxiety,’ the academic term for this feeling of unease, is also credited for the surge of popular interest in ghosts and the supernatural around the year 2000.”¹⁶⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, horror films depict the horrors of the current moment, speaking to the social, political, and economic context of the time through their specific depictions of monsters and terrifying events. What is scary at one period of time may not always be scary decades later, horror deals less with so-called universal terrors than it does to capture the fears of the moment. The type of horror films that were produced post-Cold War and post-9/11 reflected a specific reality, they spoke to a time marked with unease and violence. The 1990s saw events like the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, the 1993

¹⁶² McClintock, 55.

¹⁶³ McClintock, 57.

¹⁶⁴ Miles, 117.

World Trade Center Bombing, the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing, Columbine High School massacre in 1999, and the decade ended with the Y2K scare which raised fears about the end of the world. It was a time of turmoil that raised questions regarding one's safety, both in relation to physical location and identity. This feeling of unease and fear was further exacerbated by the events of 9/11, leading to what McClintock refers to as a "domain of paranoia" taking over America.¹⁶⁵

The start of the 2000s was marked by a widely televised moment of intense violence. The destruction of the Twin Towers set off a domino effect of further violence and death, resulting in "two countries invaded, thousands of innocent people imprisoned, killed, and tortured."¹⁶⁶ America at this time was experiencing the effects of a haunting of its own making and simultaneously creating countless new hauntings abroad. Mbembe's work on proximity is especially important here both in terms of the events on 9/11 but also those that came after. He writes that there is no longer any "outside" as opposed to an "inside." And that it is impossible to "sanctuarize" one's own home by fomenting chaos and death far away, in the homes of others. Sooner or later, one will reap at home what one has sown abroad."¹⁶⁷ These sentiments were echoed by many political scientists and activists in the years after, bringing attention to the ways American military involvement abroad in the 80s and 90s set the stage for the events of the early 2000s. Discussions of 9/11 and its aftermath are deeply tied to rhetoric of American exceptionalism. This concept is "embedded in the history of the U.S. nation-state formation, from early immigration narratives to cold war ideologies to the rise of the age of terrorism."¹⁶⁸ "Exceptionalism," writes Jasbir K. Puar, "gestures to narratives of excellence, excellent

¹⁶⁵ McClintock, 51.

¹⁶⁶ McClintock, 51.

¹⁶⁷ Mbembe, location 874-880.

¹⁶⁸ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2007), 5.

nationalism, a process whereby a national population comes to believe in its own superiority and its own singularity.”¹⁶⁹ The war on terror divided the world into the living and the dead, meaning for certain Americans to live (read: white and Christian) others had to die, which marked an entire geographic area, religions, and ethnic groups as the living dead, exposed to constant surveillance, violence, threats, torture, destruction, invasion, and more. The limitless and spectral nature of the “War on Terror” both created a kind of unreal enemy that was invisible and lurked in the shadows, while also making it very clear that the true horror of this situation was created by the actions of humans.¹⁷⁰ People make ghosts, literally and figuratively. People make ghosts by dehumanizing and killing, but people also make ghosts by writing ghost stories.

Interestingly though, the 90s and early 00s were a difficult time for horror, with many considering it to be in a state of crisis.¹⁷¹ The period saw a slump in critical horror film reception and success, with critic David Church writing that the post-1980 horror film was “locked in an endless loop of formulaic repetition” which continued with a slew of remakes marking the beginning of the new millennium.¹⁷² This is notable for my discussion of the case studies in this chapter as both of them are remakes from the 60s and 70s. However, while many refer to remakes and the endless cycle of horror sequels as a negative aspect of this era of horror, I argue these remakes and sequels speak to each specific time period in which they were produced and then released. While basic aspects of the films may be the same, and an argument could easily be made that these remakes are mere cash grabs, these films are not shot for shot remakes and have been transformed to fit the new 21st century reality. Beyond this, the remake can be theorized as

¹⁶⁹ Puar, 5.

¹⁷⁰ Aaron Michael Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, n.d.), 23.

¹⁷¹ Steffen Hantke, *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), vii.

¹⁷² Hantke, Viii and xi – xiii.

a haunted piece of media. A remake invariably addresses the past moment in which the original was released and brings it into the present. The 2005 *The Amityville Horror* cannot be separated from the 1979 version and every discussion of it always acknowledges that it is a remake of a previous film from a different era. The remake, like the ghost, brings the past into the present.

It is out of the post-Cold War and post-9/11 context that the films *THIRTEEN Ghosts* (2001) and *The Amityville Horror* (2005) were released and received. These two films are perfect case studies with which to examine the ways ghosts exist in precarious positions as marginalized identities. These films depict specific forms of suffering, both in terms of who the victim is imagined to be, as touched on in Chapter 2, but also through the suffering that brought about the haunting and created the ghosts. Tiya Miles, discussing ghost stories created to attract tourists to haunted Southern locales writes, “the narratives reinforce retrograde interpretations of power, race, gender, sexuality and identity. These stories turn on the abuse of the socially weak, often African American women, but do nothing to contextualize the experiences of Black women or hold accountable the perpetrators of violence against them.”¹⁷³ Although Miles is referring to the haunted tourism industry in this quote, this can be applied to ghost stories depicted on screen as well. The choice of who exists as a human victim and who exists as a ghost is not a neutral choice, and it is important to examine the ways in which these films speak to, yet ultimately gloss over, the historical context that produced these spectral entities. As is common in the neoliberal culture of America, events like hauntings and the existence of ghosts becomes an individual experience, a freak of nature occurrence, instead of something illustrative of a systemic problem. In the following sections I will examine each film and the ghosts represented

¹⁷³ Miles, 124.

on screen as illustrations of the ghost as a disruptive and othered figure and as representation of America's past (and present) practices of systematic violence and repression.

AN AMERICAN HAUNTING

In the 1979 version of *The Amityville Horror* the ultimate source of evil that has haunted the Long Island home is a passage to hell in the basement. A well filled with evil black slime hiding behind a wall under the basement steps is the reason the home and the land it sits on is poisoned and reproduces death and violence. The 2005 remake however takes a drastically different approach to the root of the haunting, engaging with America's history of genocide, but notably never uttering the word. Towards the climax of the film Kathy Lutz finds herself at the local library, trying to uncover more information about the history of her home. Her research process is interspersed with cuts of George Lutz in the basement of the house doing his own kind of research. After sleeping in the basement and being continually drawn to one wall of the room he finally decides to take a sledgehammer to it to uncover what lies beyond, and what it is that's calling to him. Both are trying to figure out why their life in their new home is marked by fear, anger, and strange occurrences. Kathy's search takes her to a book on one Reverend Jerimiah Ketcham, a man who in the 17th century created "The Sanctuary," a building that happens to be the same home that the Lutz family finds themselves in now. As Kathy reads the book, a shot of a page with the words "torture devices" appears before cutting back to George's journey into the bowels of the home. As he makes his way down a hallway, he finds what look to be cells before getting surprised by the appearance of what we later learn is one of Ketcham's Indigenous victims. George's experience face to face with these victims is interspersed with illustrations from the book Kathy is reading, forcing the audience to witness two different images of the various tortures these people were subjected to.

The climax of this scene, and what forces Kathy to dramatically shut the book however is not the torture and pain of the Indigenous people, but the realization that Ketcham committed suicide in their basement. Already this scene has set up a judgement of who's death is more horrifying, the suicide of the white sadistic man is the true source of horror in this scene, not the torture of Indigenous people that speaks directly to America's history of genocide. Kathy's tear-stained outrage as she confronts the priest who ran from her home continues this trend. "I just read about this man, Ketcham, tortured Indians on *my land*. On *my* basement!"¹⁷⁴ Immediately it becomes apparent from Kathy's dialogue that the idea of Indigenous people being tortured is not the cause of her outrage, it's the fact that this happened on "her" land. Not only is this an alarming statement in general, but when discussing Indigenous people it is particularly shocking that she would feel comfortable staking ownership over land in America. As I've mentioned previously, American land is stolen, this is the historical reality of our country. White claims to ownership on stolen land continue the violent legacies of American colonialism. Kathy presumably wouldn't have this outrage if she learned her neighbor's home was the location of Indigenous suffering, nor would the issue be as personal if the bodies had been found in the lake behind their home but never directly attached to the home itself. Further, all land in America is stained with the blood of genocide and colonialism, her home's history is not an anomaly. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has written on the role land played in the process of American colonialism, positing that in this unique system "the dispossession of indigenous lands [was] the central motor force of primitive accumulation in the United States."¹⁷⁵ So for Kathy to emphasize the ownership she has over the land, is to speak directly to this legacy of dispossession.

¹⁷⁴ *The Amityville Horror*, directed by Andrew Douglas (MGM Distribution Co., 2005), 1:09:53 to 1:10:14, <https://www.hulu.com/movie/the-amityville-horror-ba100981-0e0c-47bf-83f6-ba9322b92d7d>.

¹⁷⁵ Bhandar and Bhandar.

Further, by only depicting these Native ghosts through the white eyes of Kathy and George, and to emphasize their death, or rather undeath and continued suffering, perpetuates dehumanization and renders these entities illegible.¹⁷⁶ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou have discussed a form of dispossession by which “persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability” including the loss of land and also the ownership one has over their living body.¹⁷⁷ But it also brings up the ownership, or lack thereof, one has over their undead body, and raises the importance of considering whose eyes the viewer is seeing these ghosts through. The normative and normalizing powers in this film define who is intelligible and who is considered vulnerable, and as I discussed in the previous chapter, this is overwhelmingly white families, and more often than not white women and white children. The undead bodies of the Native ghosts are not the ones displayed as vulnerable and in fact one of the ghosts we first see has his lips sewn shut, literally silencing these ghosts from sharing their story or claiming subjecthood, including the position of victim. This is particularly noteworthy because it evokes the history of disenfranchisement and silencing of living Indigenous peoples in America, what Bergland refers to as, “construct[ing] them as simultaneously there and not there” which “confined them to a spectral role in American politics... they could not speak for themselves... in some basic sense their presence was denied... they haunted the American polity.”¹⁷⁸ The sewn-shut lips of the ghost echoes this sentiment both literally and figuratively, the ghost is silenced and is both there and not there, an entity that people can deny the existence of both through their status as a ghost but also as an Indigenous person.

¹⁷⁶ Gaines, 180.

¹⁷⁷ Gaines, 180.

¹⁷⁸ Bergland, “from Indian Ghosts and American Subjects,” 388.

Furthermore, for Kathy's outrage and terror to stem more from Ketcham's blood "I read about how he slit his throat so his presence would live forever" is a practice of centering whiteness and making it about the white man and not the violence and pain experienced by the Indigenous victims. This outrage is painted as specific to this occurrence, it is not, as Tiya Miles discussed in regard to the ghost stories of enslaved people, contextualized within the larger history of American genocide.¹⁷⁹ Both this case and other horror tales of "Indian burial grounds" are never references to genocide, they are places where people buried their own dead, or the place where a "bad apple" white man killed Indigenous people. It is a reflection of American neoliberalism and the tendency to individualize experiences of violence, instead of the ways these acts speak to histories of specific forms of structural violence, not unlike what Mbembe is referring to with necropolitics. It also speaks to strategic forgetting. Because to position these violent acts as within the larger acknowledgement of the nocturnal side of American democracy and the ways specific populations are marked for death systematically, would mean challenging ideals of American exceptionalism. These images of Indigenous suffering also speaks to Anne McClintock's work on violence and the visible and invisible, where she inquires "how do we insist on seeing the violence that the imperial state attempts to render invisible?"¹⁸⁰ I raise this question here because the images in this film do the work of simultaneously making violence visible while also keeping it invisible, by marking these actions as the acts of a depraved individual instead of the violence of the American state in addition to consigning these actions to the past.

Returning to Kathy's outraged comment that these horrific events occurred on *her* land and in *her* basement, we can see this as speaking to the way the ghost disrupts both the flow of

¹⁷⁹ Miles, 124.

¹⁸⁰ McClintock, 52.

normative time but also normative understandings of who belongs in what spaces. Ghosts are frequently understood as entities that have “taken up residence in unwelcome places where they do not belong,” hence the frequent need to “cleansed” the home in order to remove the unwanted guests.¹⁸¹ Not only does this speak to the erasure of the exclusion of Black people from the American Dream and suburbs, but it also speaks to the deeper meanings that accompany the rhetoric of a cleansed home. A cleansed home is a home free of spirits and a haunting, but the word choice also speaks to another form of cleansing, that is, ethnic cleansing and the forceful and violent removal of Indigenous people to make way for white hopes, dreams, and infrastructure. The Native specters George sees as he investigates the basement disrupt the linear flow of time that positions the dead in the past but also disrupts the popular myth that Indigenous people of America exist only in the past. In her book *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* Renée Bergland argues that “when European Americans speak of Native Americans, they always use the language of ghostliness” and goes on to caution, “but when we focus on Indian ghosts, we risk forgetting the fact that many survived.”¹⁸² This practice of painting specific populations as already dead and thus relegated to the past is similarly discussed by Annalee Newitz when she examines the ways race is tied to temporality and how racial difference is often coded in terms of “living and dead cultures” which serves to freeze people of color in the past.¹⁸³

In their edited collection *Phantom Pasts, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in North American Culture and History* Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush posit the “Indian uncanny,” an exploration of the work Native ghosts perform. This cultural and political work is divided into

¹⁸¹ Gaines, 184.

¹⁸² Bergland, “from Indian Ghosts and American Subjects,” 371. And Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Dartmouth College Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁸³ Newitz, location 1689 and 1694.

three sections but for the sake of my work we'll be focusing on the third, "Native haunting[s] disrupt dominant and official historical narratives as expressions of liminality that transcend fixed boundaries of time and space."¹⁸⁴ This reimagining of the uncanny considers how these specific ghosts and their hauntings relate to the American colonialist rhetoric and the way the presence of Native ghosts both challenge our understandings of Indigenous people living only in the past, while still portraying this identity as one irremovable from death and thus in past tense. Bergland too argues that ghost stories can work as a "technique of removal," which speaks to the ways "settler society depends upon the acquisition of Indian ghosts."¹⁸⁵ By depicting these Native ghosts as imprisoned still, even after death, and as presumably tied to the continued evil presence of Ketcham's ghost, these ghosts remain dispossessed. But not only are these ghosts dispossessed in death, they are also, as Maisha Wester put it "villainous even in their moment of victimization."¹⁸⁶ The Native ghosts in this film are not depicted through a lens of sympathy, they are entities intended to frighten audiences, two of them serving as jump scares. They are never humanized, we never get their names or their experiences, we never listen to their pain. They are spectacles of fear that further the practice of refusing to depict Indigenous people as living or as victims of an organized genocide, instead they are scary and undead.

While Kathy is the one who discovers the full story of the wicked history behind their new home, it is George who sees it first-hand and who is later covered in the blood of Ketcham's ghost, thus possessing him with the evil man's intentions. Maisha Wester discusses this as a reflection of the "inheritance of white men" and Bergland echoes this, writing that the ghost metaphor is associated with "white American men's anxiety and guilt over their complicity in

¹⁸⁴ Boyd and Thrush, ix.

¹⁸⁵ Boyd and Thrush, xi and xv.

¹⁸⁶ Wester, "Whose the Real Monster Here?"

American hierarchies of race, class, and gender.”¹⁸⁷ George is the one who goes on an attempted murderous rampage, he is the one possessed by the sins of the father, by the historical white man who directly participated in genocide and colonialism. And while the film doesn’t ever say so outright, this can easily be read as a reflection of the continued role the white man, but more accurately white people at large, continue to play in colonialism and violence against people of color. Kathy’s comment staking claim over the land and home hold the weight of white women’s role in colonialism and the way rhetoric of ownership and claims to victimhood are legitimized when they come from the mouth of a white person.

I do want to acknowledge that my reading of these ghosts is not the only reading that exists, and that some of the same scholars I cite above, Colleen E. Boyd, Coll Thrush, and Renée Bergland also touch on other kinds of work performed by Native ghosts. Bergland discusses the ways Native ghosts can remind white America of the “fragility of national identity” and work simultaneously to “establish American nationhood and call it into question.”¹⁸⁸ Boyd and Thrush, in their layout of the “Indian uncanny” also include the way “Indian ghost stories harness very real Indigenous beliefs in the power and potency of the dead” which have been deemed irrational by white America.¹⁸⁹ The role the Native ghost takes depends heavily on the text in which it appears, but, at least in the horror genre, the Native ghost primarily stands in as someone so othered they are otherworldly.¹⁹⁰

The choice to depict these Native ghosts as, seemingly forever imprisoned in their cells, raises the implication that Native people cannot escape persecution even after death. This

¹⁸⁷ Bergland, “from Indian Ghosts and American Subjects,” 388. And Wester, “Whose the Real Monster Here?”

¹⁸⁸ Bergland, 375.

¹⁸⁹ Boyd and Thrush, ix.

¹⁹⁰ Bergland, 375.

location is a death world, a very literal fictional manifestation of Mbembe's work.¹⁹¹ The Native ghosts are forever injured as they were in life, forced to suffer forever and exist not as human or dead but as the living dead. And more than that, the torture and dehumanization they experienced while living, and continue to experience in un-death, speaks to Mbembe's discussion of non-immediate deaths and the "severing of limbs," amputation both physical and metaphorical."¹⁹² The separation of characters between those who are living subjects and nonliving beings particularly stands out in this movie as the only representation of Indigenous people is as non-living beings.¹⁹³ While Ketcham, a white man, is ultimately the most evil character, whiteness is not depicted as inherently tied to ghostliness or death as the film has countless *living* white characters, yet only depicts Indigenous people through the image of the ghost. Further, Mbembe discusses the idea of sovereignty as "the production of general norms by a body – comprising free and equal individuals. These individuals are posited as full subjects," something that can be seen again in the representation of Ketcham.¹⁹⁴ Ketcham is able to express supreme authority not only through his ability to dictate who lives and who dies, that is, through his torture and killing of Indigenous people, but he is also able to exist as a free individual. He decides when *he* dies as well, he committed suicide, holding his death in his own hands, but also killed himself in a way that maintains his presence in the land forever. He was a full subject when living, but he has also kept his power in his death, something that appears to be part of the privilege of whiteness. We also can see this separation of the ghostly experience through the physical location the ghosts appear in. Ketcham's final resting place is a large room where he committed ceremonial suicide

¹⁹¹ In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe outlines a some topographies of cruelty which include: the plantation, the colony, the concentration camp, and prisons. Mbembe, location 1920.

¹⁹² Mbembe, location 806 and 1828.

¹⁹³ Mbembe, location 181.

¹⁹⁴ Mbembe, location 1403.

and serves as the locus of his power, allowing him to extend his reach to the entire house. The Native ghosts however appear to be trapped in their small prison cells, which brings to mind the history of Native American boarding schools and reservations, locations where Indigenous people were relegated out of sight and out of mind. It is also important to consider how, as Luana Ross concluded in her study of incarcerated Native American women, “prisons, as employed by the Euro-American system, operate to keep Native Americans in a colonial situation.”¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, the fact that these cells exist underneath a white family’s dream home is particularly telling. Again, not unlike *Poltergeist*, this home explicitly depicts the way America’s white supremacist capitalist patriarchal system, as depicted with the single-family home, is literally built on the deaths of others, particularly the torture, dehumanization, and murder of Indigenous populations.

Anne McClintock’s exploration of hidden torture sites and the way they are haunted by the powers of empire reverberates along the stone walls of the cells underneath 112 Ocean Avenue. The perpetually injured Native ghosts are fictional representations of what McClintock describes, “a tortured person is slowly unraveled, a person unmade, a body unpeopled, a person forced, unspeakably, to inhabit the wounded carapace of a body once tenanted by life but refused that final, sacred right to die.”¹⁹⁶ As I touched on earlier in this chapter, to experience a haunting means to experience a call to action. To see a ghost means that something is unfinished and must be done to finally lay the spirit to rest. However, this never occurs in *The Amityville Horror*. These ghosts are presumably never laid to rest because the call to action has never been answered. Instead, as discussed in chapter 2, the film ends with the Lutz family speeding away in

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York City, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2011), 73. Also see: Morning Star Gali, “Stolen Freedom: The Ongoing Incarceration of California’s Indigenous People’s,” Medium, October 12, 2020, <https://level.medium.com/stolen-freedom-the-ongoing-incarceration-of-californias-indigenous-peoples-a5f55eba2765>.

¹⁹⁶ McClintock, 74.

their family boat and refusing to even look back at the home or *think* about it, let alone ever consider returning. These ghosts have not been heard, their politics and humanity have not been acknowledged or pursued. They will continue to haunt the land because no one has tried to lay them to rest, to give them the sacred right to death. Further, the cause of their death and undeath is never acknowledged. Do they still exist simply to scare the new white family that moves in? Why are they ghosts and not at rest? Perhaps it is because America has never truly faced up to its own Native ghosts, it has never made a concerted effort to provide reparations and heal the wound we created through genocide and colonialism. Of note is that Kathy takes the time to look up the history of the house but only through the history of the white inhabitants, through newspaper clippings of the DeFeo murders and through an entire book on Reverend Ketcham, but nothing on the Indigenous people who lived there and were victimized. Frequently in ghost stories it's the story of the victims that requires understanding before the ghost can be laid to rest, not a deep dive into the perpetrator, although that often plays a part. These ghosts are never afforded that process, there are no scenes dedicated to learning about the victims past their status as victims.

A MACHINE POWERED BY THE DEAD

In Chapter 2 I briefly mentioned the Dark Castle Entertainment remake of William Castle's 1960 film *13 Ghosts*. The 2001 film *THIR13EN Ghosts* was released in theaters on October 26, 2001, just over a month after the events of 9/11 and nineteen days after America invaded Afghanistan. To recall the plot of the film, *THIR13EN Ghosts* tells the story of the Kriticos family who are mourning the loss of their mother/wife and home after a deadly fire. Out of nowhere the father, Arthur, is informed about the death of his estranged Uncle Cyrus. Unbeknownst to the Kriticos family, Cyrus was a ghost hunter and died while attempting to

catch and imprison a ghost called “The Juggernaut.” The struggling family is thrilled to learn of the inheritance left by Cyrus and eagerly travels to see the home the late uncle left for them.

From the beginning, however, it is obvious that this is no typical home or mansion. The home is made entirely of glass and metal and is inscribed with Latin phrases. Cyrus’s assistant Dennis rushes to inform the awed family of the reality of Cyrus’s work and warns them that the home functions as a kind of ghostly prison, home to 12 very angry and deadly ghosts. The home is ultimately more of a machine than anything else, designed to give the owner absolute power by opening the eye to hell. As the night passes one by one the ghosts are released and the house goes into lockdown, attempting to enact its purpose. The Kriticos family, their nanny Maggie, Dennis, and Kalina, later revealed to be Cyrus’s secret lover, struggle to survive the night. Ultimately, all is set right when Arthur refuses to die in sacrifice of the house, terminating its programming and ultimately destroying the home completely, while also setting free all the ghosts.

During the summer of 2020 I decided to rewatch this film as I remembered it fondly from my childhood. What I discovered upon rewatching it however, was not a rekindled love for the film, but rather a new approach to the movie. Not long before I watched the film I had revisited of a different kind of horror movie, the Netflix documentary *13th* (2016). The documentary explores the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution which has been widely understood as the amendment that abolished slavery. This film however pays particular attention to one important qualifier in the amendment, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States” (italics added).¹⁹⁷ The work of this documentary and other pieces like it, such

¹⁹⁷ “13th Amendment: Abolition of Slavery,” Interactive Constitution, 2021, <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xiii>.

as *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, consider how the 20th – 21st century prison industrial complex serves as an extension of slavery and Jim Crow laws, criminalizing specific populations, namely Black people, in order to continue systematic oppression and violence by the state.

Watching this documentary before *THIR13EN Ghosts* forced me to reconsider the prominent role incarceration plays within the plot of the film. It brought to mind the work of Angela Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* when she explores the role media has in naturalizing the existence of prisons in America. Although this is a perhaps more roundabout application than the fictional or reality-based prison television shows and movies she focused on. But horror films are still media that depict, as I have explored, very real issues even if they're often covered up by SFX makeup or CGI, and deserve to be explored in depth. Davis sentence, "we consume media images of the prison, even as the realities of imprisonment are hidden from almost all who have not had the misfortune of doing time" speaks to *THIR13EN Ghosts* and other horror that includes imprisonment in their narrative world and imagery.¹⁹⁸

As I have already discussed at length previously, ghosts are frequently seen as representations of the ultimate Other, a reflection of the identities of various marginalized groups and the intimate proximity to death these groups experience. When one considers this, and combines it with the ways the ghosts in *THIR13EN Ghosts* are imprisoned for the benefit of a white man, it necessitates a reading of the film that considers the ways prisons and ghosts are intertwined. To begin with, for some, the idea of a life without prisons is as unimaginable and farfetched as acknowledging the existence of ghosts or the supernatural. Prisons have been so deeply normalized within the American landscape that the fight for prison abolition is often shut

¹⁹⁸ Davis, 17.

down on the grounds that people simply cannot imagine how a society could function without them. As Michel Foucault writes in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, as public spectacles of punishment died out the process then became hidden, which had a number of consequences, “it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime.”¹⁹⁹ The hidden punishment that operates within the walls of a prison now becomes an inevitability. Prisons, the popular argument goes, are needed because they keep dangerous criminals locked up, away from the good law-abiding citizens, and because without punishment and incarceration, people would freely commit any crime without any fear of retribution. Prisons are widely accepted as the answer to violence, as the way to decrease violence in society and “reform” criminals. The reality of course is not only much more complex but also requires Americans to rethink that which is the considered the norm.

To question prisons means to question the idea of criminality itself, and the way it fits into America’s practice of marking specific bodies for death, cruelty, and dehumanization in ways that are intrinsically tied to race, class, gender, citizenship and more. The reality of the prison industrial complex, and its close ally the military industrial complex, is that they reproduce violence and create locations of death, or death-worlds. Anne McClintock calls for a shift in America’s understanding of prisons and violence, writing for the necessity to “illuminate the continuities that connect those circuits of imperial violence abroad with the vast, internal shadowlands of prisons and supermaxes – the modern ‘slave-ships on the middle passage to

¹⁹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York City, NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 9.

nowhere’ – that have come to characterize the United States as a super carceral state.”²⁰⁰ Incarceration is a ghosting process, a practice of unimaginable dehumanization that has occurred for more than 2.3 million people in America alone.²⁰¹ These prisons are death-worlds as described by Mbembe, where “weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying personas and creating death-worlds” and “vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead.”²⁰² These prisons, both those on American soil, but also the “global gulag of secret interrogation prisons, ‘black sites,’ torture ships, and off-shore internment camps now known to straddle the world,” are locations specifically designed to hide away the violence being done to Othered people and communities.²⁰³

Mbembe’s work has examined how subjects of regimes of power are divided into “living subjects and non-living beings,” writing that being a free individual means you are “posited as full subjects capab[le] of self-representation.”²⁰⁴ When we consider this phrasing of “full subjects” and put it in conversation with the phrasing Mbembe uses to refer to the non-living subjects, “confer upon them the status of the living dead” it speaks directly to prisons and the distinction between those who are currently incarcerated and those who are not, and also those who have been formerly incarcerated and those who have not. People who are incarcerated are not afforded the same legal standing as other citizens, as is evident in their precarious position both within society and within the prison, as well as when they are released and given the status

²⁰⁰ McClintock, 52 quoting Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York City, NY: Verso, 2000), 170.

²⁰¹ Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020” (Prison Policy Initiative, March 24, 2020), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html>. I say more than 2.3 million because the report writes, “the American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people” but I am also considering those who have been incarcerated previously but are no longer detained (page 1).

²⁰² Mbembe, location 1918-1919.

²⁰³ McClintock, 51. In addition, consider the work of Foucault again, “punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process.” Foucault, 9.

²⁰⁴ Necropolitics, location 1920.

of individuals previously incarcerated, which severely limits job prospects and in certain states can also disenfranchise the individual. These people have been ghosted in a variety of ways, in the way they both exist but legally don't, that they have disappeared from their previous life, and also in their designation as something other than full-citizens. Consider for a minute the weight of the term "enemy combatants" after 9/11 and what violence and dehumanization it sanctioned. The use of a word outside the normal legal framework created a whole new system of death that was completely legal and removed all humanity from the subject, turning them into "zombies, unpeopled bodies, dead men walking, bodies as imperial property."²⁰⁵ Judith Butler writes that, "'indefinite detention' considers the political implications of those normative conceptions of the human that produce, through an exclusionary process, a host of 'unlivable lives' whose legal and political status is suspended."²⁰⁶ Butler here is referring to the "indefinite detention" that emerged post-9/11 which subjected primarily Muslim and Arab populations to this status of unlivable lives, but this ideology and the practice of dehumanization, deportation, and detainment also occurred on American soil. The prisons on our soil are not as different in practice or ideology from offshore facilities and various black sites as many would like to think.

It is always worth noting how words, or rather population designations, carry with them the weight of social ostracization and exclusion from certain political and economic privileges. To classify a group of people as criminals, prisoners, ex-prisoners, is not just to use a "word" but to use a label that carries with it the act of dehumanization and exposes these individuals to state sanctioned violence. Turning again to Foucault, he writes, "it is the conviction itself that marks the offender with the unequivocally negative sign...punishment has become an economy of

²⁰⁵ McClintock, 65.

²⁰⁶ Butler, xv.

suspended rights.”²⁰⁷ Who is or has been incarcerated is not random or equal, and further the idea of criminality is not random either. In 2010 13% of the US population was Black, yet the population of Black people in correctional facilities was 40%.²⁰⁸ On the other hand 64% of the US population was white, yet white people only made up 39% of the population in correctional facilities.²⁰⁹ And in California alone, Native people are imprisoned “nearly four times the rate of White people.”²¹⁰ In conjunction with this reality sits the system created after 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and US Customs and Border Protection which “saw the increase in racial profiling, greater policing of Black and Brown communities” and a growing budget to support process of detention and deportation.²¹¹ These are all systems that work together to subject vast populations to a status other than that of a full subject. Prisons, black sites, temporary detention centers which more aptly can be termed American concentration camps, and the deportation process all work in tandem to enforce America’s white supremacist and settler-colonial system. As Angela Davis wrote so succinctly, “the prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues.”²¹² In conjunction with the important racial disparities in prisons and jails one must always consider how class affects rates of incarceration. Even before a trial occurs, those who are not able to afford bail bond are detained. The median annual income of men who are detained before trial is \$15,598 and for women it is \$11,071, so already the system is designed to punish those who cannot pay

²⁰⁷ Foucault 9-11.

²⁰⁸ Sawyer and Wagner, 23.

²⁰⁹ Sawyer and Wagner, 23.

²¹⁰ Morning Star Gali, “Stolen Freedom: The Ongoing Incarceration of California’s Indigenous People’s,” Medium, October 12, 2020, <https://level.medium.com/stolen-freedom-the-ongoing-incarceration-of-californias-indigenous-peoples-a5f55eba2765>.

²¹¹ UnitedWeDream.org, “Why We’re Fighting for a World Without ICE,” Medium, October 13, 2020, <https://level.medium.com/why-were-fighting-for-a-world-without-ice-b3b104e95498>.

²¹² Davis, 16.

their way out of it.²¹³ In the United States those who have been incarcerated in prisons make substantially less money annually than those who have not been incarcerated, and those who make the least are women of color.²¹⁴ Race, gender, and class all work together in this system to mark certain populations vulnerable to incarceration and over-policing, removing people from their communities, lives, and families and placing them in a location of dehumanization and violence. To depict prisons in media is to speak to this reality and the history prisons were built on. Prisons speak directly to the past and present, their growing presence and normalization perpetuates the past and present systematic forms of violence based on racism, sexism, transphobia, classism, citizenship and more.

Returning to the ghostly, consider for a second the number of “haunted” prisons that exist in America, both “truly haunted” locations like Eastern State or Alcatraz, but also the once-a-year popups around Halloween like Chicago’s Statesville Haunted Prison. Remember that locations do not become haunted for no reason, they become haunted because acts of violence occurred there. So why have we seemingly accepted that prisons are essentially locations of severe violence that inevitably lead to hauntings? If you look at Statesville Haunted Prison’s website you can uncover the story behind the attraction, “you will be forced to find your way through 23 maximum security cells and come eye to eye with over 100 criminals that were *too evil to die*” (italics added).²¹⁵ While a detailed analysis of Halloween haunted houses like Statesville is outside the scope of this project, it is worth bringing up because of the association between haunted house attractions and haunted house films and the way they frequently occupy the same or similar space in our imaginary. The rhetoric of “100 criminals that were too evil to

²¹³ Sawyer and Wagner, 25.

²¹⁴ Sawyer and Wagner, 25.

²¹⁵ “Home,” Statesville Haunted Prison & City of the Dead, 2021, <https://statesvillehauntedprison.com/>.

die” is not an unpopular way of imagining prisons and their ghosts, as it turns the discussion from communities being systematically victimized to a rhetoric about “truly evil” people who “thankfully” were kept away from the rest of society locked up in a prison. But it also furthers the notion that violence does not end after death, whether these ghosts are “evil” and punishing the living, or the idea that ghosts are reliving their pain and suffering on earth, both perpetuate an understanding that death does not stop the process of violence in America.

Now that I have discussed the ways in which prisons relate to ghosts and hauntings, in addition to exploring the context that media depictions of prisons and incarceration are speaking to, I want to examine how *THIR13EN Ghosts* reflects or obfuscates these considerations. But before doing so it is vital to mention the ways this film also rejects or shifts many of the realities around incarceration. As I mentioned in my analysis of *The Amityville Horror*, the pain and suffering of the Native ghosts was largely displaced onto the white victims in the film, and something similar is occurring in *THIR13EN Ghosts*. There is a racial shift performed through the process of turning the reality of prisons into the setting of a haunted house horror movie. As I’ve mentioned previously, haunted house films are overwhelmingly a sub-genre that depicts white characters, and that is not very different in this film, with the exception that one of the living characters, the nanny Maggie, is a Black woman and one of the ghosts is a Black man. The suffering of these ghosts is depicted in regards to the way it impacts the living white family. And the vast majority of these ghost are also white, displacing the reality of incarceration demographics onto white ghostly bodies. While that is the case, I find it to still be valuable to explore this film and the way the ghosts speak to various marginalized identities, and again how this media depiction of incarceration glosses over the reality of prisons in America. I also think it is worth noting the ideological work this film is performing by casting the majority of the

incarcerated ghosts as white people. Considering how this perpetuates misunderstandings around prisons and incarcerated folks and perpetuates a neoliberal post-racial idea that those who are incarcerated deserved it for their individual choices as opposed to the reality which targets and punishes already marginalized people, especially people of color. I would also like to note that while this of course is not depicting an actual prison, these ghosts were taken from their normal environment and kept locked up in small cells. Even if the term prison isn't uttered or the setting isn't a literal prison, it is worth considering how this film engages with concepts of imprisonment and the ways in which ideology and practices of policing and prisons extend past the walls of literal prisons.

In line with this neoliberal perception of criminality and incarceration, many of the ghosts in *THIR13EN Ghosts* are depicted as evil and extremely violent, Dennis even goes so far as to say they only know violence. Ghosts like The Jackal and The Juggernaut are depicted as out of control in their violence and their pasts speak to histories of intense violence and an enjoyment of killing. These ghosts are depicted as truly evil and are thankfully kept locked up in the cells (until they're set free in the house). By including incarcerated ghosts that are hyper violent in death and life it echoes the way prisons are depicted as needed because people argue there are inherently violent people out there. And again it speaks to the words of Angela Davis and the ways prisons and incarceration are depicted in media that normalizes its existence and function.

In *THIR13EN Ghosts* the home where the film takes place is actually more of a machine than a typical home, a machine “designed by the Devil and powered by the dead.”²¹⁶ The fact that this machine requires the energy of ghosts to function parallels the systems of violence required to maintain capitalism, and further the fact that it is the property and enterprise of a rich

²¹⁶ *THIR13EN Ghosts*, directed by Steve Beck (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2001), 0:54:36 to 0:54:43, <https://www.amazon.com/Thirteen-Ghosts-Tony-Shalhoub/dp/B004TJW5VA>.

white man speaks volumes. Towards the end of the film when Cyrus is trying to kill Arthur he responds to Arthur's claims that he's insane with, "the world has no time for little people like you. It needs people who are willing to do anything, anything for greatness."²¹⁷ This sentence would not be out of place in typical capitalist conversations about the rich deserving their wealth and the poor failing in some way. Being willing to do anything for greatness in this case means capturing and exploiting ghosts which is not unlike how capitalism requires one to be willing to do whatever they can to get to the top and the ways this ascension demands the exploitation of others. This house needs the energy of the dead to function while capitalism needs the lives of the working class to maintain itself.

An analysis of the characters rhetoric used to discuss the treatment of the ghosts uncovers more echoes of capitalist sentiments. When Kalina chastises Dennis for his involvement in Cyrus' scheme she says, "you stole people's souls for money."²¹⁸ This is not specific to the idea of stealing ghosts, but speaks to the ways in which, as mentioned in Chapter 2, capitalism relies on dead labor and forces the worker to experience a "symbolic and literal death."²¹⁹ In another instance, when we first meet Kalina and her partner Damon they are berating Cyrus and Dennis for their work, calling what they're doing to the ghosts "out and out slavery" and arguing "these aren't animals you're capturing, they're human beings." To which Dennis responds "they are *dead* human beings."²²⁰ Cyrus is, in a way, perpetuating the notion of dividing society into grievable and ungrievable lives. He also speaks to how proximity affects one's perspective of oppression and whose deaths are worthy of outrage. Not unlike my discussion earlier in regard to Kathy's outrage in *The Amityville Horror*, it is only when one is in proximity to the death that

²¹⁷ *THIR13EN Ghosts*, 1:21:08 to 1:21:19.

²¹⁸ *THIR13EN Ghosts*, 1:02:28 to 1:02:34.

²¹⁹ Newitz, location 148-157.

²²⁰ *THIR13EN Ghosts*, 0:04:47 to 0:05:07.

they see it and think of those affected. Kathy was furious about the torture of Indigenous people because it happened on *her* land, she wouldn't have cared if it was next door. Dennis similarly says, after informing the Kriticos family that there are ghosts in the basement, "of course this basement. If it was next door I wouldn't give a shit."²²¹ He continues this sentiment when he admits helping Cyrus capture the ghost of Arthur's late wife, saying, "I didn't know her. I didn't know she had a husband."²²² Again and again it's not about the structures of violence or the victims, it's about how it impacts the living and in this case, how it impacts a living white man.

The fact that these ghosts must be captured and incarcerated in cells for Cyrus' benefit also brings to mind the function of the prison industrial complex as a system that requires people in cells to make money. The ghosts are being exploited so Cyrus can have ultimate power and riches, a kind of supernatural interpretation of the ways in which prisons exploit those who are incarcerated through their cheap labor, helping companies to make larger profit margins. But who are the ghosts? As I touched on earlier in this chapter, ghosts are primarily theorized as representations of the Other in particular because othered people and communities experience a closer proximity to violence and death. As Dennis explains to the nanny Maggie, "there are ghosts around us all the time. Most of them can't hurt us. Most of them don't even want to hurt us. A little ghost here, a little ghost there. No one cares. But there are exceptions, like this badass behind me, the ones who die a violent death stay in that tortured realm, and so violence is all they know."²²³ Dennis sets up a dichotomy between ghosts, making it clear that not all ghosts are the same just as not all humans are the same. But he is especially foregrounding the violence that is required to create a restless ghost.

²²¹ *THIR13EN Ghosts*, 0:43:33 to 0:43:44.

²²² *THIR13EN Ghosts*, 1:03:38 to 1:03:50.

²²³ *THIR13EN Ghosts*, 0:48:44 to 0:49:00.

THIR13EN Ghosts has a significant amount of lore and world building available in supplemental places like the DVD extras and online that discuss the backstory of each ghost. In the film these ghosts are referred to as representations of the “black zodiac,” a deadly inversion of the typical 12 zodiac signs. I’ll be examining the specifics of some of the ghosts that are given the most screen time and whose identities speak to the way ghosts are representations of othering and societal practices of violence. First there are the five female ghosts. The Angry Princess is represented by the ghost of Dana Newman who suffered from self-hatred and multiple abusive boyfriends.²²⁴ Her pursuit of aesthetic perfection led to mutilation and finally drove her to suicide.²²⁵ It is notable that she is the only naked and sexualized ghost. She was victimized in life by patriarchal beauty standards and abusive relationships with men and even in death she is objectified by the living. On a different note, The Pilgrimess or Isabella Smith, is the ghost of a New England woman who was accused of witchcraft and suffered a slow and agonizing death in the stocks.²²⁶ Again an illustration of a woman victimized by society, but this time killed specifically by American ideology that targets the Other and marks them for death. The Dire Mother’s three-foot height led her to join a circus where she was displayed as part of a freak show. Her ghost is shown with her son, The Great Child who was born of rape, and who later kills her attackers after she was killed as part of a joke by the other circus employees.²²⁷ Her ghostly presence references America’s past and present problem with ableism and the violent experiences disabled people face. While the life of The Bound Woman isn’t particularly exciting, living a privileged life as a rich white cheerleader, her cause of death still speaks to widespread

²²⁴ “The Angry Princess,” 13 Ghosts Wiki, accessed February 2, 2021, https://13ghosts.fandom.com/wiki/The_Angry_Princess.

²²⁵ “The Angry Princess.”

²²⁶ “The Pilgrimess,” 13 Ghosts Wiki, accessed February 2, 2021, https://13ghosts.fandom.com/wiki/The_Pilgrimess.

²²⁷ “The Dire Mother,” 13 Ghosts Wiki, accessed February 2, 2021, https://13ghosts.fandom.com/wiki/The_Dire_Mother.

experiences of dating violence. After cheating on her football playing boyfriend Chet, he killed the boy she cheated on him with before hanging her and then burying her body in the football field.²²⁸ The violence that resulted in her death was motivated by male entitlement and violent misogyny.

These ghosts' experiences and death are obviously colored by their gender, but also their whiteness. In addition to this, the only sympathetic ghost is that of a white woman, the ghost of the mother of the Kriticos family, The Withered Lover, a well-meaning and gentle white woman. She is the only ghost who is never seen as a threat. So while ghosts frequently speak to othering, not every ghost, like not every human, experiences othering in the same way. White women experience sexism and other forms of oppression based on their intersecting identities; however, they are also recipients of white privilege and ultimately depicted as sympathetic and rarely as a threat. On the other hand, one of the most violent ghosts is the only ghost of color. The Hammer, or George Markley, is depicted as a muscular Black man covered in blood and wounds from railroad spikes. His story is one of wrongful accusation, evoking thoughts of the real-world experiences of many Black men throughout history. Something that stands out in the depiction of The Hammer is the fact that he was killed slowly by townspeople and his hand was cut off, replaced with his sledgehammer.²²⁹ Although perhaps not intentionally, The Hammer echoes many of the characteristics of the 1992 horror icon Candyman. Not only did they both die in the 1890s, but they were both attacked by a mob of people, slowly tortured, and eventually had one of their hands cut off. Even if unintentional, the similarities speak volumes. The Hammer references the ways Black men are frequently the victims of wrongful convictions or accusations, but at the same time is reifying depictions of Black men as aggressive and hyper-violent. Again

²²⁸ "The Bound Woman," 13 Ghosts Wiki, accessed February 2, 2021, https://13ghosts.fandom.com/wiki/The_Bound_Woman.

²²⁹ "The Hammer," 13 Ghosts Wiki, accessed February 2, 2021, https://13ghosts.fandom.com/wiki/The_Hammer.

speaking to Maisha Wester's reading of the ghosts in *Amityville Horror*, Markley is ultimately "villainous even in [his] moment of victimization."²³⁰ He is dead and has obviously suffered an extremely traumatic death, but he is a villain, portrayed as such through his severe anger and his threats and attacks against the living cast, all of whom, with the exception of the nanny Maggie, are white. It's important to consider as I did in the previous chapter, how these films are making conscious or unconscious choices to disseminate images of specific forms of suffering and precarity. Just like how Cyrus made specific choices of choosing "bodies" or in this case ghosts, to shackle and isolate in cells for his own pursuit of power and comfort. Locking up ghosts is fine as long as they're dangerous ghosts who "deserve" to be locked up, the exception of course being the sympathetic white female ghost.

While the cells in the basement are not referred to as a prison, it is obvious that it is emulating one. The ghosts are kept in small rooms unable to leave and unable to exert autonomy, and later when they're let out of their cells it is for the benefit of Cyrus and his machine. On top of portraying a prison, the story also discusses systems of legality. Dennis informs the Kriticos family that the glass of the house is etched with Latin containment spells to keep the ghosts from escaping. Even the supernatural realm, he says, has a set of laws, and for ghosts they have to obey spells. Law and order and imprisonment has passed from just being an aspect of the living realm to that of the dead, or undead, as well. The film is also, perhaps without meaning to, drawing parallels between prisons and their history rooted in slavery and its abolishment. Kalina and Damon refer to Cyrus's work as "out and out *slavery*" and later Dennis says "Cyrus had a nasty habit of *enslaving* souls."²³¹ They are not shying away from a rhetoric of dehumanization, enslavement, and incarceration, however they are once again working to make it the actions of a

²³⁰ Wester, "Whose the Real Monster Here?"

²³¹ *THIR13EN Ghosts*, 0:53:45 to 0:53:58.

deranged white man instead of a systemic form of violence. And further they are choosing to depict the ghosts experiencing this violence as overwhelmingly white, just like the living cast of characters. Of note, they don't bring up language of dehumanization or enslavement when discussing or depicting *The Hammer*, perhaps because that would bring in inescapable connections to America's past and the way slavery still haunts America to this day, especially in the form of the prison.²³²

At the end of the film, once the house has self-destructed and the living have all comforted one another, we see the ghosts walk away and disappear into the surrounding forest. This brings to mind the ending of *The Amityville Horror* and the way the living family were the only ones to escape, leaving behind the ghosts. In this depiction we see the ghosts escape, truly free for the first time in the film. But these ghosts still never get closure. The only ghost to seem satisfied and at peace is that of Jean Kriticos, who fades away after an emotional talk with her living husband and children. The other ghosts are never given space to share their stories or pursue true rest, remember even their pasts are only accessible in bonus content, not within the actual film. Their freedom is the unintended side-effect of an action focused on protecting the safety of a living white family. The ghosts in this movie are overwhelmingly robbed of their ability to disrupt, they are relegated to cells and kept under the strong thumb of the law. Yet, they have disrupted life for one family, they have challenged the Kriticos family's understanding of life and death, past and present, and locations of safety and danger.

LISTENING TO GHOSTS

Returning again to Holland's discussion of Toni Morrison's book *Beloved* at the beginning of this chapter, ghosts in film and other forms of media allow storytellers and

²³² Ameer Hasan Loggins, "We're All Living in a Future Created by Slavery," Medium, October 16, 2020, <https://level.medium.com/were-all-living-in-a-future-created-by-slavery-d20199979a72>.

readers/viewers to explore the idea of what happens when the dead refuse to die. Ghosts in fictional worlds are representations of the ways history refuses to stay relegated to the past, often arising from a horrific murder or some other form of traumatic event. Ghosts and violence and trauma are intimately intertwined, after all not every death creates a ghost. They are symbols of unfinished business, unearthed secrets, and trauma that has never been recognized and worked on. But ghosts are not only ways to understand gothic fictional worlds or ways to attract visitors to lesser known historical sites. The ghost also offers a useful lens with which to examine how violence functions within the real world, both in interpersonal ways but also on the global political scale. They challenge our understanding of real history and force us to consider experiences that the living have never made a concerted effort to truly hear. They also are tied to violence and bring to mind what types of violence are visible, and what instances are ghosted, hidden from view and thought, as if the violence doesn't have an impact if it can't be seen by the masses.

In this chapter I have examined the ghosts in two haunted house films not just as villainous or perpetrators of violence, but as victims of violence themselves. The disruptive force of the ghost in a horror film is never truly removed from the society that created the author and thus the story. Again, humans make ghosts, both through extreme violence but also very literally through ghost stories and horror movies. To examine the ghosts and to listen to their call means considering who they were when they were living and what systems of power are connected to their death. Traumatic deaths that lead to ghosts and hauntings speak to larger systems of violence and what communities and individuals are targeted or exposed disproportionately to intense violence and dehumanization. I do not see fictional media portrayals of individual and systematic violence as a completely separate category removed from real life. Fictional media is

informed by real people's experiences and written by real people, and frequently the fantastical aspects of these stories are simply metaphors for aspects of real life. Thus, to examine these seemingly fantastical aspects of a horror story is to uncover the real-life implications they pose, and in this case consider what forms of violence are visible or invisible and whose bodies are exposed to these forms of violence. Media normalizes the depictions of specific forms of suffering and I have endeavored to consider what is being normalized and to name those practices in order to problematize them and make them visible and strange. To name what haunts us both visibly and invisibly, acknowledges how death operates in our society and how history is never just in the past.

Conclusion

In late October of 2020 Netflix released a new British horror film on its platform called *His House*. The film centers on the experience of a refugee couple from South Sudan who come to England to escape their war-torn home. Bol and Rial Majur find themselves in temporary housing as they endure the drawn-out and complex bureaucratic system of becoming English citizens. When they first learn that they are going to be able to leave the detention center with probational asylum they are ecstatic. But when their case worker finally brings them to their temporary housing, they find it to be alarmingly undesirable. Not only is the outside cluttered with various junk, but the interior has no electricity, the walls are covered in peeling wallpaper, and there are bugs in old food containers. The neighborhood is hardly any better, filled with racist and xenophobic neighbors and confusing architecture that feels like a never-ending maze. They are told that they will be “subject to certain conditions, if you fail to meet them, you will be sent back.”²³³ Among these conditions are “a home of our choosing. You must reside at this address. You must not move from this address. This is your home now” and “no candles...no guests, no friends, no parties... no games.”²³⁴

But this not a home in the way many people would define a home. Neither Bol nor Rial chose this home for themselves, they did not furnish it themselves, and in fact when they first enter it we can see their hesitancy and discomfort. In addition to this, if it was a home in the conventional sense, they would be able to freely leave, could decorate it as they pleased and invite over whoever they wanted. This is not a home that makes its inhabitants feel safe. It is a haunted home, in the sense that it is filled with the ghosts of all those who were left behind on

²³³ *His House*, directed by Remi Weekes (Netflix, 2020), 00:03:59 to 00:04:41
<https://www.netflix.com/title/81231197>.

²³⁴ *His House*, 00:04:42 to 00:04:56 and 00:07:20 to 00:07:43.

Bol and Rial's journey to England. But also in that it is haunted by the surveillance Bol and Rial are under by the English state, haunted by the threat of a bad report or deportation if they make a wrong move.

In many ways the film speaks to the manner in which those who are living in precarity or come from experiences of extreme trauma and violence, cannot escape their ghosts. While a white family can run from a home that is haunted by their ancestors practices of systematic violence and terror, Bol and Rial as African refugees in England cannot. A different home doesn't remove their traumatic past nor the current oppression they are facing. To escape hauntings seems to be in many ways a privilege afforded primarily to white people, at least that's what the white haunted house films explored previously, seem to say. In this film Bol and Rial try face their trauma and allow the other ghosts to stay in their home. As Bol says, "Your ghosts follow you. They never leave. They live with you. It's when I let them in, I could start to face myself."²³⁵ The action taken in this case was not to banish all the ghosts but instead to allow them into the home to stay. In addition, his comment that your ghosts never leave you speaks to the ways those marked for death and oppression cannot escape this reality. This power and violence is structural and reaches far and wide.

The film references another aspect of my previous analyses, that of belief or rather, disbelief.²³⁶ Because Bol and Rial are African refugees in England, their haunting experience looks very different to those I have discussed in the previous chapters that depict white families in America. In many ways Bol and Rial's haunting is exacerbated by their identity as African refugees. Unlike the white families in the films touched upon earlier, these two literally cannot

²³⁵ *His House*, 01:23:57 to 01:24:12.

²³⁶ I would also like to note that, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, hauntings, ghosts, and supernatural creatures are not ridiculous and fantastical to all people. And there are religions, cultures, and people that accept their existence. In the film, the ghosts and apeth are not ridiculous concepts to Bol and Rial. They are depicted in the film world as culturally authentic expressions and Rial doesn't struggle with believing in their existence.

leave. It is a stipulation of their probationary asylum that they cannot leave the house. And when Bol attempts to sway their case worker into letting them move he is unable to explain why they need to leave without raising suspicion against himself and Rial. His plea to leave is met with the case worker investigating the home and a report being filed. Bol knows that if he is honest about their experience they will be in danger of being deported. And when Rial tells the truth she is met with judgement and confusion by the white English case workers. Notably though, it is less her words of a haunting that the case workers remark upon in confusion, but her choice of dress. As they leave the home one of them remarks, “We’d better write ‘em up. They can kiss England goodbye.... Dude she was wearing her bedsheets.”²³⁷ Here too is an exercise in control over lives. The case workers hold Bol and Rial’s future in their hands, they can mark them for death by sending them back. Rial is aware of this, commenting “this is what they want, they like to see us crazy.”²³⁸ Even after escaping violence the two are in a precarious position, never far from memories of physical violence and also facing bureaucratic violence.

At one point in the film Rial says to Bol, “After all we've endured, after what we have seen...what men can do, you think it is bumps in the night that frighten me? You think I can be afraid of ghosts?”²³⁹ In many ways this quote embodies the tensions within an analysis of fictional and real-life violence. How do we understand fictional instances of violence and death in relation to the real world? Fictional ghosts are of course not the same as the actions of real human beings, but these ghosts frequently *speak* to the actions of real human beings, and can be a tool or vehicle for which to unpack instances of violence and trauma. Because in this film the ghosts are tied to real life instances of violence, these ghosts would not exist without the trauma

²³⁷ *His House*, 00:56:56 to 00:57:03.

²³⁸ *His House*, 00:57:04 to 00:57:10.

²³⁹ *His House*, 00:44:413 to 00:44:23.

and death faced by Bol and Rial. While the ghosts are not as scary as the real humans, they are connected to one another and in fact by dealing with the haunting Bol and Rial seem to be able to work through complicated feelings and trauma from the real world.

What makes this film so notable for my work is that the aspects I've been discussing in other movies that have previously been implied or only visible in their invisibility are actually said outright in this film. This film engages directly with ideas put forth by necropolitics. Not only in its explicit depiction of post-colonial Africa, war, and refugees, but also in its portrayal of how specific populations experience violence and dehumanization. This film also brings up important considerations as far as the limits of my scholarship and the theories I'm employing. While many aspects of this film relate to the American haunted house genre and films that I've discussed previously, the context of these films are different in notable ways. While America and Britain hold many similarities and connections, they do not have the exact same sociopolitical economic systems and norms and thus these horror movies speak their specific realities. I also do not mean to imply that the hauntings of white families are the exact same as the experiences of Bol and Rial, rather I bring up *His House* to introduce just one possible application of haunted necropolitics to non-American haunted house horror.

But while there are many differences between America and Britain which could pose possible complications and expose the limits of certain analyses (of which there are always limits), these two countries also share some very important similarities that allow for considerations of how certain theories can be applied to both country's horror films. Both America and Britain have historically been, and still are in many ways, colonial powers. America is frequently portrayed as an outlier from colonial powers, its position outside of Europe and mythic image as a bastion of democracy and freedom, has allowed its past and present colonial

moves to go forgotten or be ignored. But both countries are nocturnal democracies and while the specifics of their histories are different, and these contexts are vitally important to recognize and consider in a horror analysis, they are both capitalist colonial countries with structural forms of racism, sexism, classism and more. It is for these reasons that I have included this preliminary introduction of how haunted necropolitics might be applied to a non-American horror film like *His House*.

SPECTRAL SCHOLARSHIP

Over the course of this work I have attempted to intervene in the field of horror scholarship in a variety of ways. My work has considered the productive opportunities made available through distinguishing sub-genres like a haunted house sub-genre. When we consider how these movies are part of a group with its own norms, we can better explore the similarities and differences in their depictions of violence and suffering. In addition to this I have continued the long-standing argument for the validity of horror as a focus of scholarship, however not as part of the discussion of horror's artistic qualities, rather I have argued against the idea that horror is a genre for escapism and that its fantastical nature somehow separates it from real-world instances of violence and the reproduction of systems of power. In line with this practice of taking horror seriously I have attempted to problematize the normalization and invisible nature of whiteness in horror and more specifically in haunted house horror. Race is not only made visible by the existence of people of color in horror, but also through their exclusion and the foregrounding of whiteness. By considering the role whiteness plays in these films I have continued the work of Richard Dyer in making whiteness notable and strange. This has all been part of my larger dedication to intersectional scholarship. Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote that the work of intersectionalism is a "process of recognizing as social and systematic what was

formerly perceived as isolated and individual.”²⁴⁰ I have endeavored to practice this approach by considering both the films themselves and also the stories they tell in conversation with one another and the context they came from. The hauntings in these stories and the existence of these specific films are not isolated instances. These neoliberal understandings of violence have been rejected in my work, instead I have considered how all of these films and their stories are connected to each other and the complex structures of suffering in our world. I have examined the various layers to these stories, looking at more than just victims versus ghosts but victims and ghosts, and ghosts *as* victims. Considering how they interact, who each are, and why they are depicted in specific ways. In addition, I have considered multiple forms of identities at play in these stories, looking at class, gender, and race, rejecting the impetus to keep them isolated. How, for instance, white women in these haunting tales are frequently victimized in multiple ways, or how the families often have some sort of economic constraints, but also exploring how even with these realities, they are still enormously privileged in comparison to poorer families, and people of color.

In addition to considering what has been depicted in these films, my work has also foregrounded their invisible aspects, highlighting who is not depicted and what that means. Because my work has been so focused on ghosts, entities that are frequently invisible, it makes sense that my work needed to consider that which was visible in its invisibility. As Judith Butler writes, “the public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as

²⁴⁰ Crenshaw, 1241-2.

deaths.”²⁴¹ By considering who isn’t depicted in these films and who are overwhelmingly depicted as ghostly, my work has examined what history and forms of suffering are being erased and/or normalized. Ghosts are frequently on the margins of our sight, just out of our range of view, heightening our fear of them and allowing us to dismiss them as a trick of the eye. Through this research I have looked at aspects of these films that are frequently just out of view, eschewing the impulse to write off these considerations of race, class, gender, and American ideologies as fictive. Both in the sense that these aspects are unimportant or not present because it is a fictional film, but also in real life when people silence critiques of these systems as overreactions and a process of seeing things that aren’t actually there.

This thesis has been an exploration into what it can look like to apply necropolitics to horror films. Returning again to Mbembe and his words, “power itself is spectral,” my work has attempted to act as a bridge between the seemingly separate realms of ghosts and horror movies and real-world theorizations of violence like necropolitics.²⁴² Systems of power cannot be separated from the media we consume. Just because horror is frequently fantastical doesn’t mean it isn’t reflecting the realities of daily life. We cannot separate death in the real world from death in fictional worlds, nor can we consider the idea of ghosts, hauntings, or the living dead to be purely fictional concepts. More than anything my work has considered the work performed by ghosts and the ways in which they are more than just imaginary figures in fictional worlds. As Avery F. Gordon writes in their work on the role of hauntings in sociological imagination, “what’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more

²⁴¹ Butler, xx-xxi.

²⁴² Maria del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, “Spectropolitics,” 95.

obliquely.”²⁴³ History is not in the past. The work of ghosts puts the past in conversation with the present, shedding light on the festering wounds of history, forcing those who are haunted to do the work of discovering why they have not healed. Adopting this perspective, this work has considered how ghosts and hauntings in horror films draw attention to systems of power and violence in our real world.

Haunted house films also open up important conversations around housing and its integral role in American ideologies like the American Dream. The homes in these films are not simply four walls and a roof, the haunting makes them so much more. They become a portal to hell, a home poisoned from sour ground, a machine of death, part prison, and more. This allows for considerations into the ways homes in general are more than just four walls and a roof in real life too. This is particularly important today during a pandemic when we are encouraged to spend all our time at home. Over the past year we have seen increased rates of domestic violence and more conversations around housing as a right and not a privilege due to higher rates of unemployment without a freeze on rent payments. These discussions force us to consider how the home stands for and within a system that perpetuates violence and exclusion, and the ways in which a home is not safe for everyone. Outside of instances of violence, over the course of the last year, the home has come to mean something new for many of us, and many of us have found ourselves creating a new relationship with this space. When I began to conceptualize this project I had no idea the entirety of this thesis would end up being researched and written at home, including much of it at my childhood home. As I spent all my time inside I considered the immense privilege I hold by having a home in general, but especially a safe home that provides me with comfort and the ability to isolate myself from the pandemic. The pandemic has also

²⁴³ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, location 191.

forced me to consider the privilege of mobility and the ways it is intricately connected to class and disability.

One of my goals throughout this work has been to emphasize the importance of exploring the ways in which horror movies depictions of violence parallel real-world systems of violence. As all media is not created or consumed in a vacuum it is vital to consider how real-world concepts are reflected and promoted. I do not find it compelling to always keep separate analysis of real-world experiences and ideologies from that of fiction. Humans make these fictional tales and regardless of intention their work mirrors the real world, both in the ways they depict real-world dynamics (even if these aspects are embodied in fictional ideals or entities) but also by reflecting back onto viewers ideologies that the author has internalized. Horror scholar Andrew Scahill spoke to this idea when he said, “the relationship between the horror film and reality is reciprocal; that horror films do reflect culture, but they also give us a vocabulary to talk about things in the real world.”²⁴⁴ As I discussed in Chapter 1, genre and myth making go hand in hand. Genre films are a kind of social ritual and collective expression of culture.²⁴⁵ Horror in particular speaks to cultural norms and perceptions of what horror is and why these things are horrific. These films that depict fear have to be rooted in the real world at least partially, or the intention to terrify couldn’t be accomplished. Those involved in these films made specific choices related to how they depicted ghosts and hauntings, choosing to show certain forms of suffering which is in direct conversation with systems of power in our society that facilitate suffering. These films are not individual occurrences and they were not inevitable, they are in communication with forms of suffering experienced in real life.

²⁴⁴ Roman Chimienti and Tyler Jensen, *Scream, Queen! My Nightmare on Elm Street*, Documentary (Virgil Films, 2019), <https://www.shudder.com/movies/watch/scream-queen-my-nightmare-on-elm-street/59ca4c88bdce3787>.

²⁴⁵ Schatz, 12-13.

Adam Lowenstein wrote in his book *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*, that “our understanding of the modern horror film as a genre is very much engaged with, rather than estranged from, traumatic history.”²⁴⁶ Through his work he raised the vital question “what does cinematic horror have to tell us about the horrors of history?” continuing on to say, “to speak of history’s horrors or historical trauma, is to recognize events as wounds.”²⁴⁷ Just as ghosts both theoretically and also in these specific horror films speak to wounds that have not been given recognition or any offer of healing, studying horror through lenses like necropolitics forces us to consider historical and current traumas, the systems of power that facilitated the trauma, and that have informed the suffering depicted on screen.

I have laid out just a few examples of how to explore horror through a haunted necropolitical lens, but there are many more opportunities here for future work. This is certainly not exhaustive, rather it is a beginning. As Jack Halberstam has written about the gothic horror film, but I would argue can be applied to horror films more generally, they produce “models of reading (many in one location) that allow for multiple interpretations and a plurality of locations of cultural resistance.”²⁴⁸ I am excited for future scholarship that considers non-Western horror films, horror outside of the haunted house sub-genre, and finds new theories and understandings to put in conversation with necropolitics.

The process of researching and writing this thesis has been illuminating at times and intensely difficult at others. Throughout this work I have considered the ways suffering pertains to specific populations and all the while I’ve been living through a global pandemic that has

²⁴⁶ Lowenstein, 10.

²⁴⁷ Lowenstein, 1.

²⁴⁸ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 23.

produced suffering that disproportionately affects specific groups of people, namely people of color, poor people, disabled people, and more. The pandemic has thrown into stark relief the ways in which America is built on and sustained by suffering and the sacrifice of specific lives. We have seen the violence of capitalism clearly through the ways minimum wage workers have been forced to either lose their jobs or work in unsafe conditions, the rhetoric from politicians that values the well-being of businesses over that of human life, and the countless conversations on social media and the news that debates whether or not people should have access to health care, housing, and an income. We have witnessed first-hand the cruelty of American systems and American people, in particular white Americans who have refused to take a pandemic seriously that disproportionately harms and kills people of color. Suffering during this pandemic has not been neutral and it has been directly connected to American structures that go back to its foundation, especially those of white-supremacy and capitalism. As the pandemic has raged and an incalculable number of lives have been lost and negatively affected, we have also witnessed intense political turmoil including an insurrection and an increase in white supremacist and xenophobic violence. At times it has been difficult to understand where my research and this thesis fall in all this suffering and unrest. I have struggled with my position as a white academic writing about horror movies through the lens of a theory by an African post-colonial scholar during these difficult and deadly times. But, as I have said before, death does not exist in a vacuum, and I have endeavored to consider what insights we might gain about our real world by applying theory that might not seem immediately applicable to horror films. In addition, I have attempted to use the insights from Mbembe and others to make visible the structuring and violence force of whiteness in these films and the reality they speak to, whether directly, or through association.

Overall, this work has been an exercise in leaning into contradictions instead of wanting everything to fit into a perfect box of harmful versus empowering. Instead of discovering the ways these films simply target folks with financial issues, as I had originally anticipated, I have uncovered the rich complexities of these stories and the ways race plays an intensely important role in these films even if it is often relegated to the margins or depicted primarily through the normalization and foregrounding of whiteness. This work has, in many ways, solidified my dedication to intersectional scholarship and always remembering to ask “what isn’t visible?”

When suffering is depicted in media it is never neutral or random, as I have demonstrated here, and I hope future scholarship can continue to explore the complex ways our media, and in particular horror, speak to real instances of suffering. And, in addition, I hope to see more scholarship leaning in to the messy and often contradictory nature of horror, embracing the ways these films can include both instances of resistance and cultural commentary, while also normalizing instances of suffering and certain harmful ideologies. As I have discussed at various times over the course of this work, America is a deeply haunted country, and we are currently reckoning with many of the hauntings we have long tried to ignore or push aside. This past year has been filled with death, suffering, and fear over what the future holds or doesn’t hold. Like any haunting, our current amalgamation of hauntings requires action and a concerted effort to heal and put in the work to repair the damage that has been wrought since the beginning of this country. We must look at the suffering around us and consider who is experiencing it disproportionately. And the same goes for our media production and consumption. With films like *Get Out*, *His House*, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), *Blood Quantum* (2019), *Candyman* (2021) and more, I hope we can continue to see challenges to the assumption that horror is a white genre and see more stories from points of view that are non-Western and non-

white. Horror is a genre ripe with resistant opportunities and avenues to work through complicated fears and trauma, and I can only hope we will continue to see horror being used as an avenue with which to deal with our various hauntings.

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